

TLC Showcase

Stephen Chance



Introduction to the novel	2
Novel: <i>The Alum Maker's Secret</i>	4
About the writer	9

Introduction to *The Alum Maker's Secret*

About four years ago I came across a sign – ‘remains of alum works’ – and, following the cinder path indicated, came to another – ‘beware, adder colony’. That afternoon I started writing this book.

The Alum Maker’s Secret explores the recognisably modern world of the early 18th century, its incipient industrial revolution - a world as easily discovered as stumbling across an old stone culvert in a meadow, turning over a piece of jet on the beach, and seeing the gleam of desire in a might-be lover’s eye.

In the novel, Ana, daughter of a Spanish urine trader, complains she feels 'bartered like a Moor' to procure work for her father in a desolate and inhospitable region of northern England.

Making alum, a beautiful translucent crystal, essential to the dyeing of cloth, has been a lucrative business for centuries. Now, however, its obscure and obnoxious manufacture, burning rocks and stirring together urine and seaweed, dominates a remote part of eighteenth century Britain.

Ana is put to work with the inheritor of the 'alum-makers secret', manager Robert, and witnessing the almost alchemical rituals of his work, an attachment starts to form. Shortly after her arrival, a canny scientist-on-the-make arrives from London's Royal Society to investigate a disturbing discovery in a quarry rock fall.

Help from TLC

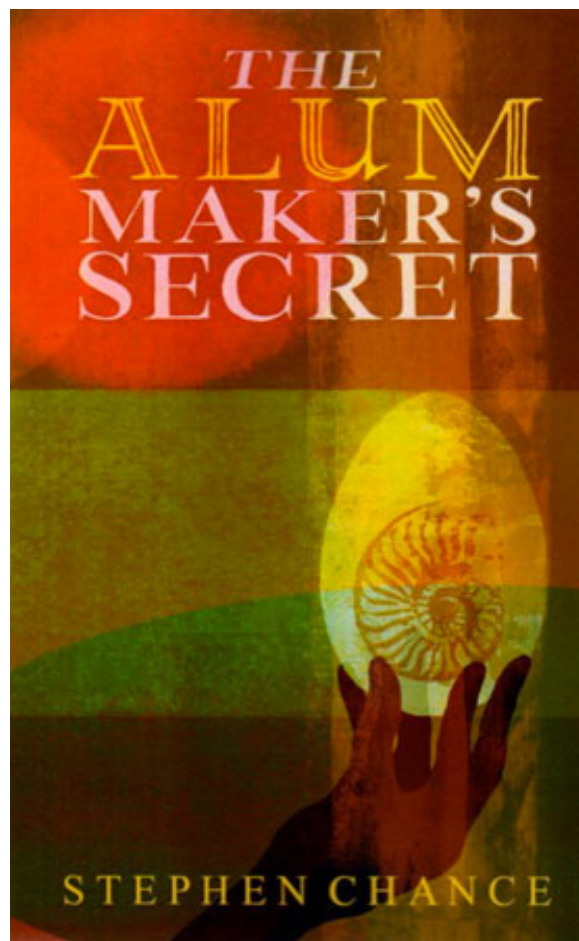
Encouraged by the author John McGregor (*If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*) I contacted TLC. I had written a reasonably complete draft and I took myself off on one of TLC's literary holidays in La Alpujarras, Spain. There I attended workshops run by the author Rebecca Abrams in which, in a small, sociable group, we talked, wrote, read to each other, walked in the hills and visited local bars.

Later, TLC arranged for author Sara Maitland (*A Book of Silence*) to read my draft and encouraged me to work towards a more direct, less collaged narrative. Many drafts followed. I had an encouraging response from one or two agents,

including Rachel Calder at 'The Sayle', and, following good publicity via the Guardian website and a local paper, I still hope to find representation and a traditional publisher. In the meantime *The Alum Maker's Secret* is available online, and I have begun a second novel.

2000 word extract

In this extract, a little way into the narrative, a London banker, presented with a report into possible investments in the alum trade, ponders its contents while shaking off a hangover. Meanwhile, at the works a snowfall chills Ana and a little warmth emerges in her relationship with the manager, Robbie.



Tyrian purple.

In London, the banker leans back in his chair. Closes his eyes to alleviate ache from the previous night's inebriation. Shifts his backside on soft leather, stretches against the polished oak back, and daydreams Tyrian purple.

His mind a whirl of colours and scents, a mercantile babble of Low Country docksides, and a thick fog of masts in Venice's Lagoon.

On his desk the report he has just read, interpreting the researcher's scrawl. Discontinuous, full of conjecture. Almost certainly misleading, erroneous and based on other fabrications. Nevertheless, nevertheless, he muses, a revelation!

This alum flour, a dirty dust, without which it seems the colours of kings and emperors would simply run to the peasants' drab.

Opening his eyes, he flicks through it, alighting here and there as words leap out to brighten his imagination.

The facts stark enough: alum, a mordant. A fixer of dyes. With it – wool, cotton, silk, linen – colours are brighter and more fast. Craftsmen it seems, have passed on this knowledge for thousands of years. This quality has always had dramatic commercial significance. Fact two – money follows alum.

He takes his pen and underlines some words: Imperial purple. The porphyry, the account states, of Byzantium, and later Greece – a dye made of whelks! Highly valuable – and the wearing of it proscribed, except for royalty. The banker has a hazy image of ruined columns, sunken baths, thinking of sketches from Grand Tours he has seen worked up into etchings and prints.

Cloth brought in galleys from around the azure Mediterranean. The alum brought, it seems, from the island of Milos, from Libya, from Vulcano, from Naples, Persia, Spain....

He leafs through the papers, muttering names: dark ages, monopolies, alchemy....

He glances over tables and figures – sackfuls, boatloads, unquestionably a vast trade - and alights nearer to time. Venice, Florence, Flanders, Bruges....

This period he can picture. If he saunters down to the Thames after his mid-day meal he will see this scene: merchants' houses, wharves, the unloading of ships. But...the scale, the insatiable demand. The report states bluntly: the golden age at Venice, the Florence of the Medicis. English wool! Flemish cloth! London, Ghent,

Lille....the market squares and tiered and jettied merchants' houses. Dripping wealth, he thinks, and alum shipped as ballast! Under the lighter, more precious goods, alum. Alum – essential to the Venetian dyers, the Florentine tailors.

English wool – from the monasteries apparently – and now, now he thinks, reflecting on last night's tale at Cornhill, in the Swan and Hoop – English alum.

His eyes drift down the blotchy ink. Cordovan, Castilian – the Moorish al-kemiya, and here's the rub: the damned mystery of it! How to make it, how to guarantee that purity needed, how to use it?

Ludicrous recipes the report quotes: blackberry, honey and alum – for a sore throat. Excrement of hound, a pigeon and a hen – with gallons of fermented urine – to dye a hide! Gum, water and alum, with egg white – for distemper. Verdigris, quicksilver, saffron and vinegar – plus alum of course – to make gold! The banker pushes himself back from his table. Chair legs scrape on the flags. He feels tired, but there is more.

England. The efforts so far in England to benefit financially. Pitiful. A brief history of rogues and scoundrels. Monopolies broken (the curse, it seems, of some Pope – cheerfully ignored) and fortunes hanging in the balance. Cases of corruption dragging through the courts for years.

Now this Yorkshire nonsense. Oh yes – alum indispensable, alum priceless, alum the history of empires before our own. All this glorious history of purple, of galley slaves, of smoking volcanoes, of Venetian barges laden with colour, of togas, of turbans... and all come to this! A stinking, remote, freezing north sea cliff-land, and an upstart landowner with a beady eye on fitting out a jumped-up farmhouse with the latest Italian gardens, looking to borrow a fortune to demolish headlands and burn rocks.

Early morning, Ana senses a particular stillness and gleam behind the window rag. Rising she brushes it to one side. Between the curtain and the windowpanes stands an invisible slab of cold. Ana shivers and waves her hands, thinking to disperse it. What she sees beyond stills her, her lips part involuntarily. It is the most radiant and astonishing scene. Her first thought is that the world has been sprinkled with alum crystals.

She rubs away moisture her breath has laid on the panes, and feels at her

eyes icy draughts that leak in at the cracks. Peering out through the glass to the foot of the house's boundary wall, the dark spines of the reed grasses poke up through white candescence. Swirling flakes in the brightness above, catch light. She imagines the boards torn off dozens of roaching casks and the wind spinning in the tun house, twisting around the unravelling casks, spiralling up out of the unroofed building. Like smoke boiling off a moorland fire and drifting over the fields. It deposits like ash over the fields up to the rounded brow above the quarries. It sprinkles and settles over the headland. The heavy grey drapes of clouds wind-whip aside and a clear turquoise blasts through. Sun pours across and the dirty crystals, individually lit, and dusted over the fields, form a sparkling bright blanket of dazzle.

Later, Ana would come to hate snow like the rest of them.

This morning it unifies the ravaged landscape. Drifting against spoil heaps, clarifying out the horizontal strata of the quarry and distinguishing only by textures the differences between bracken, heather, grass, gorse, and spoil. Thin dustings, coarse coatings and wind-heaped bankings in the purified air.

Only at the clamps, she notices, is business as usual. Smoke spins up off the clamps, twisted by the wind.

Ana piles on all the clothes she can find and scampers through the chilled house. It is empty, she realises. She grabs a couple of oatcakes and some cheese, and goes out.

She is surprised by the granular texture of the snow. There is a heavy wet-cold cloth of wind that slaps her cheeks and eyeballs. Gusts shiver the melt-water of track puddles. She follows the sandstone liquor trough down to the works. The stringy white grasses and the odd small yellow flower straggle over the tooled stone of the trough. The grainy hail lies in the drain as though the liquor straight from the pits has simply settled out into alum.

By the time she covers the short distance to the laboratory she cannot feel her toes except as a deep ache within the bone. The wind seizes the door and flings it into the laboratory with her still holding the handle. Amid the sudden gull-wings of airborne paperwork, and the shattering of glassware, she is aware of her wrist gripped and the door heaved shut.

It is instantly calm. The lab is warm. Acrid fumes of stale urine immediately

make her retch. Robbie ignores it. He is matter-of-factly reassembling papers. He takes the broom and starts sweeping up fragments of a flask. She goes to the fire and sits down.

In the order of the neatly crowded glassware, the rack of surgeons' implements, the light from the large window, she feels even more than usual like a badly stitched together rag doll. But the lab is often the most peaceful place, where even in her customary impulsive disorder some of the manager's calmness rubs off on her.

"Drink?"

There is a pot hanging over the fire and from it Robbie pours into two mugs. She nods, a little timidly.

"Feet are numb."

She inclines her head in the direction of the high window, where the snow on the sill is backed up flat against the glass.

"So beautiful – *pero mucho frio*."

"Here."

He hands the mug. She wraps both hands around it and sniffs. A herbal concoction. She sips, slurping the hot liquid noisily to cool it. Spicy.

"Mmm."

He draws up the stool opposite and without a word he removes her shoes and the wet woollen socks. These he places in the hearth. Throws a couple of logs on and the sparks fly up. He takes Ana's foot into his lap and massages the wrinkled rubbery toes gently, clasping his fingers around for a few moments at a time to impart warmth.

Ana is quiet.

The logs crackle and settle. The embers pulsate. Light from the high window swirls through the external fluttering of flakes and glints on the glassware.

Years later Robbie will reflect. This was the moment. Not the later glances. Not the accidental physicality when he helped Ana lift the heavier pans. Not the gradual playfulness of their exchanges. It simply formed. Everything else was an elaboration, a refinement. That time.

Ana looks up at him through the steam, wary and inquisitive, over the rim of the held mug, just the two eyes holding his.

Years later she will remember. That time. The reigned-in, expectant curiosity

as he gently, an unfolding surprise, brought feeling back into her toes. Later, she will think, the most unexpected and complete moment of exquisite tenderness in my entire life.

She observes him over the fragrant punch, through the steam, body warming almost to the point of drowsiness, mind alert. He looks down mostly, at his handiwork. Glances at her only briefly. Finally, reluctantly even, he stops, with a final ever-so slightly extended squeezing of the toes of each foot. Her socks have finished steaming. He hands them back dry. She puts on her shoes. He goes back to a pot and, lifting the lid on a disgusting vapour, stirs its brackish contents thoughtfully.

She gets up slowly and, seeing a collection of soiled glassware, takes some water from the pot, and the bucket, and starts rinsing.

About the writer

Stephen Chance was born into a family of generations of steelworkers in Redcar, north Yorkshire. Growing up close to both heavy industry and stark moorland, this background informs his first novel – ***The Alum Maker's Secret***.

Stephen is an architect and lives in 'Cargo Fleet' – a rusty steel house he and his partner designed. His limited edition book *Cargo Fleet* was presented to the president of SSI, the Thai steel conglomerate, as part of successful negotiations to secure the takeover and reopening of the Teesside casting plant and furnaces.

The Alum Maker's Secret was catalysed by his stumbling across the remains of alum workings on a Yorkshire cliff top.

