

Wales Arts Review



Greatest Welsh Novel

Part Two

Rachel Trezise - Dannie Abse - Kate Roberts -
Raymond Williams - Trezza Azzopardi -
Alastair Reynolds - Rhys Davies

Senior Editor

Gary Raymond

Managing Editor

Phil Morris

Design Editor

Dean Lewis

Fiction Editor

John Lavin

Music Editor

Steph Power

Non Fiction

Editor

Ben Glover

PDF Designer

Ben Glover



Wales Arts Review is excited and proud to announce that 2014 marks the year in which we launch the search for the Greatest Welsh Novel. Over the course of 2014 *Wales Arts Review* will publish a series of essays by some of Wales' top literary voices nominating a longlist of twenty five novels marking the finest long works of fictional prose our nation has ever produced. Each issue we will announce the latest title to be added to the longlist, along with the nominating essay. When all the nominating essays have been published we will open a public vote focussing on that longlist to find the Greatest Welsh Novel. The winner will be announced at the *Wales Arts Review* Roundtable event toward the end of the year, where an award will be handed out to either the author, estate or publisher of the winning work. The longlist has been compiled by a team of *Wales Arts Review's* writers and editors, as well as some guest voices. It is a diverse collection of old and new, and there are a fair few surprises in there. Here is Part Two.

- 3 Chasm City by Alastair Reynolds** – Charlotte Rogers
- 4 Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve by Dannie Abse** – Phil Morris
- 6 Tywyll Heno by Kate Roberts** – Francesca Rhydderch
- 7 Border Country by Raymond Williams** – Dai Smith
- 9 The Withered Root by Rhys Davies** – Dylan Moore
- 10 The Hiding Place by Trezza Azzopardi** – Dylan Moore
- 11 In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl by Rachel Trezise** – Emma Schofield
- 12 The Great God Pan by Arthur Machen** – Phil Morris
- 13 The Life of Rebecca Jones by Angharad Price (Translated by Lloyd Jones)** – Jim Morphy
- 15 Howl's Moving Castle by Diana Wynne Jones** – Penny Thomas
- 17 The Little Stranger by Sarah Waters** – Gary Raymond
- 19 The Genre of Silence by Duncan Bush** – Robert Minhinnick

Chasm City by Alastair Reynolds

by Charlotte Rogers

It is intended that this information will ease your transition into a culture which may be markedly different from the one you were expecting to find when you embarked at your point of origin.

-Prologue, Chasm City.

When you think of Science Fiction, you might think of Japan and its futuristic technologies, or an imagined American city landscape devastated by intergalactic war. It is unlikely that the beautiful landscape of Wales will immediately come to mind.

For Alastair Reynolds, it did.

The pastoral vistas of a rural Wales are the prevalent images in tourist information leaflets and holiday advertisements. However, the powerful industrial history of the country is brought to the fore in Reynolds' epic narrative, *Chasm City*. The novel is a sweeping tale of ex-soldier and security extraordinaire Tanner Mirabel, and his quest across the planet of Yellowstone to once-great Chasm City, in pursuit of the man that killed his love. However, through the twists and turns of the narrative, Tanner begins to remember things that he cannot be sure have ever actually happened to him. He begins to question his entire identity, and picks up a number of interesting and quite obscure characters along his route to discovery and vengeance.

However, despite how vastly and unapologetically fictional it is, this is certainly a Welsh novel, and not merely due to its author's birthplace.

Tanner's story is played out across the backdrop of a pure Science Fiction landscape. We are taken through different galaxies, introduced to time travel and extreme physical modification, all with the incredibly detailed vistas of Yellowstone, and especially the grimy and dilapidated Chasm City, in the background. It was in fact the post-industrial landscapes of South Wales that inspired Reynolds to create these locations. Port Talbot's steel works and Barry Docks were particular influences on the young Reynolds, and the effect of their sharp and convoluted metal structures, and steam-powered, clanking machinery are clearly echoed within the descriptions of *Chasm City*:

Where the furthest wall should have been was only an opening through which the lower levels of the city could be seen, behind a perpetual screen of dirty rain sluicing from the side of the terminus. A haphazard line of rickshaws waited: upright boxes balanced between two wide wheels. Some of the rickshaws were powered, coupled behind steam-engines or

chugging methane-powered motors. Their drivers lounged indolently, awaiting fares. Others were propelled by pedal-power, and several looked to have been converted from old palanquins.

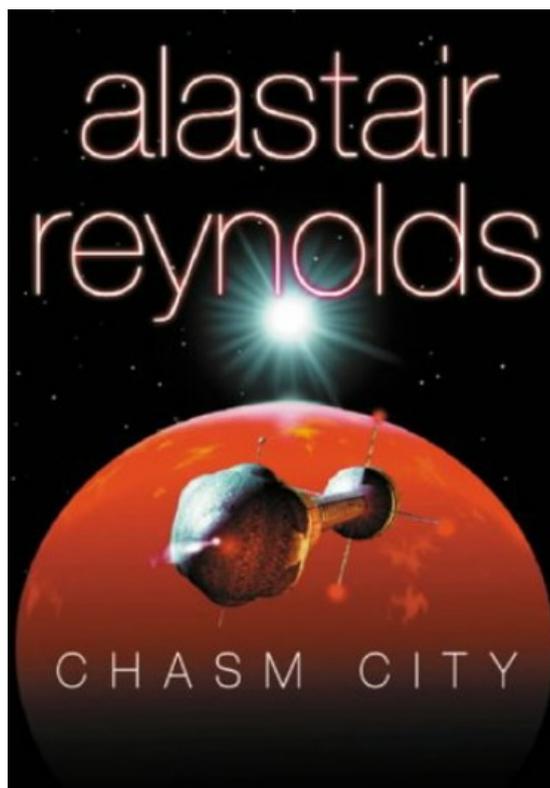
Reynolds claims that the distant lights from such 'exotic' places as Mumbles and Minehead as seen from his home in the Vale of Glamorgan were definite influences. The exoticism of a land that is both relatively close, spatially, but culturally incredibly distant, is certainly evident in the vision of the Canopy in Chasm City:

Some of the buildings split in two halfway up their length, while others bulged with unseemly obesity. Some sprouted tiny avatars of themselves, like the elbowed towers and oubliettes of fairytale castles. Higher, these structural growths bifurcated, and bifurcated again, interpenetrating and linking like bronchioli, or some weird variant of brain coral [...] I had seen it before of course, from the sky, but the meaning of it – and its sheer, city-spanning scale – was only now apparent from this vantage point.

It is not only the physical landscapes of Wales that are reflected in Reynolds' universe, but also the socio-political landscape of Wales and its history; specifically a late twentieth Century Wales. Having grown up in the Vale of Glamorgan in the late 1970s and early '80s, Reynolds was inevitably born into a Wales where political concerns were heightened. The much-famed miner's strike from 1984-85 left a full and lasting effect on the issue of class for Welshmen and Welshwomen everywhere, and although it is not certain that these socio-political issues were a conscious influence on Reynolds and his writing, a Welsh reader can certainly hear echoes of their own struggles

within the text. For instance, the divide between the City's Canopy and Mulch-dwellers can easily be seen as a reflection of the delicate class system in Wales under the Thatcher government in the 1970s and '80s, the period during which Reynolds was first envisioning the planets he would later use in *Chasm City*.

When Tanner first reaches Chasm City from his home planet, a young guide named Juan describes the stratification of the Mulch and the Canopy, and in his own broken, basic language explains; 'This Mulch,' [...] 'Everything down here, street level, this Mulch.' Tanner immediately senses the strict separation between the levels, noting that 'the Canopy was a kind of suspended ecology and below it was another world – another city – entirely.' Juan then goes on to explain that up in the Canopy, '[t]hem rich people,' [...]



'Real rich, not small-time rich.' We later learn that despite the whole of Chasm City having been exposed to a devastating technological and biological plague, because of their wealth, it is the inhabitants of the Canopy that are at an advantage in the aftermath – being able to afford costly and intricate medical procedures and life-lengthening tonics.

However, it is not only the issue of class that is raised in terms of identity, but also that of 'nationality', for want of a better word. The fact that travelling within both temporal and spatial planes is possible within Reynolds' universe means that we are introduced to a veritable menagerie of characters of varying biological, technical, and planetary origins. Inevitably within a narrative populated with so many different 'nationalities', the concept of otherness pervades through the story.

Although it is possible to identify the Welshman or Welshwoman as 'other', not least due to the origins of the term, the idea of otherness is of course not a trait that is particular to the Welsh. It is in fact a worldwide phenomenon and a well-documented theme in literature, especially within the genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy. It is at this point, then, that I would like to consider Chasm City not just as a great Welsh novel, but a Great Novel, period.

To return to the issue of otherness, Reynolds addresses here a theme that can be considered integral to the Science Fiction genre. However, rather than merely introducing posthuman and chimeric characters as aesthetically-pleasing asides, the plot twists that centre on Tanner's questionable identity address deeper issues of being, and of self. For instance, the main narrative – that of

Tanner's revenge quest to Chasm City – is interspersed with the story of pseudo-religious figure Sky Haussmann, presented as memory flashbacks within Tanner's mind. Here Reynolds explores the more philosophical depths of self, and the reliability of the mind, and of memory. This is not your average pulp SF novel.

The knitting of the two narratives is both detailed and fast-paced, mirroring the imagined sensation of interstellar travel, and despite its intricacies, is cohesive and well written. Reynolds successfully presents an entire universe, along with its tumultuous history, all in a matter of six-hundred-and-something pages. We are pulled through various worlds and back-stories, only to end up at a destination that is more hazy than the one from which we departed.

As the prologue to *Chasm City* – and to this essay – states, the world into which we are carried by Reynolds is much more complex and of an entirely different flavour than we might expect when presented with a Welsh Novel. This is not a tale of pastoral Welsh living, nor is it a completely disconnected tale from an author that just happens to be from Wales. The influence of the Welsh landscape and politics on the narrative is clear, whilst the issues raised are relevant to a much wider world. Reynolds delves into the depths of identity and what it means to be human, and brings a new facet to the Science Fiction genre. Also, let's not ignore the fact that this is a gripping and thoroughly enjoyable read. *Chasm City* is not just a Science Fiction epic, and not just a novel written by a Welshman. It is, truly, a Great Welsh Novel.

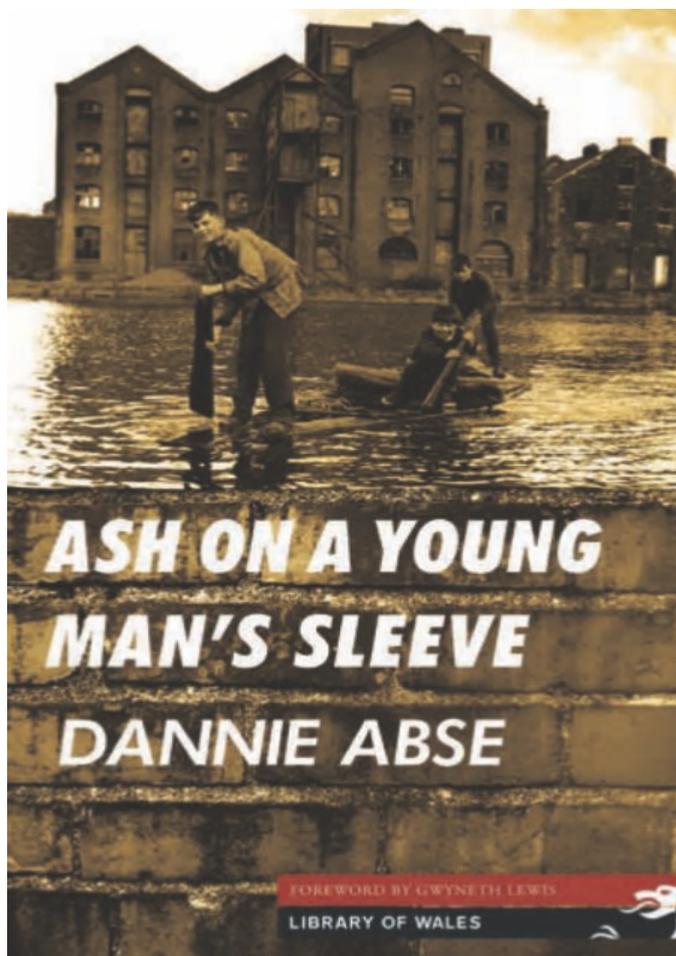
Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve by Dannie Abse –

by Phil Morris

When I interviewed Dannie Abse last year for the Wales Arts Review (Vol. 2, Issue 18) he recounted his horror at finding his 'most successful book' *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* classified as autobiography:

People have come up to me, after reading that book, saying, 'I've read your autobiography,' when in fact my actual autobiography is *Goodbye Twentieth Century*. And it's a shame really, because I want people to read the autobiography that is actually my autobiography, and read *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* as a novel, because it is a novel.

Of course, one of the more intriguing aspects of Abse's novel is the fine line it treads between autobiography and the novel, between fact and fiction. The central character of its bildungsroman narrative is a young Welsh-Jewish boy named Dannie, growing up in Cardiff during the nineteen-thirties, whose older brothers just happen to share the names of the author's brothers Leo (the campaigning MP) and Wilfred (the eminent psychiatrist). Also, embedded among the fictions of *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* are real-life historical episodes imagined with a poet's eye. The novel situates the intimacy and warmth of semi-autobiographical recollections within a wider historical and political context that includes the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War and the outbreak of World War II. Rarely has a book captured the relationship between the personal and political in such poignant detail – when Dannie plays Cowboys and Indians he always chooses to be an Indian



'because my brother Leo had told me that Cowboys were Imperialists.'

I first read the novel during my GCSE studies, when the author's tender reflections on his vanished childhood were rather lost on me. What I did respond to, however, was the urgency and fervour of the political idealism – keenly felt by the young Dannie under the influence of Leo – in response to the economic iniquities in South Wales and the fascist menace both at home and abroad. With the post-Thatcher consensus prevailing throughout the late eighties into the nineties, and the 'end of history' brought about by the end of the Berlin Wall, I wallowed in a red-tinted nostalgic yearning for the days when one might take up a rifle and volunteer for the Spanish Republic, knowing who the enemy was and what had to be done. Abse's novel is richly evocative of those years of the pre-War popular front, and its name-checks of figures such as John Cornford held a somewhat romantic appeal for my teenage self.

Rereading *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* twenty years later was an even more rewarding experience. Leo and Dannie's political radicalism had not lost any of its power to move me, but now the corresponding portrayal of childhood innocence – endless summer holidays and the tumultuous mystique that seems to emanate from the opposite sex – suffused the novel with an added strain of melancholic loss. The novel is redolent with staccato playground exchanges of one-up-man-ship, on topics ranging from the best seaside beaches to preferred methods of killing each other, and references to boyhood heroes who play football for Cardiff City and cricket for Glamorgan. Abse wrote the novel during his medical studies, completing it in 1954, and it often reads like an attempt to desperately hold on to a childhood, which had only passed recently but that was about to slip away for good. As one character in the novel puts it, 'A man has to keep his roots or he's lost.'

Any tendency there might have been for the novel to lapse into sentimentality is averted by Abse's stark

observations on the anti-Semitism that plagues the young Dannie, who faces the immediate threat of schoolyard bullies who call him a 'pudgy Jewboy' and the globalised threat of Nazism and homemade fascism. When the family sit around the radio and listen to a ranting Oswald Mosley claim that 'We English... are being throttled and strangled by the greasy fingers of alien financiers,' the young Dannie grimly perceives that 'he was talking about Dad and Mam, Wilfred and Leo, me and Uncle Isidore.'

A particular highlight of *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* is an imagined account of the assignation, by the young Jew, Herschel Grynszpan, of Nazi diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris on 7th November 1938. The episode has no direct bearing on Dannie's life whatsoever, other than he and Grynszpan share a Jewish identity that is being shaped by a future threat of annihilation. Gwyneth Lewis shrewdly describes this section of the book as a proto-poem, in which Dannie, the poet in embryo, empathically visualises Grynszpan entering the lobby of the German Embassy and noticing the 'grey-coloured luxurious carpet' that serves to highlight his sense of futility: 'The carpet was so thick that it disturbed his balance organs, he walked over it like a drunkard, but with no noise.' Writing of this acuity transforms mere historical record into indelible art.

In the novel's final, tragic section a major character – I won't spoil the book for future readers by revealing who it is – meets his death during an early wartime bombing raid. It is a sad, unheroic death in a conflict that will do the same for millions of similarly innocent people. The great achievement of Abse's novel therefore, is that he's able to place the petty anxieties and tribulations of childhood, and the global wars between the radical left and far right, between democracy and tyranny, within some form of universal field theory of human experience in which both the microcosmic and macrocosmic are shown as being important to the growth of Dannie in a myriad of interconnected ways. It is a novel that is undeniably Welsh, in accent and location, but one with broad international horizons.



Illustration by Dean Lewis

Tywyll Heno by Kate Roberts

by Francesca Rhydderch

I am not sure I like the word 'great', not when it is used in the same sentence as the 'novel', anyway. It ushers in a whole host of men, for one thing (some of them deserving, some less so), and for another, it raises questions of quality which can only be answered in the fullness of time. I would agree with Virginia Woolf that we cannot really measure the artistic success of a work produced in our own lifetime. This, along with the gender inequalities embedded in the literary canon, was an issue she worried her way around in almost all her critical essays. She did so partly out of a deep-rooted anxiety about the reception of her own fiction: her final nervous breakdown was partly attributable to her fear that her latest novel *Between the Acts* was not as strong as her earlier work. I sometimes wonder how she would have felt as she waded into the River Ouse with her pockets full of stones if someone had told her that the canon-makers of the late twentieth century would be spoiled for choice as far as she was concerned.

Woolf's Welsh-language counterpart, Kate Roberts, who suffered in equal measure both from depressive episodes and ongoing anxiety about the quality of her own writing – and who produced an equally impressive body of work – would perhaps have been similarly hard-pressed to predict which of her numerous novels and collections of short stories would find its place in the literary canon. Popular opinion maintains that *Traed Mewn Cyffion* [Feet in Chains], her 1936 family saga about the effects of the First World War on Welsh culture and identity, was her 'greatest' novel. But when you stand back and consider at her work as a whole, it is the writing that came out of her middle years which is the most interesting and technically virtuosic. Short novels such as *Stryd y Glep* [Gossip Row], 1949, are arguably as political as her earlier books: it is just that when she reached middle age, following the sudden death of her husband Morris Williams from alcoholism, she started to look inwards. Her landscapes became largely interior, and her books from this time are clouded in the kind of claustrophobic ennui which too easily attracts the marginalising

label of 'women's fiction'. You have only to look at the most recent Man Booker longlist (on which just three out of thirteen writers are women) to see how easy it still seems to be – unintentionally or otherwise – to sideline fiction by writers who happen to be female.

Roberts' 'greatest' work, without a doubt, is a novella called *Tywyll Heno* [Dark Tonight]. Produced when her writing still had a sparkling vitality – before that antsy liveliness morphed into a more static muscularity in her later years – it has a permeable, flexible quality that makes it stand out from the rest of her work. It is also built on one striking concept: a Nonconformist minister's wife loses her faith and ends up at the local asylum. Roberts' story begins and ends within the central tenets of Welsh Nonconformity, including the repressive roles foisted on women in a still deeply religious culture.

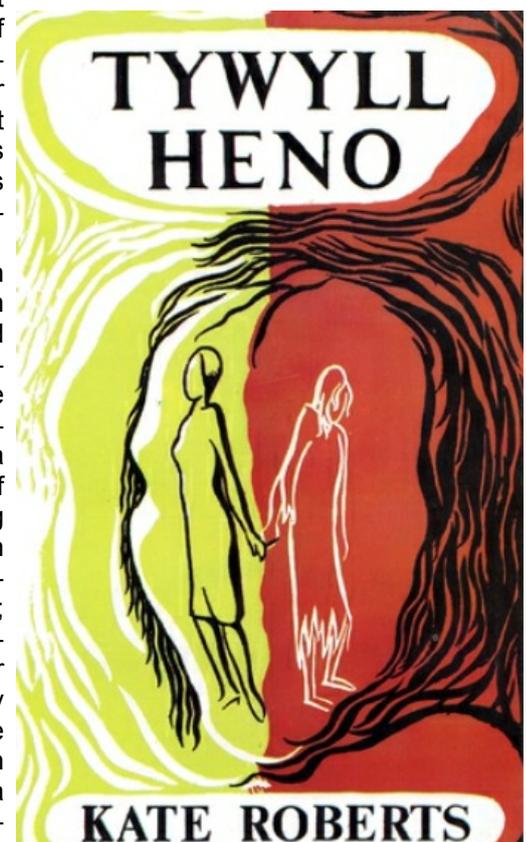
Although this is a personal, domestic story, it takes place against a backdrop of broader change – Nonconformity losing sway, the Anglicisation of the north Wales border town where our protagonist Bet Jones lives, the young losing respect for the old, her son becoming detached from her in his teenage years. At the heart of the book is a bottomless pit of angst which transcends the borders of an individual society or distinct culture, an existentialist fear that beneath all this there is simply – nothing. The power of this short book lies in its terrible bleakness.

Bet's breakdown is both literal and literary – its articulation springs from one word, *syrrffed* [fed up]. In the throes of her breakdown, she finds solace in the words of the old poets, most especially the ninth-century saga poem *Canu Heledd*, the song of Heledd (sister of Cynddylan, king of Powys): 'The hall of Cynddylan is dark tonight / Without fire, without a bed. / I will weep for a while; then I will be silent.' Roberts connects her protagonist with other women through a specifically Welsh literary line and makes the domestic spaces associated with 'women's writing' resonate with a deeper meaning beyond the im-

mediate and everyday. She literally speaks Bet's madness into being, and she voices her own literary tradition in order to do so.

The structure of this multi-layered novella also mimics the simplicity and redemption of a talking cure. After the Second World War Kate Roberts got to know the Hungarian psychoanalyst Lilla Wagner, and through their correspondence she learned much about modern thinking on psychology. By speaking Bet's madness into being, Roberts sees her protagonist talking herself back to full health, and despite the fact that there are never any happy endings in Kate Roberts's work, there is here a complex yet satisfying sense of resolution.

Although Roberts could not have known it at the time, the desperate years after the war when she was mourning her husband, struggling to keep her printing business afloat, and trying to find her way as a writer again after a period of silence, would be the most fertile of her long life. They became the seed-bed of a second flowering which would bring this, her best single work, to fruition, in which the brilliant beam of her desolate vision would – for a tantalisingly short time – pierce the darkness.



Border Country by Raymond Williams

by Dai Smith

In a prefatory note to the first publication of his novel, *Border Country* (1960), Raymond Williams wrote 'I know this country'. He meant, in a specific sense the Welsh border country between England and Wales, and even more particularly Pandy where he was born and raised, and Abergavenny where he went to school before Cambridge in 1939. Yet, more generally we can also take that professed 'knowledge' to encompass his understanding of the inter-relationship of countries of the mind, of culture as given and community as lived, between generations, across what is settled and that which is in flux; in short the nature of living in a world where time and space, here through industrialisation, have to be re-negotiated generation by generation if they are to function for us rather than to make human beings the ciphers of their functioning.

Is this novel that profound in intention? My answer is a resounding 'Yes'. Does it succeed by bodying out its chosen time and space with such an undeniable skill of characterisation that its fictional lives carry such a weight onto the page, and on into our consciousness? Another thunderous 'Yes'. And as for Wales, if the novel form, above all others, cannot convey the textual stitching of the individual life and the collective world of working-class society then it does not speak for the forces that shaped most of us most of the time and all of us some of the time during our turbulent last century. *Border Country* does all of that, and more. To the escapology of

Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* our own greatest 20th century intellectual figure counterposes the demonstrable commitment which validates values across generations, as in *Border Country*, and forever links those who have been to those who will be.

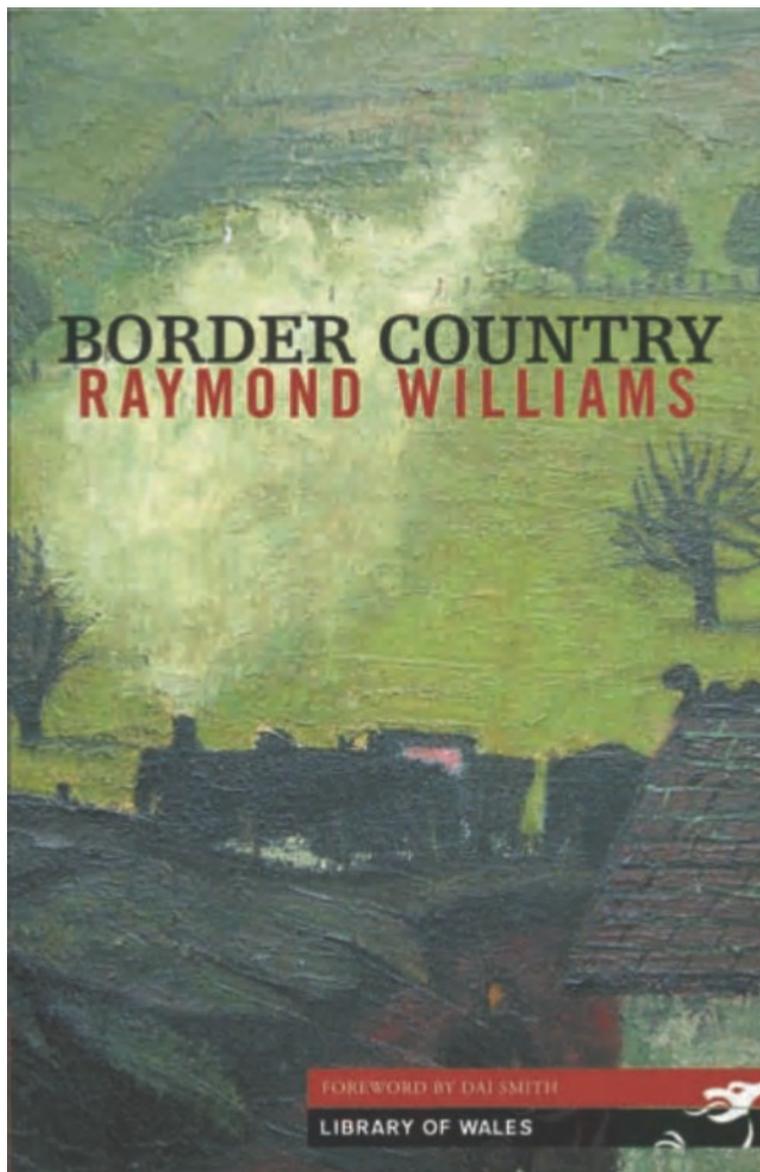
The son in question here is Matthew Price, or Will as he is known at home, the only child of a railway signalman and his wife, Harry and Ellen, who has become a University lecturer in London. His research work is 'on population movements into the Welsh mining valleys in the middle decades of the nineteenth century'. His concern is

that the measurer may indeed learn how to measure, but that to measure is not, in itself, sufficient if lives, and how they were lived, are themselves the real question:

The techniques I have learned have the solidity and precision of ice cubes, while a given temperature is maintained. But it is a temperature I can't really maintain; the door of the box keeps flying open. It's hardly a population movement from Glynmawr to London, but it's a change of substance, as it must also have been for them when they left their villages. And the ways of measuring this are not only outside my discipline. They are somewhere else altogether, that I can feel, but not handle, touch but not grasp. To the nearest hundred, or to any usable percentage, my single figure is indifferent, but it is not only a relevant figure: without it the change can't be measured at all. The man on the bus, the man in the street, but I am Price from Glynmawr, and here, understandably, that means very little. You get it through Gwenton. Yes, they say the gateway of Wales. Yes, border country.

And that will be Williams' justification for his writing a novel as a part, an essential but related part, of his whole work project: to restore the consciousness to working class communities who were shaped by cultural and social, political and economic, factors beyond themselves but who responded with individual dignity and collective creativity. In *Border*

Country we are shown the why and the how of it in the lives of de-racinated Matthew Price and the settlement Harry and Ellen have made. After Matthew, now become Will again, is called back to the bedside of a terminally ill Harry, the novel takes us via flashback to the first arrival in Glynmawr of the newly married couple after the First World War. As a signalman Harry will be at, and precisely so, the junction box between industrial and rural Wales, passing coal-laden trains through into England, in communication via this technology, even from an idyllic rural spot, with his work-mate peers elsewhere. At the heart of this, and of





Will's growing up and schooling, will be the General Strike of May 1926 and the unprecedented support from the whole of the organised working class which was accorded to the miners in their national strike and lock-out. The social significance of this event, the nearest thing to a revolution which 20th century Britain saw, is re-told by Williams with quietly insistent subtlety as he plays off the instinctive fellow-feeling of Harry, and others, for the cause against the more overt, politicised demands made by a fellow-signalman, Morgan Rosser. Harry will lose his job. Rosser, fire-breathing socialist, will become an entrepreneur in soft fruits and jams. Williams uses incident and dialogue to point up tensions, not to deliver sermons. Lives continue to slower rhythms after the strike but there is no mistaking the tow of the undercurrent the strike has released. Matthew's later career, in post-war Britain, is an unspoken echo of the earlier generation's cultural triumph even in political defeat.

Raymond Williams brilliantly sets what is tumultuous, and life-changing, against a background that is, in landscape terms, lyrically evoked:

In the spring of 1926, in Glynmawr, the green of the meadows was fresh and cool, and the blossom was white in the orchards, and on the thorns and crabs in the hedges. Along the banks of the roads the violets were hidden in overgrowing leaves, but the primroses were out, though not so thickly as on the banks of the railway, where they flowered most richly, as if the cuttings and embankments had been made for them. All over the valley, and far up on the mountains, innumerable birds sang and flew. The Honddu was high, as it had been since midwinter. The low-lying cottages near the river had already been flooded.

Here was the ordinary history of the valley, sheltered and almost isolated under its dark mountains. But now, with this May Day, a different history exerted its pressures, and reached, with the railway line, even this far. The troubled years of strike and lock-out, which had affected the village only slightly, moved now to their crisis, and touched this valley under its lonely mountains... Up beyond the mountains, little more than ten miles from this farming valley, lay the different valleys, where the pits and the colliers' houses were crowded. At dusk, above Darren, the glow of the steel furnace spread up each evening into the sky, and many turned now to watch it more seriously, and to think of the black valleys that lay hidden beyond. There was the trouble, that the

eye could almost see, and in the papers the trouble was recorded, to be read in the sun of mid morning among flowers and blossoming trees.

The whole novel is a rebuttal of pastoralism as any kind of comforting genre, and in Welsh terms as a far too frequent literary companion. Everywhere, in its almost complete absence of simile and metaphor, it eschews efflorescence in its prose and fantasy in its steadily paced narration. Yet it shines with descriptive luminosity of place and tender empathy for the inner lives of its characters and their fraught relationships. With Harry's death, Mathew will return to his work, and to his necessarily new and different life, but the knowledge he will now have, from memory and from experience, of 'this country' will indeed inform all that he is and all that he will do. He tells Susan, his wife in London:

'...I remember when I first left there, and watched the valley from the train. In a way, I've only just finished that journey.'

'It was bound to be a difficult journey.'

'Yes, certainly. Only now it seems like the end of exile. Not going back, but the feeling of exile ending. For the distance is measured, and that is what matters. By measuring the distance, we come home.'

Raymond Williams' first, and best, novel had taken him over a decade to write and several versions to complete. He finished it in 1958, the year he published his path breaking critical work *Culture and Society*. He always considered *Border Country's* appearance in 1960 as a delayed twinned birth. As I showed in my biographical study of his life and work, *Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale* (2008), he was right to insist upon that and upon the bridge that connected the general or universal to the specific or local. He wanted both to explain and to show how men and women, caught in the great climate of events, also made their own weather by giving expression to their individual identities and common humanity in the places and over the times in which they lived. The ambition, make no mistake, was huge. The triumph, no less. This is a novel which in its implicit comparisons reaches out from Wales to the wider world. Its grasp of its subject on the ground of the page translates, from Wales, for that world of readers which *Border Country* has found, the meaning for individual human lives of the deep patterns he had discerned through his ground-clearing intellectual enquiry. It is both the reach and the grasp that makes *Border Country*, and pre-eminently so, the Greatest Welsh Novel, and a consummate work of art.

The Withered Root by Rhys Davies

by Dylan Moore

What I am about to reveal probably invalidates my nomination of Rhys Davies' *The Withered Root* as one of the Greatest Welsh Novels of all time. It may even undermine our whole business of trying to choose a Greatest Welsh Novel.

I have not read every novel Rhys Davies wrote. In fact, I have only read one. *The Withered Root*.

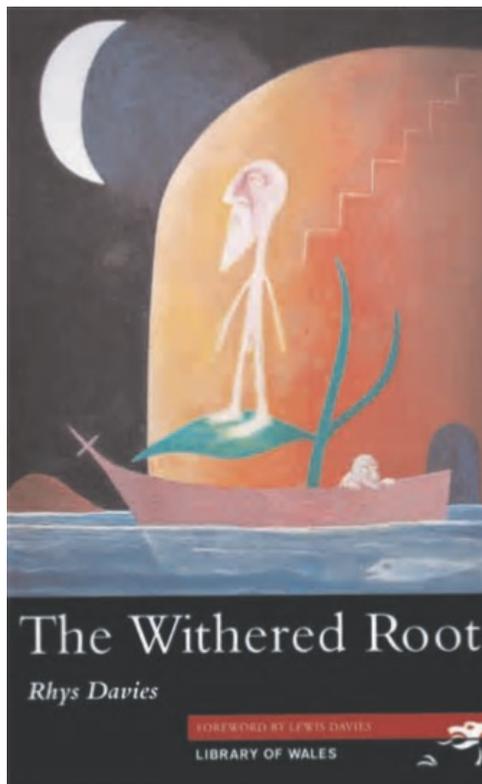
Given that Davies wrote eighteen novels, that hardly qualifies me as somebody permitted to pontificate on the greatness or otherwise of Davies' output. Maybe rather than writing an essay in praise of the very fine novel *The Withered Root*, I should be settling down in an armchair with *A Time to Laugh*, the next Davies title in the Library of Wales series.

Of course, the Library of Wales is going to be absolutely crucial to my argument. Quite apart from the fact I'd be willing to wager that with the possible exception of Davies' biographer Meic Stephens, *nobody* has read cover-to-cover all eighteen of Davies' novels, the Library of Wales project itself deserves huge credit in the sense that I can write in the knowledge that a significant proportion of the *Wales Arts Review* audience will at least be aware of *The Withered Root*'s existence. It brings the absolute necessity of the Library of Wales' existence into sharp focus to imagine a similar poll being conducted in England where, for example, a reasonably highbrow literary publication could not rely on its audience having a strong awareness of, say, *The Rainbow* or *Jude the Obscure*.

As a sixth former in a Welsh school and an undergraduate in a Welsh university in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was largely unaware of the idea that there might be any Welsh novel that might be considered great, let alone the number required to make the current debate stimulated by *Wales Arts Review* a worthwhile enterprise. At Cardiff, I did take a couple of niche modules, populated overwhelmingly by the 'home crowd': Professor Stephen Knight's 'Welsh Fiction in English' and another on 'the Thomases', Dylan and R.S. But for the most part my Literature courses were a diet of representations of English-

ness, with some side-dish Americana; tellingly, any considerations of post-colonialism were contextualised in the far-flung outposts of Empire, not in the somewhat 'Anglo-Welsh' city where we sat.

Two opinions of Rhys Davies that have come to prevail in Wales are that he has been inexplicably overlooked by the literary establishment, particularly in England, and that his nearest equivalent in the canon of English Literature is D.H. Lawrence. Lewis Davies' play *Sex and Power at the Beau Rivage* emphasised the biographical link between the two free spirits of Britain's interwar era, but the best evidence of a Lawrentian influence at work in Davies is in the work itself.



The connection between the two writers goes far beyond the fact that they met or the personal and sociological parallels, both men being sensitive souls who had grown up within the tough environs of a traditional mining community: Lawrence in Eastfield; Davies in Blaenclydach. There is something in *The Withered Root* that shares the very atmosphere of a Lawrence masterpiece. Maybe it is the central tension between the world of the body and the world of the spirit, the dichotomy between sexual attraction

and spiritual calling that threatens to pull young Reuben Daniels apart. Maybe it is the cramped atmosphere of inter-generational conflict and misunderstanding in the small terraced house inhabited by Daniels, his alcoholic mother and somewhat weak-willed father. Or maybe it is simply that Davies, like his English counterpart, is simply a *world class* writer.

It seems crude to talk about fictionists in such terms, as if they were footballers or heritage sites. But for the purposes of this competition – and what else is the Greatest Welsh Novel series if not a Champions League for storybooks – we need to be clear in our minds about the Great and the merely very good. And as the competition enters its latter stages and intensifies, we also need to be clear about our criteria. *The Withered Root* is a novel that captures, in rarefied prose, a quintessential element of Welshness. That it is a strand of Welsh life largely forgotten by the vast majority of the public makes it all the more important as a historical document. Through fiction we remember.

A highly accomplished fictional treatment of the 1904-5 spiritual Revival during which tens of thousands made an emotional commitment to Jesus Christ, Davies' focus on the 'Evan Roberts' figure of Daniels – a man with a clear divine calling but also in possession of the heady cocktail of the weaknesses of the flesh and a magnetic sexual attraction – makes *The Withered Root* a classic of the period, one of those carefully-constructed *bildungsromans* that build in almost claustrophobic intensity as we come to share the protagonist's struggles. It is therefore, I think, not a Great Welsh Novel, but simply a great novel that happens to be Welsh; we should be grateful that it, and he, was so.

All of which is to say that I am looking forward to consuming, over the coming years, the remainder of Davies' oeuvre and that I hope many more titles follow in the Library of Wales. But I would also be surprised if Davies wrote a better novel. Indeed, if any of his seventeen others are on a par with *The Withered Root*, then this list should be as chock-full with Davies as its equivalent in poetry would no doubt be dominated by Thomases.

The Hiding Place by Trezza Azzopardi

by Dylan Moore

Tiger Bay occupies a singular position in the Welsh imagination. Through its oft-celebrated Otherness, its non-traditional version of Welshness, its cosmopolitan grid of terraced streets and roughhouse boozers have become a shorthand representation of Wales almost as powerful as pitwheels and red jerseys and chapels on remote hillsides. But from John Mills' evocative shots of Pillgwenlly's Transporter Bridge through Shirley Bassey's upbringing in Splott to the Dr Who Experience at Roath Lock, 'the Bay' has always been a place of tall tales, a place that easily succumbs to myth-making.

In the popular imagination, Tiger Bay was *both* a community of vice and danger and a place where you could leave your front door open. It was where sailors from around the world – Norway, China, the Caribbean, Arabia and the Horn of Africa – stopped and settled, fell in love with girls from the Valleys and created their own rainbow nation within a nation. As the graffiti once had it, this was Independent Tropical Wales.

Although there are grains of truth within what is undoubtedly an attractive idea of one of Britain's first truly multicultural neighbourhoods, it is in stark contrast to such cosy sepia visions and lazy stereotypes that *The Hiding Place* sets itself up. Trezza Azzopardi's debut novel is a family saga set in the dockland community of the forties, fifties and sixties. Published in 2000 – the year after the rebranded 'Cardiff Bay' became the nation's political focal point – it is anything but sentimental.

Contemporary reviews celebrated *The Hiding Place* as a revelation and exploration of a community underrepresented in literary fiction; in *The Guardian*, D.J. Taylor pointed out that the Maltese of British fiction were primarily 'low-life bit-parters in Soho crime novels, gamely hurling paraffin heaters through the windows of dirty bookshops.' If Azzopardi's characters were more fully realised than their pulp fiction counterparts, they hardly painted her father's countrymen in a more positive light.

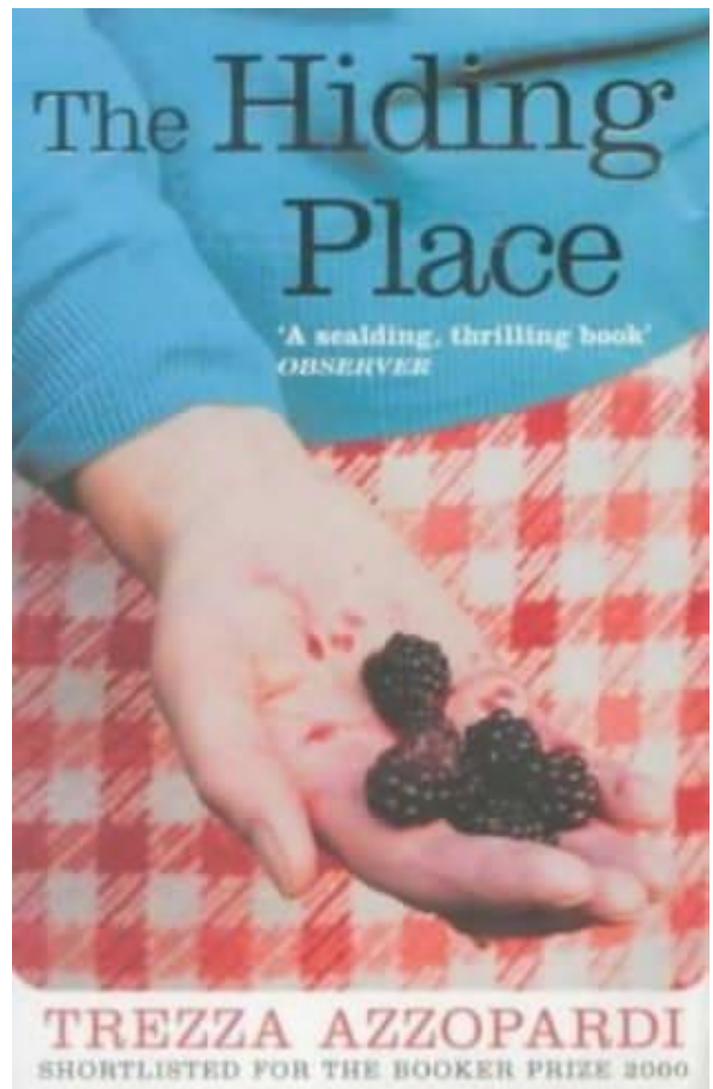
Indeed, *The Hiding Place's* patriarch – Frankie Gauci – is a dark figure who casts a long, vampiric shadow over his wife Mary, all six of his daughters and, for a long time afterwards, the reader. The book is a dark tale of sickening abuse, unflinching violence, unfettered gambling, arson, prostitution and the killing of a pet rabbit. All of this is handled with a surety far beyond that of most debuts and the book was deservedly shortlisted for the Booker Prize – for its 'vivid picture of Cardiff's seedy 1960s underworld... [an] immigrant community of gangsters, gaming rooms and betting shops, cafes, clubs and back-to-back terraces' and the 'haunting beauty' of Azzopardi's prose, 'sparse', condensed', 'poetic'. What marks *The Hiding Place* out as great among the good is its suggestiveness and atmosphere of suppressed truth.

Azzopardi's narrator is Dolores, the youngest of the Gauci sisters, and the novel moves deftly between Dol's child-viewpoint and a dual narrative in which she employs her adult hindsight. Through the gaps, Azzopardi explores the very nature of memory, as Dolores attempts to come to terms with the psychological fallout of her brutal childhood and shattered family. It makes for a heart-rending first-person voice: as early as page 15, Dolores is narrating her own birth through a quasi-omniscient view of

her mother: 'Mary is in a state of mute blankness. A girl baby, yet again. In her head, she wonders what to call me – she's exhausted her list of Saints' names on the boys she never bore, and is sick of all the arias in the names her girls have got.' This is how poor Dolores starts her life, as her mother's own little lady of sorrows – and things are about to get worse.

At a month old, Dolores' left hand is burned in a house fire that has tragic consequences for the whole family. As a result, Frankie sees Dolores as an omen, and the loss of her hand becomes the novel's central motif. And it is this symbolic power that lifts *The Hiding Place* from its place as a 'niche' novel, notable for its sailing into the uncharted waters of Tiger Bay's Maltese underworld and the chilling dexterity of its presentation of child abuse, onto the very top table of Welsh writing in English.

'Porth Teigr' is today being refitted into a factory for 'the creative industries'. That *The Hiding Place* offers a glimpse of the old, 'real' Tiger Bay is perhaps simply a bonus. What we learn between the cracks of Dolores' unreliable narration is a reminder not only of the unbearably quiet tragedies of many lives, but also the power that literature retains to invoke in the reader a little understanding of those whose lives have been forgotten in the rush to create broad brushstroke histories.

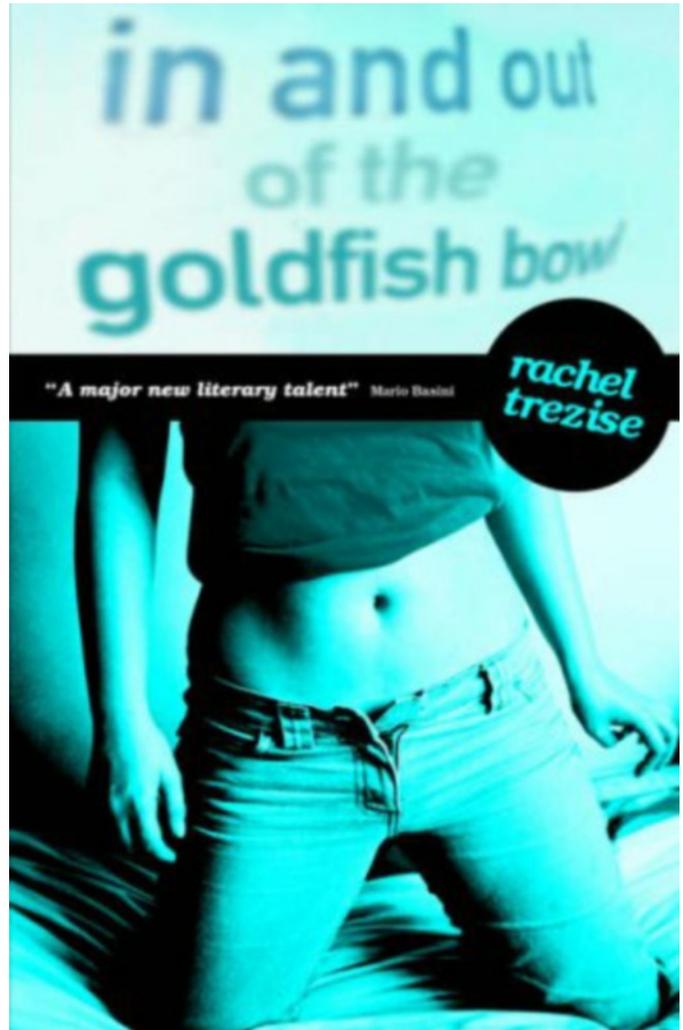


In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl by Rachel Trezise

by Emma Schofield

As with a number of the excellent novels featured in earlier nominations, I suspect that a vote in favour of Rachel Trezise's 2000 novel *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl* may raise a few eyebrows. Controversial from the start, this compelling novel tackles the topics of abuse, rape and childhood trauma on its often stormy rampage through life in 1990s South Wales. Yet in choosing a truly great novel, we sometimes have to recognise that outstanding literature may not always depict the world as we would like to see it. *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl* is hardly a glowing endorsement of life in 1990s South Wales, instead it is a glimpse into the wilderness of the 1990s, a snapshot which neatly captures moments of hope and despair at a time of intense political and social turmoil in Wales.

Speaking in an interview with John Lavin in 2013 Trezise was keen to emphasise her belief that 'life is multi-layered all the time; you need shadow and light to paint a complete portrait', *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl* perfectly reflects this concept. The shadow in the novel is obvious from the outset; the first-person narrative traces the childhood and adolescence of Rebecca Trigiani as she struggles to cope with her mother's alcoholism and a series of brutal sexual assaults which she suffers at the hands of her step-father, Brian. In keeping with the unconventional style of the novel there is no contrived happy ending; the problems Rebecca faces as a young girl cannot be entirely forgotten as she makes the transition to adult life. Yet their significance on her life dissipates, with the epilogue describing how these events of the past have gradually 'dissolved' leaving Rebecca able to move on to the next phase of her life. In contrast, the scars of industrial decline and economic difficulty evident in the novel's de-



scription of the Rhondda are still as vivid at the novel's close as they were in its opening, suggesting that more still needs to be done to overcome the social and financial problems which blight the area throughout the narrative.

It is not only the depiction of post-industrial Wales that gives this challenging novel a distinctive tone. The decision to tackle topics such as rape, childhood abuse, suicide and mental health issues was, inevitably, likely to prove controversial. Yet Trezise is not simply telling the story of Rebecca's troubled life, she is giving voice to the many who struggle in silence against such problems. For readers perhaps one of the most uncomfortable facets of this narrative is the fact that it is semi-autobiographical. Trezise has always been hesitant to provide specific details about which aspects of her life survived the transition to fiction and which parts of the novel were developed during the creative process. What is clear is the rawness of the narrative, the sense that this is a story which, fictional or not, must be told. Here, Trezise and her complex protagonist are united in their perception of writing as a personal process, able to heal wounds inflicted in the past.

But where there is shade in the novel, there is also light. Rebecca's narrative is essentially one of survival, more than that, it is a survival narrative generated solely by the female characters in the story. As Rebecca struggles to overcome her experiences of rape and sexual

abuse, it is the figure of her terminally-ill grandmother who passes on her 'gift-wrapped' strength to her young granddaughter. Moreover, it is Rebecca herself who eventually realises that she has the power to take control of her own life, using her writing skills to further her recovery and build a future for herself. The development of this independent nature is not only key to Rebecca's survival, but can also be read as representative of the unprecedented political step Wales was preparing to take at the narrative's close in 1997 just prior to the referendum on Welsh devolution. The resilience Rebecca ultimately displays in the novel marks not only her personal development, but a powerful bond between character and country.

Similarly, one of the most striking features of the novel is the way in which it regularly offers insightful social observations amidst the turmoil of Rebecca's life. In a particularly dry observation of life in 1990s Rhondda, Rebecca comments at one stage that 'the problem with the Rhondda was the lack of choice', cutting straight to the heart of the socio-economic problems of the decade.

I wanted so desperately to shatter the dreams of hometown people who only find respect for you if you give up the fight for originality. But if you stand out like a sore thumb, looking like you're doing better than the next one, then someone will knock you down. How can you be the one to make the change in a place where nothing ever changes but the shoes?

Here Rebecca's honesty and desire for change drive the narrative forward in this tumultuous novel as she moves through her school and college years in a haze of alcohol, sex and attempts to escape to other places. In the end, however, Rebecca always finds herself drawn back to Wales and the identity she cannot fully escape from. With her nation on the cusp of the post-devolution era, Trezise offered a story which reflected the Wales she had grown up with; her decision to tackle, not mask, the problems she had encountered is to be commended, not condemned. The fact that the novel is now included on the syllabus for Welsh Literature modules at a number of Welsh Universities is testament to the recognition it has received as a literary text of relevance to contemporary studies of Wales.

In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl is a portrait created with a delicate blend of light and shadow, it is a distinctly Welsh novel and a great example of the strength of contemporary Welsh writing being produced in Wales at the moment. Yet it is more than that; it is a touching, and often heart-breaking, reminder of the obstacles too many face in modern life and of the difficulty we all sometimes experience in finding the strength to survive the problems life throws at us. A modern, multi-layered, nation facing social, economic and political turmoil demands fiction which is strong enough and original enough to represent those problems. *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl* is that fiction, making it, indisputably, a keen contender for the title of the Greatest Welsh Novel.

The Great God Pan by Arthur Machen

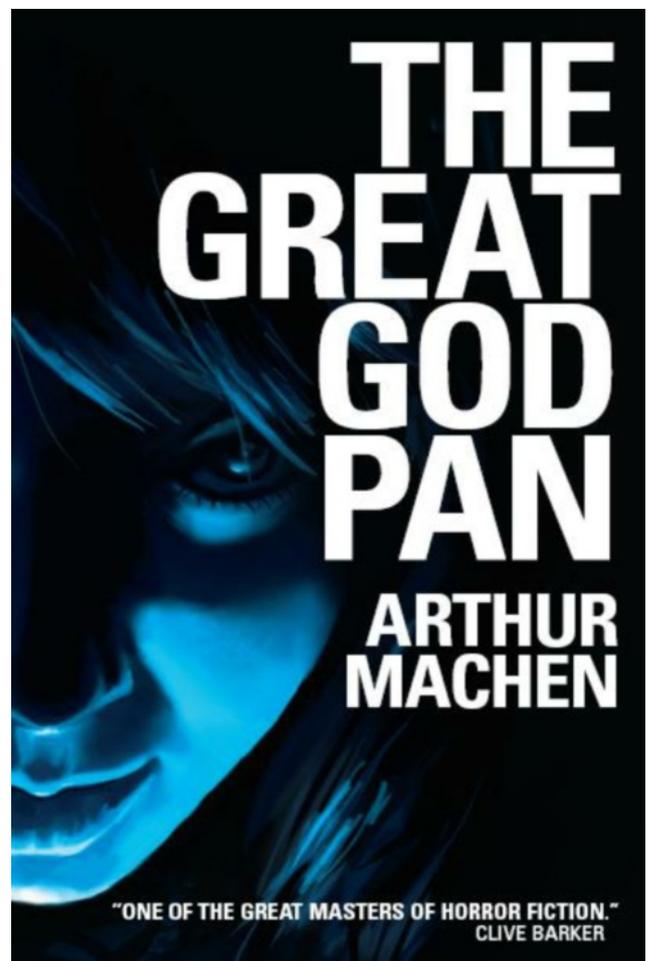
by Phil Morris

Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* opens with a mad scientist, Dr Raymond, performing a botched experiment in late-Victorian brain surgery on a young woman, Mary, who is rendered insane after being granted a momentary glimpse into the noumenal universe that exists beyond our own world of surface, though illusory, realities – *and then it gets even stranger*.

Like his fellow masters of the supernatural – Edgar Allan Poe and M.R. James – Machen does not shock his readers with gory descriptions of bloody violence, nor terrify with evocations of scary monsters red in tooth and claw; but rather he works his dark magic by affecting a creeping sense of dread, with what his admirer H.P. Lovecraft described as a 'cumulative suspense... with which every paragraph abounds'.

At the heart of *The Great God Pan* is the mysterious figure of Helen Vaughan and the unholy fascination she exerts over the young, rich men of fin-de-siècle London. Like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Machen's novella elides intense sexual allure with a secret undisclosed evil that lurks beneath the shimmering surface of physical beauty. Only, in Machen's case, the book speaks to Victorian anxieties about the sexual agency of women rather than the decadence of aesthetes. The beauty of Helen Vaughan is not described in any detail, it is the effect of her beauty, its soul-corrupting voluptuousness, on others that is of interest to Machen.

Machen's powerful capacity to disturb lies not in what is described and explained but what is indicated and unsaid. His plot bounds forward in big leaps in which the narration skips from the impressionable young Clarke to



Vaughan's nemesis Villers, the story unfolding in a series of gossipy accounts, journal entries and stories within stories. Jon Gower accurately described *The Great God Pan* as 'a Matryoshka confection, a Russian doll full to the brim with seeping, foggy menace, inexplicable deaths and resurrections'. The reader is frequently knocked off balance by a sudden shift in time and place – speculation about Helen's death is confounded by rumours of her sexual adventures in South America, years later another mysterious woman turns up in London with a host of young suicides trailing in her wake – could this lethal Mrs Beaumont be the same Helen Vaughan?

Underneath all these tantalising narrative mysteries there lies the deeper existential conundrum that Machen locates in the landscape of Gwent, where the novella begins. In his autobiography *Far Off Things*, Machen presents his birthplace of Caerleon, and its surrounding countryside, as some form of transcendental portal in which prevailing notions of time and space can be collapsed or exploded. For him, Gwent was not merely a place of boyhood dreaming, but also a means by which the universe beyond the obscuring veil of our perceived 'real' world could be perceived as it truly is. In the gripping opening chapter of *The Great God Pan*, the sinister Dr Raymond makes this challenge to his friend Clarke on the notion of perception and reality:

You see the mountain, and hill following after hill, as wave on wave, you see the woods and orchard, and the fields of ripe corn, and the meadows reaching to the reed-beds by the river... I say that all these are but dreams and shadows; the shadows that hide the real world from our eyes. There is a real world, but it is beyond this glamour and this vision, beyond these 'chases in Arras, dreams in a career', beyond them all as beyond a veil.

Machen's aim in his fiction was always to 'depict the eternal, inner realities – the things that really are of

Plato – as opposed to the description of transitory external surfaces; the delusory masks and dominoes with which the human heart drapes and hides itself.' Which is why, in spite of Machen's sometimes overblown and often clunky prose, *The Great God Pan* still manages to get under the skin of its readers. Its unknowable anti-heroine, its dark implications, its structural lacunae, and its expressions of awe in the face of the ineffable mystery of our universe, directly addresses our concerns regarding the odd impulses that emanate occasionally from our Id, the highly subjective nature of perception, and the limitations of human knowledge. Much scarier than a mere monster is the idea that we don't really know who we are, why we're here and what is our purpose. The novella also touches on our contemporary fears regarding the medical modification of human subjects. Machen's work lingers long in the mind after reading, not because it features the Gothic staples of wicked women, inherited satanic evil and damned souls, but because it reawakens our own suspicion that reality is something that we only ever dimly perceive and always fail to comprehend.

The influence of Machen can be found in the works of later writers, such as H.P. Lovecraft and Peter Straub, and the films of Guillermo Del Toro. Stephen King acknowledged that he was 'strongly influenced' by Machen's *The Great God Pan* in the writing of his own novella *N*. King noted how Machen works his way 'relentlessly into the reader's terror-zone'.

In another interview King stated: 'Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*...is one of the best horror stories ever written. Maybe the best in the English language. Mine isn't anywhere near that good, but I loved the chance to put neurotic behaviour – obsessive/compulsive disorder – together with the idea of a monster-filled macrorverse'. Such a tribute from a modern master of horror fiction should encourage many modern readers to appraise themselves of Machen's work.

The Life of Rebecca Jones by Angharad Price (Translated by Lloyd Jones)

by Jim Morphy

My nomination for the Greatest Welsh Novel is a book I haven't read: *O! Tyn y Gorchudd*, by Angharad Price.

To be decent, I'll pick it alongside one I have: its magnificent English-language version, *The Life of Rebecca Jones*, expertly translated from the Welsh by Lloyd Jones.

However, even taking into account the quality of Jones's transfer, I know I'm missing out by being unable to read the book in my country's language.

As Jones himself has said: 'No translation can truly capture the original, especially a book which is so quintessentially Welsh as *O! Tyn y Gorchudd*.'

Quintessentially Welsh. Jones's phrase gets to the heart of why *The Life of Rebecca Jones* gets my choice as the Greatest Welsh Novel and why reading it gives my monoglot self pangs of regret.

The Life of Rebecca Jones is an undeniably brilliant book. Even if, for a moment, we take out that murky middle word, Welsh, and all the considerations that go with

it, it would still get my vote as the greatest novel on our list of twenty five.

It is an ingenious blend of fact and fiction, with our storyteller Rebecca (a member of Price's own real-life family) looking back on her life in the rural community of Maesglasau, mid-Wales, from the start to the end of the twentieth century. Price gives Rebecca a dignified voice and a deeply moving story to tell.

In particular, we read the true tales of Rebecca's brothers, three of who are blind and have the opportunity to be educated and find work away from the valley. A fourth brother yearns to be a doctor and travel the world, but is bound to the family farm. Maesglasau itself – with the evocative descriptions of the hills, the farms, the crag, the ruins, the mountain stream – is a character as much as any person in the book.

Rebecca's own love story is gently-placed, almost half-hidden, into the book's pages. And, of course, the novel's final paragraph is as heartbreaking as any paragraph you'll find in world literature. It's an ending that shows what a loving book this is.

The Life of Rebecca Jones is a quiet novel, written in a style that is both straightforward and spell-binding. Added to all this – and added to our competition – is the idea of Wales.

The Life of Rebecca Jones is soaked through with a certain Welshness. It consumes you with a sense of place – with a history, a character, a language, a way of life. Price deftly uses Rebecca's intimate tale to capture the much bigger stories of a Wales. Read the 150 uncluttered pages of *The Life of Rebecca Jones* to discover an entire culture. This is, for me, what makes *The Life of Rebecca Jones* the novel of our nation.

Rebecca recalls her 'Welsh chapel childhood'. We see the grace and dignity of her mother, who lived by the motto 'believe in God and do your work.' We see the farming community living and working together, their rhythm dictated to by the seasons.

Spinning out from this personal narrative are the grander stories passed down through the generations. We read of Olwen from the Mabinogion 'who leaves white traces'. Of Cadair Idris, to the summit of which Rebecca never ventured as 'it was said you'd come down mad – or a poet'. Of the Red Bandits of Dugoed who robbed their victims without mercy. Of Hugh Jones's wondrous writings.

The Life of Rebecca Jones creates and carries this weight of history with an effortless ease. Price crafts together the personal and the mythical with not a join in sight.

This is not to say *The Life of Rebecca Jones* is a simple celebration of a single and pure heritage. Far from it. This is more a story about the tensions that come from a traditional way of life.

As Rebecca herself says when looking back: 'I felt forces in my womb pulling me this way and that. Whether to embrace my ancestors' traditions, or reject them?' She rails against 'This detestable tradition of woman as maidservant!'. She has regrets over her father's farming life, where there 'wasn't the time to indulge in fatherhood.' Rebecca raised a personal 'temple to tranquillity' in the valley – this brought her the peace she sought, but it also brought her loneliness. Her brother Lewis is torn between his non-conformist upbringing and his yearning for the unshakeable dogma of Catholicism. Brothers Bob and Gruff: 'one a Labourite and the other a Tory. One was a Union man and the other an Establishment man. One a Welsh Congregationalist and the other an Anglican.'

These tensions go for society too. *The Life of Rebecca Jones* paints an often, but not wholly, wistful picture of a changing valley, a changing Wales, a changing world. New technologies, new ideas, new people make their way into Maesglasau. Modernity encroaches. As does, of course, the English language.

In particular with this respect, we read of the brothers' schooling: 'Gruffydd and William's journey towards education would be irreversible, taking them away from the Welsh language and its culture to another language and culture; away from Wales to another country'. The reader is always aware of Rebecca weighing up the pushes and pulls of 'progress' and 'tradition'.

Towards the end of the book, Rebecca and her family watch a TV documentary that's been made about the 'three blind brothers from Tynbraich'. Rebecca weeps at what she sees: 'The greatest pain was the lie perpetrated by the film. It seemed to say nothing changed, yet clearly showed that nothing lasted.'

In many ways, this lie helps explain both the novel and the Welsh (or any) identity. Things change; things stay the same. We search for a rootedness as time marches on. As Rebecca says: 'A longing for continuance lies at the heart of our nature, and we lie at the centre of those forces which pull us this way and that like some torturer.'

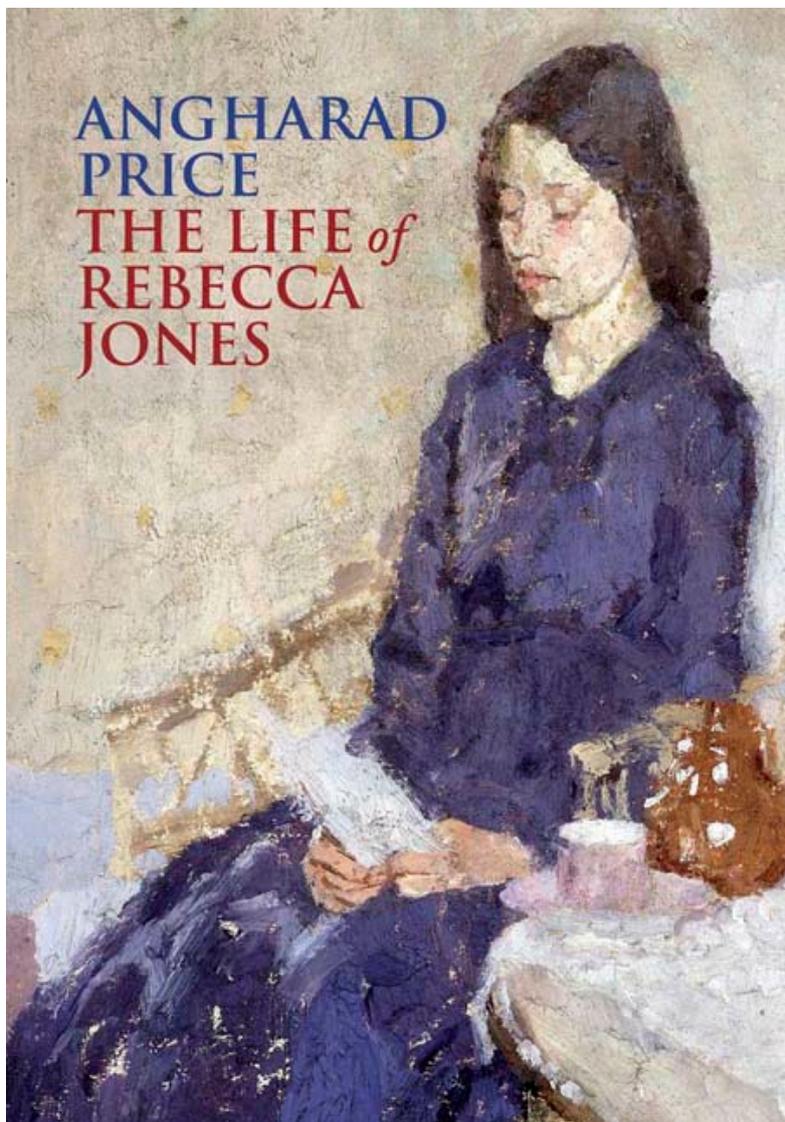
The Life of Rebecca Jones is a stunning essay on a shifting Wales and a shifting Welshness. *The Life of Rebecca Jones* is a wonderful tribute to a great

woman, her family and the glorious valley of Maesglasau. *The Life of Rebecca Jones* also has one of Wales's greatest paintings as its front-cover (but we'll save that chat for another day).

To my jealous eyes, *O! Tyn y Gorchudd* alone seems the Greatest Welsh Novel. Its language gives it an added Welshness that *The Life of Rebecca Jones* simply can't match. And that I can't match either. Reading *The Life of Rebecca Jones* makes me feel more and less Welsh at the same time. In exploring its own tensions, this book, more than any other, gets to the heart of my own identity.

So – not least to give credit to the superb author and translator Lloyd Jones – I'll happily package the English and Welsh versions together:

My vote for the Greatest Welsh Novel goes to *O! Tyn y Gorchudd* and *The Life of Rebecca Jones*. I hope your vote does too.



Howl's Moving Castle by Diana Wynne Jones

by Penny Thomas

'In the land of Ingaray, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility really exist, it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortunes.'

If your great Welsh novel has to be set in a land where seven-league boots don't really exist, then it's quite possible *Howl's Moving Castle* isn't the contender for you. And invisibility cloaks are, granted, slightly old-hat post JK Rowling. But before you hurry away in your plain old size nines, pause to glance behind you at what you might be overstepping in your haste to catch up with reality.

The author has made it quite clear in these opening sentences that you are reading a fairy tale, or at least a tale that happily contains magical elements within it. And so in this story anything can happen. In these first two sentences she has also, with the poise reminiscent of a slightly more whimsical Jane Austen, burst right through the fairy tale conventions and out the other side. The rules where the poor youngest child is the fortunate traveller, trailing along in the wake of the two elder, richer, and probably ugly siblings, and picking up the golden goose or whatever, have been stated and dismissed by over-statement in one deft move. We now know that the story will concern the eldest child of three and that he or she has a bit of a self-esteem issue, and will most likely need to be helped along the road to 'fortune' to overcome their own attitudes to their fate. We are expecting a journey, humour, witty writing and character development, with some family drama and fantastically original turns of plot. We can't wait to know what happens next. Not bad for a first sentence.

Howl's Moving Castle by Diana Wynne

Jones, was first published in 1986 by Methuen in the UK and Greenwillow Books of New York in the US. Twenty years later it won the Phoenix award for great children's books that failed to win a major award at time of publication. It was also, famously, made into an anime film in 2004 by Studio Ghibli and the Japanese director Miyazaki, who came out of retirement specially to make it because he was such an admirer of Diana's work. The film was nominated for the Academy Award for the best animated feature, won many other accolades and grossed \$235 million worldwide. Diana, whose first children's book was written in 1973, went on to write two more *Howl* books and has published some 29 books in total.

Described by Neil Gaiman as 'the best children's writer of the last forty years,' Diana Wynne Jones was

born in London in 1934 and was evacuated to Wales shortly after her fifth birthday. (She died in 2011.)

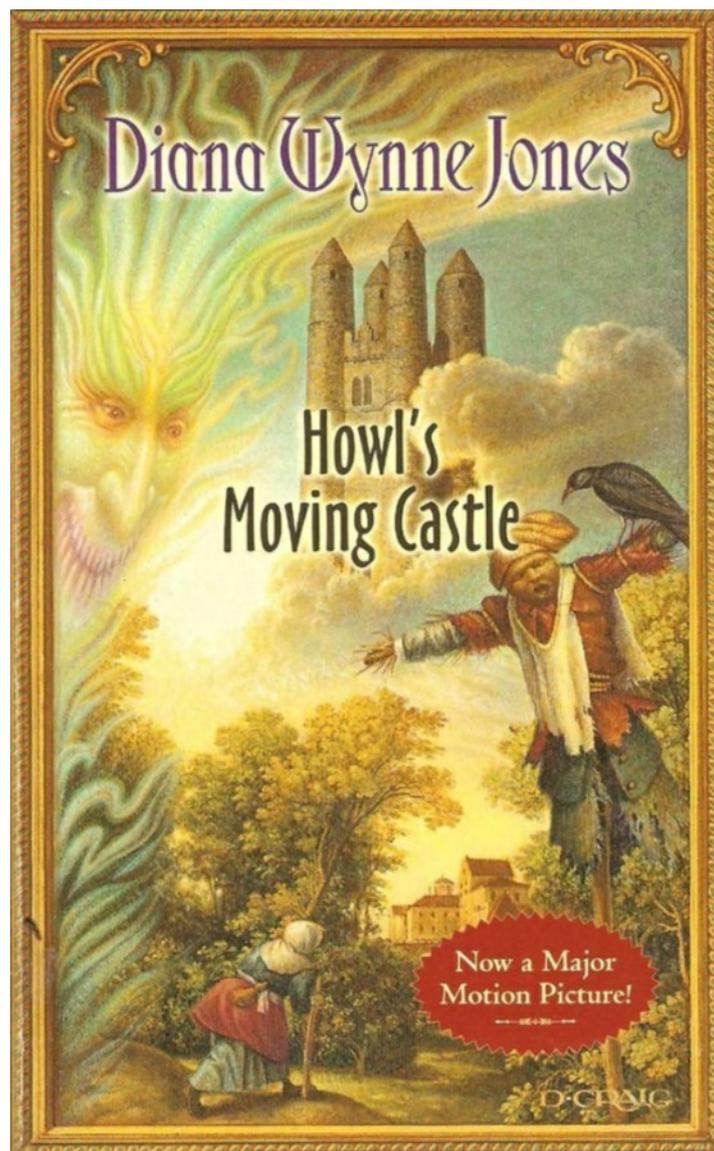
'I think I write the kind of books I do because the world suddenly went mad when I was five years old,' she wrote. 'In late August 1939, on a blistering hot day, my father loaded me and my three-year-old sister, Isobel, into a friend's car and drove to my grandparents' manse in Wales.'

The young Diana (the oldest of three sisters of course) found herself, at the outbreak of war, in a Welsh-speaking world, which was 'grey and very green' and 'houses close together and dun-coloured'. Her grandfather was a chapel moderator famed for his pulpit oratories. While she understood none of it, she recalls: 'He spread his arms and language rolled from him, sonorous, magnificent, and rhythmic ... for years after that, I used to dream

regularly that a piece of my bedroom wall slid aside revealing my grandfather declaiming in Welsh, and I knew he was declaiming about my sins. At the bottom of my mind there is always a flow of spoken language that is not English, rolling in majestic paragraphs and resounding with splendid polysyllables. I listen to it like music when I write.'

Diana knew at the age of eight that she wanted to be a writer; she studied English at Oxford in the 1950s where her lecturers included both CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien. She recalls 'Oxford was very scornful of fantasy then. Everyone raised eyebrows at Lewis and Tolkien and said hastily, "But they're excellent scholars as well".'

Much later she recalled speaking to some 'very serious people from Japan' who wanted them to tell her exactly where Ingaray was so that they could go and look at it for the film. They had trouble believing that she'd made it up. 'They insisted that I sent them somewhere so I suggested Exmoor and some towns in



Essex, but they went to Cardiff, which was quite wrong.'

The landscape of the novel is often seen from inside the moving castle, which Diana imagined as much like the inside of a chimney. The castle is made up of moving black bricks and, powered by the fire-demon Calcifer, who is tied to the grate by a mysterious contract and who sings an odd song about saucepans. The castle wanders about the moors above the town of Market Chipping where the heroine, Sophie, lives, and visitors generally keep away because it is rumoured that the heartless Wizard Howl amuses himself by catching young girls and eating their hearts. The castle door opens on different places depending which way you turn the knob above it, one is Market Chipping, one the seaside town of Porthaven, and yet another, as Sophie (the eldest of three) discovers, leads to Wizard Howl's strange homeland of Wales where he is known as Howell Jenkins and seen as a disgrace to his sister Megan and her husband Gareth. They live in a bizarre world of yellow houses with wavy glass doors, where Howl's niece Mari watches magic coloured pictures moving over the front of a big, square box. There is only one narrated visit to Wales in the book, as Howl tries to break the curse the Witch of the Waste has put on him, at the same time as search for Prince Justin and the Wizard Suliman (aka Ben Sullivan) but it's importance as the home and roots behind the charismatic lead character is the foundation beneath the ever-shifting scenes of the book.

Most of the novel hinges on the tension between Sophie and Howl. Sophie is a shy, mouse-like girl who feels in the shadow of her two younger sisters, one beautiful, one magical, and put upon by her stepmother (who may or may not be wicked). Her step-

mother intends to hand over the family hat shop to Sophie, who is intensely weary of such a life but believes it to be her fate, as the eldest, to stay there. But fate twists when it transpires that Sophie's hats are so very good that she falls foul of the Witch of the Waste herself, and is cursed to become an old woman of ninety for most of the novel. This she finds strangely and wonderfully liberating, from the moment it forces her to set out to find her fortune elsewhere. Diana's description of the unexpected benefits of this transformation are superb.

Sophie got herself to the mirror and found that she had to hobble. The face in the mirror was quite calm, because it was what she expected to see. It was the face of a gaunt old woman, withered and brownish... "Don't worry, old thing," Sophie said to the face. "You look quite healthy."... Sophie discovered that being a crone did not stop her enjoying the sight and smell of may in the hedgerows, though the sight was a little blurred ... and her cracked old voice surprised her into giving a cracked old cackle of laughter.

Because she is now old, Sophie considers herself immune from any danger from the wicked Wizard Howl, into whose castle she stumbles shortly afterwards. The wizard only sucks the souls and chews the hearts of young girls after all, and, on the pretext of cleaning the castle, Sophie is determined to find the hearts and return them to their owners. Howl's character is another of the joys of the book. He is young, flamboyant and vain, with blond hair and glass-green eyes, spending hours at a time in the

bathroom before setting out to pursue his conquests. He is a 'slitherer-outer' Sophie realises, evading all promises and requests; he's given to tantrums of green slime, and complains loudly about her intrusion into his domestic life, but oddly doesn't throw her out. Asked whether characters in the book are based on real people Diana said that people always hope that the tall, blond Howl is real.

'There are queues and queues of young ladies all over the world that want to marry him. I always think they'd be in for a difficult life if they did,' she wrote.

Anyway, I've concentrated on the characters, setting and successes of *Howl's Moving Castle* in a bid to persuade readers of its serious and impressive literary quality and debt to the Welsh element within Diana's writing – and in view of its illustrious competitors for the title of great Welsh novel. But this doesn't do it justice. It is a masterpiece of glorious imagination, controlled by succinct and superlative writing. It's witty, wildly inventive, true and funny and the story works at all its levels, most of which I've barely mentioned.

Diana always wrote stretched out on the sofa apparently, and recalled that when she wrote the part about Sophie accidentally making Howl's magic suit twenty times too big for him, she laughed so much at her own creation that she fell off the sofa, to the incredulous irritation of her husband.

'You can't be making *yourself* laugh,' he snapped.

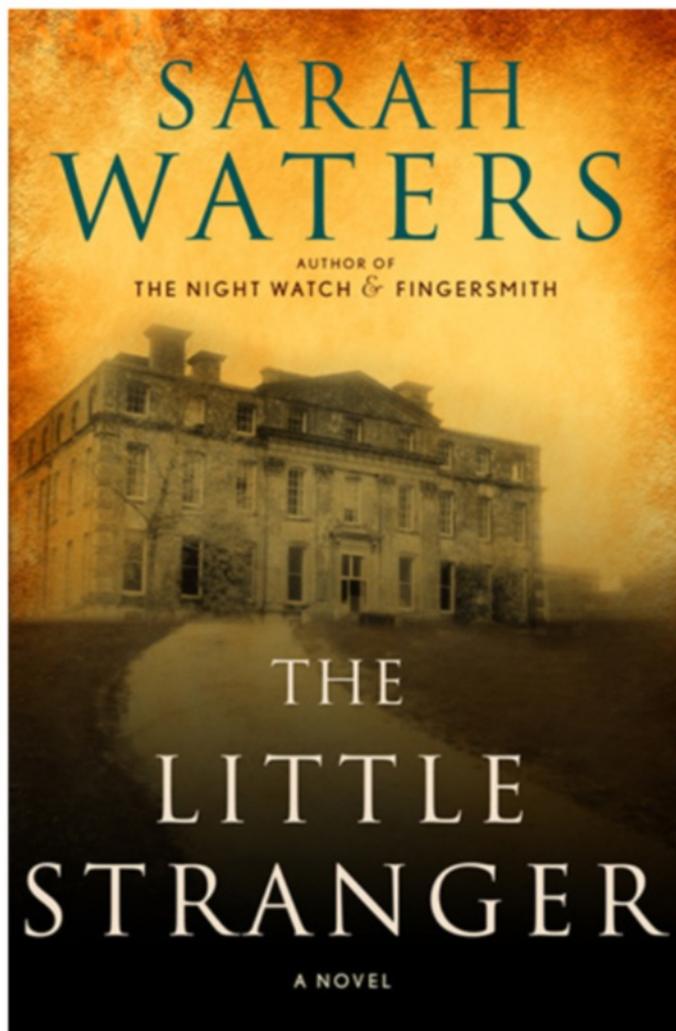
'But I am, I am,' she replied.

I hope you enjoy the magic of *Howl's Moving Castle* half so much.



The Little Stranger by Sarah Waters

by Gary Raymond



The year is 1947; Britain is victorious, but battle-worn. The country is bankrupt and suffocating in post-war depression. Dr Faraday, a Warwickshire country GP, is middle aged and from a working-class background. His patients are often from the rural slums, so he is happy to get a call from the Aryes family at Hundreds Hall. He hopes this is the moment all his years of struggle striving to drag himself up from his humble origins will begin to bear fruit; hoping this is the opening of the door to social strata he has always had his eye on. Dr Faraday's life from that moment does indeed change, but not in the ways he had hoped, as his life becomes more and more entwined with The Aryes and the strange goings on at Hundred's Hall.

Faraday is a solitary central figure, a man trapped in a world that is both outside his control and partly of his own making. He is yearning for things – love, acceptance. He is a character familiar to readers of historical fiction, to those who enjoy Victorian and post-Victorian stiff upper lip, to the lover of gothic ghost stories, haunted houses, and to those who know the work of Sarah Waters; we are in familiar territory throughout, and yet we are also surrounded by freshness and vitality.

This is a novel about the decaying last days of the manor house aristocracy. Faraday knew Hundreds Hall as a child, long before the war, long before his striving to get away from his humble origins took its toll. And there he is

back, back within the walls of such corrupting memories. He made it somewhere many others with whom he grew up did not, and yet he is distinctly unfulfilled. Always to be the outsider, always to be striving toward that which will inevitably always be out of reach.

The Little Stranger is a deeply rich novel, and just like all the classics of the genre, unsettling not because of the jolts, but because of the way it breathes around you as you read it. The strength of Waters' narrative voice is everything, and you walk every tentative step through those halls with Faraday. Every ghost story needs a sceptic and Dr Faraday guides us through our own disbelief at the goings on in Hundreds Hall. This is a careful, perfectly crafted gothic spook story, a grandchild of the masters of the art, MR James, Wilkie Collins and (with the *Fall of the House of Usher* in particular) Edgar Allan Poe. The depiction of the Ayres family dealing with the potential loss of their dilapidated estate is a pivotal force of the novel. The coupling of the decay of the house and the decay of the human mind is woven very tightly into the narrative, and we are left to ask ourselves the question: is this a haunting of a house or a haunting of the mind? Waters revels in the ambiguities so important to the most effective examples of the genre.

And so it is fascinating to hear Waters explain that:

I didn't plan for the novel to be a ghost story right from the start – I wanted to write a book about the class changes that Britain was going through in the period after the Second World War. But I set the novel in a crumbling country house, and found myself with a cast of unhappy, frustrated characters all in thrall to a world that was slipping away from them... In other words, the novel morphed into a haunted house story more or less by itself, and once I could see that happening, I realised that a novel of the supernatural was the perfect way to address the mournfulness and anxiety of post-war upper middle-class life.

So just as with all great literature, the story carries the values; it is a vehicle for the author's real preoccupations rather than the central idea itself. Waters here uses the ghost story to explore themes that are recurrent throughout her work, and one of the reasons that *The Little Stranger* stands so tall is because it stands outside her usual *milieu*, and benefits greatly from this excitable freshness. It is what changes a chill into a fright, and a good story into excellent literature.

Aside from the critical and commercial success of *The Little Stranger*, Waters is most commonly labelled a writer of 'lesbian literature'. Waters found her voice taking historical periods she has openly admitted she knew were attractive to publishers' trends, such as the Second World War and Victorian London, and inserted into them lesbian story lines. It has allowed her both to make a name for herself, but also to tackle her favourite themes of gender politics. And it cannot be denied (Waters' certainly doesn't) that the perceived salaciousness has helped sales and encouraged the television people to come calling (she is quoted as saying that when the BBC came to her to

adapt *Tipping the Velvet*, they did so clearly looking for something to spice up their tried and tested formula of costume drama).

Waters is a canny industry figure, then; she understands the business and has made an exemplary career out of it. Yet she is also entirely committed to her craft, to her themes, to her literariness.

The Little Stranger may not be an immediate work that springs to mind when looking for the Greatest Welsh Novel, but a novel that Wales can be proud of need not be one that is smothered in what could be termed 'Welshness'. Like others on this list, the influence of Wales on *The Little Stranger* is perhaps more atmospheric than thematic, if you really want to identify it. Perhaps the tempered measured prose is inspired by the landscape in which Pembroke-shire-born Waters first sunk into her beloved libraries.

But Waters has said of her Welsh roots: 'I feel a bit of a fraud being labelled as a Welsh writer, because I don't

write about Wales, don't know about Welsh culture and politics and I'm not part of the Welsh literary scene. I don't feel English, yet I do feel like a Londoner.' In a twisted way there is something quite Welsh about not feeling very Welsh, about finding yourself in the great melting pot of London and looking back to see little connection to what the tourist board tells you Wales is. Many of the books on the Greatest Welsh Novel list have a discernible element of loneliness to their stories, a sad quietness that circles the protagonist. There is something of that in much of Waters' work. It is there in *On the Black Hill*, *Submarine*, *A Toy Epic*, and many of the others. Loneliness is not Welsh, of course not; but being Welsh can be lonely. But this may be stretching it, I admit. The main reason why *The Little Stranger* should make it on to the list is because it is a scintillating, terrifying, beautiful read, and it is by a Welsh writer, and it should be celebrated by the Welsh literary establishment as such.

The Genre of Silence by Duncan Bush

by Robert Minhinnick

'Good novelists extend not only their own fictional universe but the possibility of fictional forms.'

Jay McGill, 'Paragliding and the Art of Serious Fiction', *The Amsterdam Review*, Issue 1(2004).

The *Genre of Silence* is a one hundred-page volume of prose and poetry by Duncan Bush, published by Seren in 1988. The back cover of the first edition explains:

Duncan Bush's new work brings to life, at times painfully, the work of the Russian poet, Victor Bal, who 'disappeared' under Stalinism. This surprising and original new book recalls the period by an intermingling of history and fiction which imaginative writers have always understood but that historians have rarely admitted.

Note that 'intermingling'. Victor Bal seems an entirely fictional character, although created by Bush's readings of Russian history. And Isaac Babel, another character, who exists in memory, including that of Bal, was very much a real-life writer, whose collected stories have recently been published.

Around its publication date I was immersed in working for Friends of the Earth Cymru, in being a father, and certainly in attempting to function as a writer, working on my own poems and first prose essays. New books by contemporaries were secondary to all this, and *The Genre of Silence* was one with which I meant to catch up. But failed.

Of course, I was familiar with poems by Duncan Bush that seemed to fit in with the overall intentions of *The Genre of Silence*. ('Crocuses' was one such, published a little later, but surely belonging there, and 'The Galley' another, included.) But work in the environmental movement was too demanding and I don't think I attended any of the launch events for Bush's publication. Chernobyl, acid rain and opencast coal mining saw to that.

But let us return to *The Amsterdam Review*. Issue 1 contains Duncan Bush's prose work 'Death will come and it will have your eyes', a reflection on Cesar Pavese, with Bush's own translations of seven of Pavese's poems, his 'last poems: 11 March to 10 April, 1950'.

Bush's translations of Pavese have cropped up in various places, but as far as I know, there has been no dedicated collection, as I thought was once mooted. Are the translations any good? My lack of Italian precludes a judgment. But as poems in English they certainly serve.

The biographical note on Duncan Bush in this magazine is of interest. *The Amsterdam Review* ran, I think, for four issues, and was edited by Duncan Bush and P.C. Evans, 2004-6. It was dependent on Bush's facility as a translator and essayist and Paul Evans's energy and literary position in the Netherlands. The entry runs: *Duncan Bush is a poet and novelist. He has also published translations of Mallarme, Baudelaire, Pavese and Pierre de la Pree...*

Who? Bush's translations of this writer are published in a later issue of *The Amsterdam Review*. These are good poems. They certainly read like translations, or 'versions' by Duncan Bush. So good are they the reader might wonder where Bush first encountered de la Pree's work. I had not heard of this writer before being introduced to him by his translator. But then, neither had I encountered Victor Bal. Nor Isaac Babel. These are the central figures of *The Genre of Silence*. One is real, one fictional.

Nor had I encountered Jay McGill, who introduces this essay. McGill, we are told by *The Amsterdam Review*, 'works in London and Paris'. Unfortunately, my copy of *The Amsterdam Review*, Issue 2 is mislaid. I seem to remember from this number another prose work from Jay McGill, describing a photographic exhibition. Indeed, I have memories of accompanying Duncan Bush around an exhibition of photographs in New York (was it the Guggenheim?). And a short time later publishing a suite of poems about photographs such as these in *Poetry Wales*. Yes, one of the pleasures of the editor's life is to be almost party to the germination of writers' ideas.

Reality, memory, art, identity. As I become older I recognize how they blend. Which is dangerous. Surely the

answer to this wooliness is to listen, as Victor Bal did, to the silence of the Russian pine forest.

As editor of *Poetry Wales* (1997 – 2008) I was always more than pleased to publish poetry and prose from Duncan Bush. I also interviewed him, believing here was someone who guaranteed good copy, and, crucially, would pursue an independent train of thought. This he unfailingly did. The problems I had with Bush concerned *The Genre of Silence*.

On two occasions academics inquired whether they might write about the book, with special regard to Bush's biographical detailing of the life of the vanished poet, Victor Bal.

Over the years I had read, somewhat cursorily, I'll admit, *The Genre of Silence*. Didn't these critics, I wondered, know that Victor Bal was a fictional creation? And that the poems of Victor Bal were written by someone else, that person being Duncan Bush? When I broke the news to them they did not, as I expected, wish to write about *The Genre of Silence* itself. They apologised for their stupidity (not that I considered them stupid, as the book fails to make entirely clear that Bal is a fictional character.)

Things might have been complicated for the critics by the back cover quotation from Osip Mandelstam's translator, Clarence Brown: *Even non-persons have biographies, but it is extraordinarily difficult to establish them*. Non-persons? Anyone who has read *1984* will think they know what that means: non-persons can be fictional but also *real* people whose identities have been erased by a political system.

Victor Bal was not a 'non-person' but a 'never been person'.

However, for me, 'non-persons' are real people. One such real person who became a 'non-person' was Isaac Emanuelovich Babel. But Victor Bal did not disappear into the Gulag or behind the walls of Moscow's Butyrka prison, because he never lived.

And no, I did not consider those would-be critics 'stupid'. I felt the assumption an easy error to make, encouraged by that quotation from Clarence Brown. Yet I heard no more of the critics' intentions.

I believe Duncan Bush's experience of the Welsh Union of Writers (WUW) in the 1980s influenced *The Genre of Silence*. The Union was created in summer, 1982, and Bush would have joined about two years later. By 1988 he had edited a conference report/anthology devoted to 'Censorship'. Bush also wrote the Union's obituary for John Tripp, who died in 1986.

Duncan Bush is an unlikely union member, not that I know many 'typical' members of literary unions. (Or do I?) But Bush's experiences of the WUW might have confirmed certain prejudices: that not all writers are of equal talent, and certain of them are not reluctant to accept a general invitation to 'perform' their work.

These invitations involved readings of 'poetry', at the 'open mics', which, were, frankly, amongst the most eagerly anticipated of WUW events at annual conferences. Certain members attended for the guaranteed opportunity of performing at the microphone. In the mid 1980s, such invitations were far less common than today.

Indeed, it was clear from the overall standard of work performed that invitations to the microphone were unusual. The open-mics occurred because these seemed to guarantee a decent conference attendance and thus a successful event that might keep funding agencies happy. (This type of energetic open mic-er is now familiar to most literary people who use Facebook).

THE GENRE OF SILENCE



DUNCAN BUSH

Maybe it was these WUW events that fed into *The Genre of Silence*. Anyway, what is clear is Bush's distaste for writers who conformed to prevailing orthodoxy or parroted a party line. This is clearest in 'Writers' Union Building, Moscow, 1937', which is depicted as *'Free Hotel? Or tomb of living writers?'*

Especially

This year, they tell me, members are sporting Ukrainian embroidered shirts when they herd to conferences –

sheep in peasant's clothing. Sheep milling for the microphone like wolves. And, like wolves, getting

stronger the longer you run.

In the Writers Union of Wales the prevailing orthodoxy was sympathy for an independent Wales. I shared it. Duncan Bush did not. I also believe he was appalled by the standard of some of the spoken literary offerings he heard at WUW conferences and determined to use this dismay to make a far wider point. He does this, I feel, successfully.

No, Bush did not have much regard for the majority of his fellow union writers. I imagine he thought they lacked what he considered essential for the true writer, and which

he puts into the mind of Victor Bal – ‘{an} insistence on a poet’s own creative autonomy and self-critical sense.’

This is most clearly expressed in *Genre...* in ‘The Muscle under the Tongue’

*Poets? Writers? Hardly.
But there’s no surer way to fame
for camp dogs: licking the hand
that feeds them space
to do so, prints their name.*

Victor Bal (maybe fictionally) and Isaac Babel (maybe factually) describe conditions for Russian writers in the 1930s and especially in 1938, at the height of the ‘Great Purge’ or ‘Great Terror’. Bal’s ‘poem in draft’, ‘Gera-nium’, outlines how a writer then must live:

*Act
blind and deaf and
dumb. Above all, dumb.
Shape words, but give forth*

*silence. Put out neither
fruit nor flower nor leaf.
You must look like a stone,
but live. Live like a cactus.*

And as an afterthought in the draft, Bal wrote:

*Not even that. The lichen on a rock.
As it turns out (Bush writes) not even silence is
enough to guarantee survival. But for Bal as for
other writers in the Soviet Union during the Thir-
ties, silence seems to represent the last integrity
possible...*

All of Victor Bal’s poetry is by Duncan Bush, while ‘the genre of silence’ is originally a phrase coined by Isaac Babel that became a way of life, a belief, a philosophy, a blueprint of how, maybe, to survive.

Yet silence could not save Babel. Bush states in the book that he is ‘presumed to have died, in unrecorded circumstances, in a concentration camp in 1939 or 40.’ However, it is now believed he died on January 27, 1940, shot by firing squad after a one day trial.

Why should anyone read *The Genre of Silence*? For the spare, Bushian poetry, despite the absence of what has become its most noteworthy poem, ‘Crocuses’:

*in the seconds after
the knock he may have
tried to burn the poem
that would kill him.*

But also for the usually adept, occasionally breath-taking phrase-making that we have learned to expect from Duncan Bush. This writer is capable of lines and images that have the power to raise the hairs on the back of the neck. Thus:

But few of us, educated or not, can talk with the slow and ungainsayable authority of Voloshin, with those Tartar eyes and his skull still blue from headlice and his beard of iron filings.

Greatest Welsh novel? I wonder what Bush would make of the challenge. I imagine he would have felt it a wheeze worthy of the old WUW. And for me, it would have been more straightforward if I chose *Glass Shot*, a superb read, praised by Hilary Mantel, and a more conventionally gripping novel than the earlier book.

Genre contains some admittedly short scene settings as the author establishes his context. But with the opening section, ‘In the Pine Forest’, we are immediately into the meat of the book. Bush depicts Victor Bal, who has been labouring (sawing tree trunks) and thinking, only thinking so far, about a poem and its first line. This compares ‘the silence of the Russia of that time to the immense, ominous silence there is in its pine forests.’

Surely, the authorities couldn’t do anything about *thinking* of writing a poem? Could they? Of working on the poem’s music and rhythm in your head? Yet for Bal this might prove the poem ‘that would kill him.’

Greatest Welsh Novel? *The Genre of Silence* might be read in an afternoon. But this would be a dismissal. A rapid reading would diminish its power. Certain of the poems within it, notably ‘The Leader’, ‘Peasant’, and ‘Night, Day’ evoke an abominable period of Russian history, and might encourage enquiry into what is going on now in the Ukraine. These poems must be reread. Whereas others, ‘For Marina’ for example, with their lyrical sense of loss, make those events even more poignant, as Bush outlines a few of the marvelous particularities of what is lost to Babel (in actuality) and Victor Bal (in imagination).

Any attentive reading of Bush’s work provides evidence that certain images and ideas are used in both his prose and poetry, as if being tested out. Or refined. Or as experiments. Thus, to me, the novel, *Glass Shot* (1991) was presaged by the poem ‘Bridget Bardot in Grangetown’, although this was first collected only in *Masks* (1994).

Bush publishes sparingly these days, although his author’s biography at Seren states he is currently completing a novel ‘about a politician in the Sarkozy government.’ The already published *Now all the Rage* concerns what the idea of ‘celebrity’ is doing to all of us, especially artists and writers. His latest poetry collection, *The Flying Trapeze* (2012) contains powerful pieces.

But as to fiction, let’s leave the last words to Jay McGill in the first issue of *The Amsterdam Review*:

*There’s an overwhelming sense that hype is the
only thing concealing a drab and cautious conserv-
atism at the heart of mainstream British publishing.*

Does Bush consider himself a victim of such conservatism? Possibly. That policy has made ‘non-persons’ of many writers who promised and still promise much. I imagine there was pressure on Bush to repeat the theme of *Glass Shot*, considering it became an airport paperback.

Maybe he shares with McGill (clearly a valued *Amsterdam Review* contributor) the belief that ‘good writers, whether novelists or poets, don’t repeat or imitate themselves. What characterizes original talent is a determination not only to make different choices from their contemporaries but write books which are different even from their own.’

For a novel of real achievement, the reader should seek out *The Genre of Silence*. It has been recently reprinted.