

## *A Book of Silence* by Sara Maitland

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Sara Maitland has a clearly defined goal in her present life: “to live in as much silence as is possible at this point in history” (264). This book is part memoir and part exploration of the historical context of such a goal, teasing out its implications, challenges, and rewards. Following her very busy and noisy youth and middle age, Maitland introduces the circumstances under which she developed her personal interest in silence as a topic and way of life. Closely tied to personal life changes (menopause, ‘empty-nest syndrome’) the book addresses her interest in silence partially through the framework of repeated reference to a personal letter received from a friend at the start of her journey into silence. “Silence is the place of death, of nothingness,” this letter said, “Silence is a place of non-being...from which all our yearning is to escape...silence is oppression...all silence is waiting to be broken.”

This letter reappears throughout the book and helps clarify Maitland’s thesis through opposition: for her, silence “does not seem to be a loss or lack of language; it does not even seem to the opposite of language.” (279). Silence is different, “a real, separate, actual thing, an ontological category of its own: not a *lack* of language but other than, different from language; not an *absence* of sound but the presence of something which is not sound” (28). This assertion that silence is characterized not by the absence of a known quality but by a set of characteristics altogether different and separate allows for Maitland to see silence as an inhabitable space, an accessible place. The distinctions between solitude and silence are addressed early in the book, as are other

relevant definitions. Silence itself is problematically defined (in this case, by the authority of the OED) and Maitland does well to begin by situating herself and her story within a clarified set of terms.

The book follows a largely linear path as Maitland takes various journeys, both geographical and spiritual, in her quest to introduce as much silence as possible into her life. The first chapter, “Growing up in a noisy world”, introduces Maitland’s past. Through recollecting past decades of busy, noisy life (during which she claims she would have named ‘deinosophy’ – ‘the love of, or skill of, dinner-table conversation’ as her hobby) she posits that a life spent in conversation does not make it impossible or even undesirable for a person to later refocus their energy on silence. Those familiar with Maitland’s fiction will be happy to discover that she examines her own creative output at length, observing how increased silence both aids and obstructs her artistic output.

Maitland’s first prolonged search for and exposure to silence takes place on the Isle of Skye, alone in a house she has rented for six weeks. She falls in love with the silence; it is appropriate that before setting out she saw this experiment as a kind of honeymoon, “a period of intense time together away from ... normal daily concerns, [with] nothing to do but focus on and learn about each other” (37). The chapters concerning her time on Skye and its immediate aftermath, “Forty Days and Forty Nights” and “The Dark Side”, describe in rich detail the effects of the silence, including auditory hallucinations, intensification of physical sensations, and a strong sense of connectedness to her surrounding environment. “The Dark Side” focuses more specifically on the harms of prolonged silence, and it is here that Maitland makes the distinction between chosen and enforced silence, introducing examples of each. She states that the main difference between an imposed ‘silencing’ and a desirable, self-chosen silence lie not in the actual events arising, but in one’s reactions to and perceptions of the experience.

She follows similar thoughts into the subsequent chapter, “Silent Places”. Here she identifies more specifically how she can seek out silence. Her experience so far has attuned her to ways and places she can discover and integrate silence into her day-to-day life, thus making it unnecessary to physically go to a place of silence, instead bringing it into her existing life through activities such as gardening, meditating, etc.

Maitland then travels to the Sinai desert, where she considers the relationship between silence and religion. She compares this with a more creatively-motivated silence that she associates in particular with Romantic writers who have long influenced her work. This leads her to Galloway and days spent hill-walking in contemplation. Conclusions about these journeys are not definitive; Maitland makes very clear the fact that she is on a continual quest, and she describes the ways in which she incorporates her past experiences into her present life while still learning and seeking out new challenges.

These journeys lead into the final chapter, appropriately named “Going Home”, in which Maitland attempts to integrate what she has learned into a more sustainable life. Far from being the Luddite she says she is often assumed to be (though she does make an almost convincing case for why mobile phones “represent a major breakthrough for the powers of hell” (133), Maitland outlines how tools like email can indeed help her in reaching her goal of “80% silence” (276).

While *A Book of Silence* is meticulously researched, it has a relaxed, almost conversational tone. The book is greatly helped by the addition of an index. This is particularly necessary because of the wide-ranging and extensive sources Maitland draws on. Contemporary case studies, for instance Chris McCandless’ life and death as described in *Into The Wild*, are examined next to accounts of silence experiences of early Christian hermits, tracking parallels throughout centuries. Likewise, myths and folktales from diverse cultures and regions are considered

alongside each other. Though eminently suitable as a secondary source for academic study on a wide range of topics, the writing never becomes pedantic or dry, in fact, it is consistently engaging.

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