

Wales Arts Review



Greatest Welsh Novel

Part One

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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 One.

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A Toy Epic by Emyr Humphreys

by Gary Raymond

Perhaps a strange choice for some to open *Wales Arts Review's* nominations for The Greatest Welsh Novel, Emyr Humphreys' *A Toy Epic*, published in 1958 (although Humphreys started it in 1945), is best described by its somewhat emotionally detached title. It is, in publishing terms, a novella, but in terms of theme and scope it is as far-reaching as any potent national statement, as richly symbolic and thoughtful in its own way as any *Dr Zhivago* or *Grapes of Wrath*. It is a story of a country in transition, told through the humble comings of age of Michael, Iorwerth and Albie. It is a story about the end of a world that had lasted longer than folktales, the world of the harrow and Shire horse, of chapel and Sunday best. It is the story of the moment when Wales became the Wales we know today, and stopped being the Wales of our nation's compulsively nostalgic psyche. But most significantly, *A Toy Epic* is Wales' most important war novel.

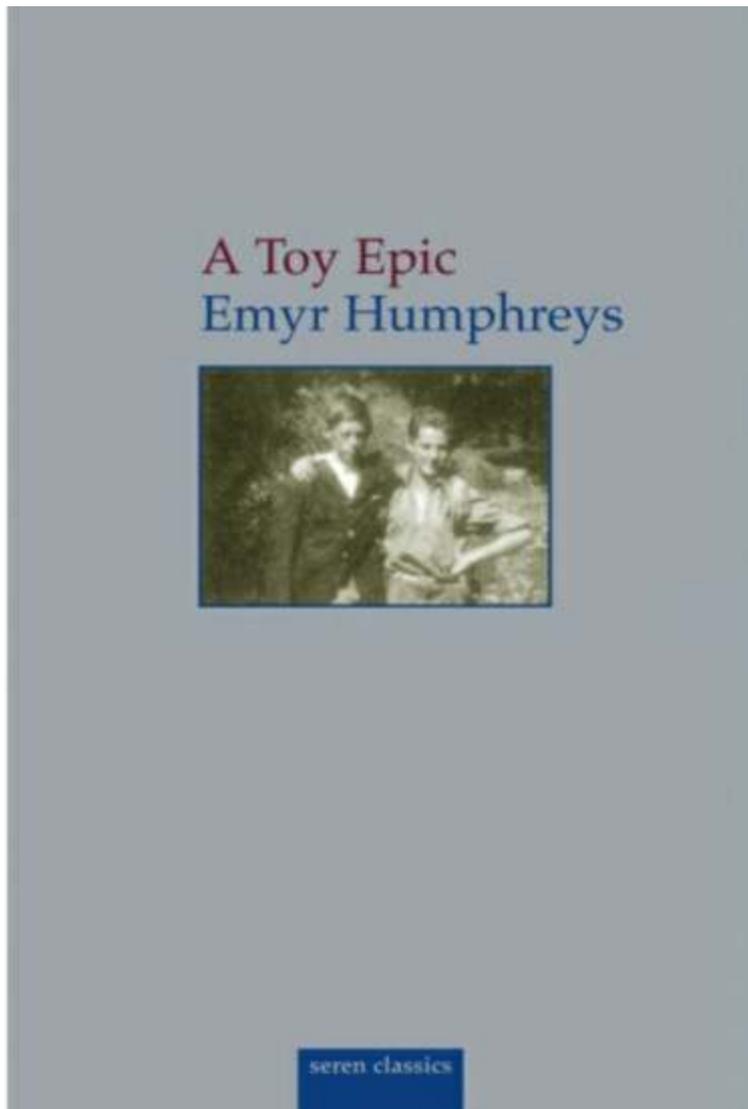
To this last point we will return.

Firstly, however, let us look at the significance of this book as a piece of literature, published and written, as it was, during what is generally regarded as the dark ages for the modern British novel of 1945-1960.

A Toy Epic is Wales' shining example of modernism. Humphreys, in this book at least, in this period of his writing, is a modernist in the exact sense of the word. He is experimenting with form (albeit in the footsteps of

Madox Ford, Joyce, Faulkner, and Woolf – in particular *The Waves* which folds an avuncular arm around *A Toy Epic* from beginning to end, from head to toe), but also he is conducting these experiments at the fault lines of fear and exaltation that the early part of the twentieth century inspired in its artists.

Modernists of the time fell pretty much into two categories: those like Eliot and Pound who embraced the new world, albeit warily, the one scarred by the coruscating trenches of the Western Front, embittered by the political chaoticness of Imperialism and Fascism as one faded and the other matured (with different levels of seduction for some cases). They built literature out of iron and mud and concrete, and painted with palettes of grey. Others like Yeats and Edward Thomas warned against what they saw as the onslaught of modernity and industrialisation. But their work was touched no less by an unbridling of their genius, fed by the same revivifying air that allowed them to experiment. For the novel, modernism meant that rules were now there to be broken, affect now had a different, more prominent role in the narrative, and fiction was no longer the sole kingdom of the storyteller. Tolstoy may have given a cameo to a cognizant dog to discuss the roll of nature in nihilism in *Anna Karenina*, but modernists could go much further and for much longer. *A Toy Epic* is a marvellous example of modernist techniques employed to condense the



reading experience whilst opening up the riches of prose's potential.

It is an advance in literary ambition from Humphreys' first attempt at a modernist narrative, *A Man's Estate*, in that it looks at the events of the wider world from a three-pronged personal, localised, and, largely, narrow understanding of the world. The march of the modern world affects everyone, whether they are aware of it or not. *A Toy Epic* is a novel that explains the world, explains Wales, but does it while never letting go of that 'innermost flame' that explores the 'extraordinary quality of an ordinary mind on an ordinary day' that Woolf talked about when distancing herself from the superficiality of those novelists she termed 'materialists'.

Humphreys takes the lessons of *The Waves* even further. As we spin through the apparent simple coming of age story, gliding from the internal perspectives of the three boys often from paragraph to paragraph, as the story gains pace we are also subjected to subtle but significant shifts in time and space. A conversation at Albie's parents' breakfast table, for instance, can take in several years of breakfasts and can be used to display both the growing awareness of Albie, the mild disintegration of his family unit, but also the alterations of public life, to society itself and the very bones of civilisation. This will take up half a page and do the job of seventy from a Victorian novelist. Humphreys was looking for something pure. He had been influenced heavily by the syntactical tricks of Faulkner in *The Sound of the Fury* (as well as Woolf's shifting perspectives in *The Waves*), which *A Toy Epic* resembles closely in the details of its most technically daring passages. But he had also been influenced by M.M. Bakhtin's 1937 essay 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel'. Bakhtin, borrowing from Einstein, adopts the chronotope as a term to describe a particular type of literature:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.

That Humphreys pondered this idea, this mode of narrative transport, and then took thirteen years to perfect the one hundred and eighty pages of *A Toy Epic* until its publication, shows a brilliant literary mind chiselling away at some very exacting innovations. So is *A Toy Epic* even a novel? (Virginia Woolf, after all, called her *The Waves* a 'playpoem', not a novel). If a novel is about the scope of a world within the bindings of a book rather than a word count, it most certainly is.

But Humphreys' masterpiece is not just about the technical achievements.

It is a very moving story of three boys growing up. It is a story about childhood, and Welsh childhood specifically, and between the wars specifically; it is about church versus chapel, about class, about different types of masculine identity, about prospects, about sex, marriage and definitely about death. It is a book about how a moment of minor madness can change a life forever, and how nurture can get its claws firmly into nature. As M. Wyn Thomas points out in his full and excellent introduction to the Seren edition, the boys are supposed to represent the polarities at work in Wales during the time; the anglicanisation of Wales from

without and within, the erosion of tradition, the significant internal migrations of a country experiencing an industrial pattern that was witnessing its communities move closer to the coast.

But *A Toy Epic* has one extremely powerful central theme, the one I mentioned at the outset, and one which dominates the book and all subsequent themes, and that is war. The novel is framed by the First and Second World Wars, and the shadows of both, one gone and one looming, colour the novel dark. War is the ultimate representation in the book of the modernists' dilemma: war, although a threat to the very existence of civilisation, can also advance it.

The myth of heroism in war is challenged in the book. A most memorable passage has Michael perusing the photographs in a roll of honour at his school. Michael thinks of them as not only 'innocent' but also as 'pathetic'. The school itself is a mechanism to assert different roles within the masculine hierarchy. Albie is being groomed for the officer class. The doomed young Jac has his future keenly mapped out, mainly because of his aptitude for rule-breaking, but a rule breaking that has a constant alignment with the behaviour associated with the masculinity that leads men to war.

Throughout the book there are allusions to the causes of war, to working class and middle class oppressions – to the treatment of the kulaks to the Easter Rising to the persecution of the Jews in NAZI Germany. Wales becomes linked to such radicalism in the book. A barber snipping at hair mentions how Welsh nationalists should be put up against the wall and shot. Divisions are everywhere, complexities are everywhere; rifts, loggerheads, the masses engulfed in the uncertainty of war.

Fascism, the ugliest and most potent of political fads in the nineteen thirties, felt less surely in Wales than elsewhere in Europe, has a strong presence in the book. And it sinks sagaciously into Humphreys' powerful ideas about language. There are no Blackshirts in Wales, but there is the pulpit, and Humphreys has no problems linking the rhetoric of religion with the rhetoric of politics, with all of the corruption and the rot, and the 'whipping up of fervour'. Here Humphreys speaks clearly about his literary attitudes to war. Language fails it – the rhetoric of the pulpit wins out, it sends men to their death, but can never explain why they die, not really. As Jacqueline Rose writes so well, 'the concept of war is incapable of calculating, or mastering, the chaos, inconsistency, and randomness of the object it is meant to predict and represent.' And so the novel itself becomes a rich smattering of random events, tragedies and disappointments, of characters trying to come to terms with what life throws at them; some fail and some hold on for dear life. What *A Toy Epic* states very convincingly is that war is a part of the human condition, not a temporal space that stands opposite to 'peace time'.

But Humphreys is always primarily concerned with the individual – *A Toy Epic* is not a cold novel, despite the impression I may have given up until now. Progress of humanity and community aside, the journey from childhood to maturity of the three boys is what drives the story along, is what makes it worth the riches that come interred.

A Toy Epic is a Great novel. It is set in a time and a place, yet transcends these things, bringing the immediate along with it to the everlasting questions of the human condition. And this happens bedded with warm and real characters, whole and fragmented all at once, and always Welsh.

Submarine by Joe Dunthorne

by Elin Williams

Oliver Tate is, as a teenage protagonist, one of the most believable characters in a teenage fiction novel I have ever come across. In fact, I would go as far as to say that he is the perfect representation of a fifteen year old boy. Writing a believable teenager as an adult is inevitably difficult, but Joe Dunthorne does it with such skill, it is very difficult to poke holes in the character. He has succeeded in creating a perfect teenager by steering away from the stereotypical and instead engages directly with a younger self.

Written during his BA creative writing course at the University of East Anglia, it is likely that Dunthorne was particularly close to Oliver's age at the time. Yes, he explores the sexual awakening of the teenage boy, but he also engages with curiosity and a sense of pretentiousness that is typical of an intelligent teenager. Oliver reads the dictionary and thesaurus and begins his diary extracts with a Word of the Day. He is also meticulous about grammar and constantly corrects his peers. The book follows Oliver as he experiences his first sexual encounter with bad girl Jordana Bevan, a passionate teenage affair which ends in tragedy. He becomes obsessed with his parents marriage, becoming convinced that his mother is having an affair with Graham, an old boyfriend of hers. Desperate for his parents to reconcile, he keeps close tabs on his depressive father and breaks into Graham's Gower cottage in an attempt to convince him that he is deranged and capable of anything. Oliver's life is full of ups and downs, from listening to his mother pleasure Graham sexually in a tent to deciding to feed rat poison to Jordana's dog in order to prepare her for the death of her mother, Oliver experiences a roller coaster of emotions which all contribute to his

development into the man he will one day become.

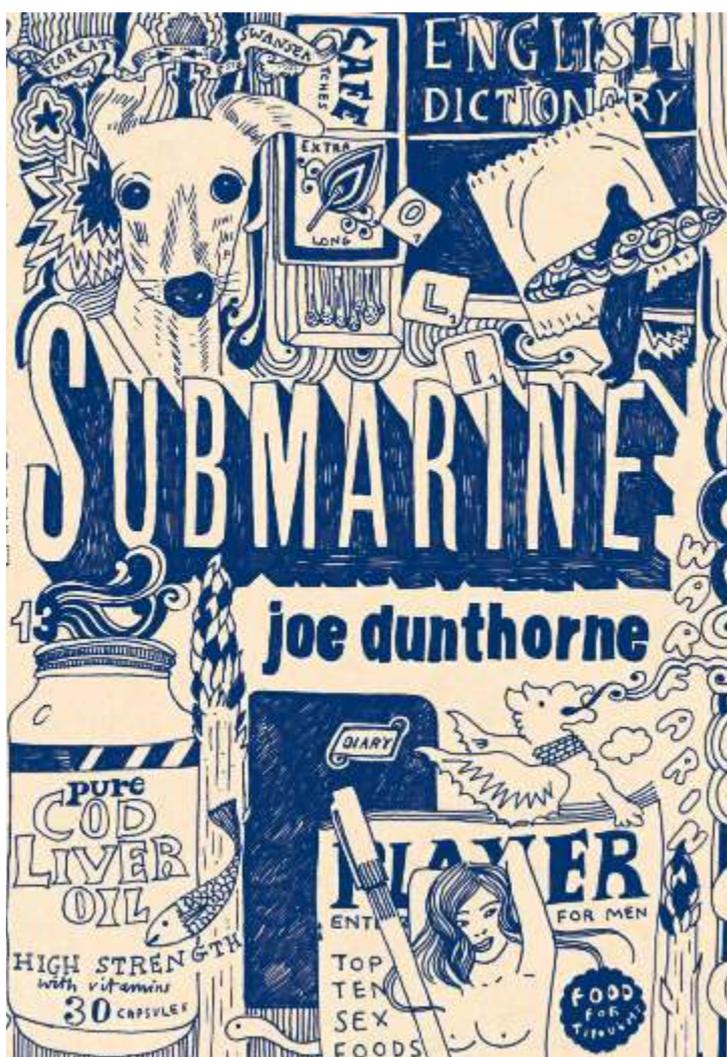
The book is inherently Welsh purely because it is written so convincingly from a teenage perspective. There is no striving to create a sense of place; Oliver lives in Swansea and so quite simply we see Swansea from his own disinterested view. Colloquialism occurs naturally (being brought up twenty miles from Swansea, the novel is a home from home for me personally).

your opinion may be on King, he is undoubtedly a master of character. Considering that this was initially Dunthorne's creative project in university, the skill he displays so early on in learning the craft is very impressive. Oliver is flawed. He is intelligent, neurotic, paranoid, delusional, well-read, funny and pretentious. It is the character that makes the book such a success. Oliver's character is so big, it dominates the novel.

Dunthorne's novel was made into a film, and rightly so; it is perfect for the alternative cinema screen. In fact, the reason I read the book initially was because the film was so fantastic, and I was thrilled to be able to expand on Oliver's antics in the novel. Directed by Richard Ayoade and starring Craig Roberts and Oliver Tate, the film is a hilarious and mostly accurate portrayal of Oliver's life. The film was shot on location in and around Swansea and the magnificent Paddy Considine stars as Graham Purvis. Capturing Oliver's sense of generic individuality through camera shots is very well executed and the fantastic cast are perfect in their portrayals. Of course, alternative or not, in true 'Hollywood' style the film ends with Oliver and Jordana. The book is not so optimistic. (I should have alerted you to that spoiler before hand – apologies.) Again, this is a sign of a good book for me. When books end on a pessimistic note it is more realistic. The fact that this novel adhered to this just solidified its greatness.

Oliver's character is extremely well-developed, and one reason for this is that there is no censor. Oliver shares every repressed memory, a few which are quite shocking to read. Dunthorne explores every awkward angle; he does not shy away from anything. This is quite rare in not only teenage fiction but fiction in general. Dunthorne explores character in the same way Stephen King does, and despite what

Although perhaps not considered as one of the greats of Welsh literature, I would argue *Submarine* is deservedly one of Wales' best novels, simply because it just is Welsh. Dunthorne's writing is engaging and well-crafted. Tate is one of the most believable Welsh protagonists I have come across; full of flaws and full of himself.



Shifts by Christopher Meredith

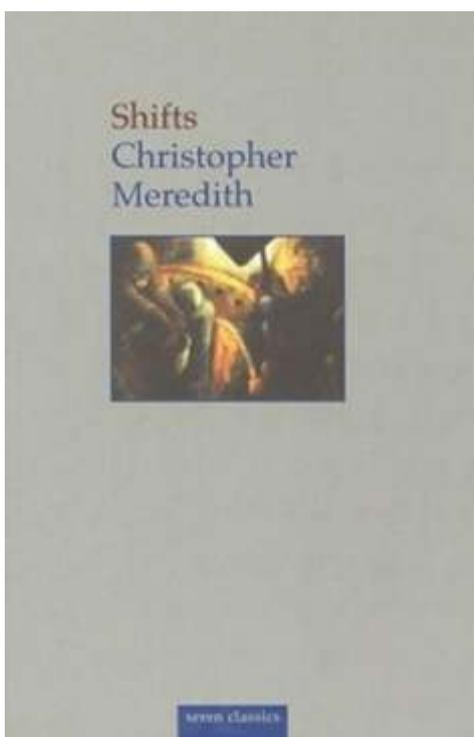
by Dylan Moore

The title of Christopher Meredith's 1985 debut novel refers to both the monotonous patterns of working class life and the changes to such routines that remain forever beyond the control of the people whose lives come to be defined by them. In a country famous for coalmining, and a Heads of the Valleys region more famous in the literary world for the romances of Alexander Cordell, *Shifts* is the novel of the declining steel industry. Moreover, the year of its setting – 1977 – confirms its ostensibly undramatic events as a kind of full stop, the last dregs of the industrial South Wales that had existed for at least a century and a half, about to turn into something else.

Focusing on four characters bound together by the closure of the steel plant in the town – unnamed but quite possibly Meredith's native Tredegar – *Shifts* is a study in how men and women are forced by circumstance to take control of their own destinies, even if sometimes it seems they are determined to let life pass them by. Jack Priday is the protagonist; recently returned to Wales after some years spent in Norfolk and Lancashire, he is attempting to rebuild his life a couple of valleys over from his original home, like a 'salmon coming home to spawn.' Jack lodges first with Connie, a middle-aged widow, but then settles with his workmate and former school friend Keith, a local history enthusiast now married to Judith, herself seeking a new way forward when familiar routines are dislocated. And then there is Rob – known mysteriously as 'O' – bullied at work and seeming to symbolise the great emptiness in all of the characters' lives; it is O who both opens and closes the novel, forcing us to consider issues of circularity and time, life and death, being and nothingness.

Meredith's achievement is a significant one – easily ranking as a Great Welsh Novel – not only because of the skilful way that he combines these grand themes with humour and pathos. An unshowy understated quality marks the prose throughout and despite its depth and complexity, *Shifts* is a down-to-earth book in keeping with its humble environs, great also because of Meredith's fine ear for dialect and the basic ingredients of character, setting and plot. Keith's interest in local history is just one way in which the author subtly layers the humdrum events of the actual story with resonance and complexity; here too is Meredith's chance to explore the shifts at the beginning of the industrial age and with a deftness of touch play the birth of the town out against what seem to be its death throes.

It is no wonder that *The New York Times Book Review* said of *Shifts* that 'the prose is spare and poetic, at once plain and rich, musical in its rhythm of speech and clear description.' It is a perfect critical encapsulation of Meredith's style that also belies the essential Welshness at the book's core. Like very great novels, the power of *Shifts*



is to evoke universal themes in a believably rendered microcosmic reality. When Jack talks of his former life in Accrington, it seems to Keith like 'the ends of the earth'. He and Judith cannot afford to heat the house; some of the central storyline's persistent sexual tension arises from their getting changed in front of the two-bar electric heater in the living room. Meredith captures perfectly the reality of life in what many might be tempted to call late 1970s working class Britain. But his canvas is not nearly so wide. It stretches, geographically, from the steelworks to the unheated house, from the town's pubs up onto 'the tops' where the long-dead victims of cholera and poverty lie undisturbed by time or memory; timewise, it lasts a single season: as the plant closes down, the winter thaws.

Shifts perfectly approximates the precise sub-dialect of Blaneau Gwent. It is all 'en' for 'isn't', the redundant

auxiliary 'do' and frequent use of 'bastard' as an adjective. In addition to accent, and the mercilessly cruel and foulmouthed banter of the workplace ('bastard', I can assure you, is mild), Meredith draws on his own experiences as a steelworker to deliver a strikingly realistic picture of a world we rarely see in fiction:

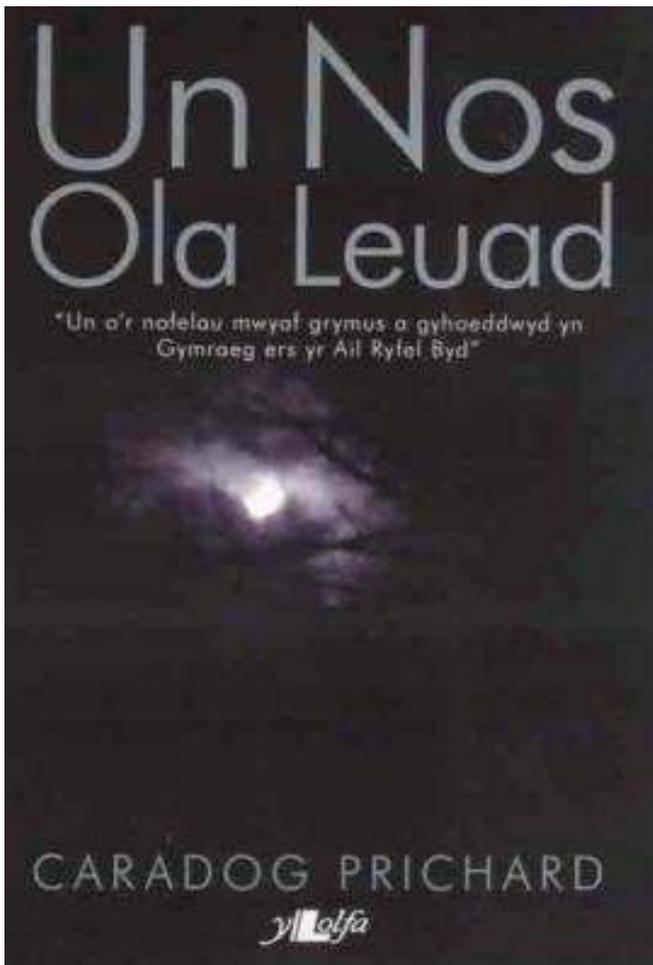
... the blast furnaces, the open hearth, the scrap bay, the coke ovens, all recently shut and decaying, and then the parts still working; the hot mill, slabyard, galv, pickler, cold mill, tinning lines, and all the other departments servicing these; boiler shop, sling shop, shoe shop, medical centre, garages, offices, railway lines, bridges...

But *Shifts* isn't simply a work of gritty realism, nor is it a kitchen sink drama (although there is plenty of careful detail that paints a picture of the everyday); there is a thread of symbolism running through the novel that lifts it, wholesale, out of the read-once-and-always-remember category of classic to the lofty position I am claiming for it today. As Richard Poole points out in his 'Afterword' to the Seren Classics edition, beneath the text's 'seemingly plain skin beats an ambitious symbolist heart'; it is a novel ripe for academic interrogation not only because of its historical, cultural, psychological and linguistic specificities – its brilliantly evoked microcosm of time and place at a (dis)juncture in the region's, and the nation's history – but also because of its rich, highly patterned, subtext. Apart from all of that, it's a great, engrossing, read.

So, if as a nation we seek to venerate a book that helps us understand ourselves and our circumstances, and that uses the novel's power to investigate the psychological fallout of socio-historical trauma while at the same time being skip-along readable and viciously funny, let's stop the search here. The book is *Shifts*.

Un Nos Ola Leuad by Caradog Prichard

by Jon Gower



This tale of a young man's growing-up and education in the slate fields of the north-west, in Caernarfonshire as was, is a Bethesda bildungsroman, if you like. It is a rich confection, both accessible and abstruse, lyrical and workaday in the same breath. It takes the Welsh language, if not for a heavy workout, then for a very, very brisk walk in the high air of Snowdonia. The prose tumbles with life and the village community described therein is etched in tender and affectionate detail. Though it is also shot through with violence and abuse, darkness contesting the light, wrestling with it.

Centrally, the narrator's mother is mad, and destined for the insane asylum and her hallucinations and visitations meld with the quotidian tales to great effect. The terrors of the old woman, stranded among the flotsam of her shipwrecked mind, are all the more powerful when one considers that all this material is autobiographically derived. Prichard's own mad mother went to Denbigh Hospital, and stayed there for no fewer than thirty years, a long and testing episode in his life which haunted and troubled him for the rest of his mortals. They had been punishingly poor before that, so his upbringing was full of tests and travails. Little wonder that the author is able to mix up Laurie Lee type nostalgia with sexual and other violences, to describe mundane characters alongside Gwynedd transsexuals, who also live in the village, and like their frocks.

The novel is a populous affair, with a relatively large cast of characters for its size, and we encounter sharply

drawn people such as Anti Elin, Guto, Elwyn Pen Rhes and Jini Bach Pen Cae, not to mention some mythical figures such as Brenhines y Llyn Du, the Queen of the Black Lake and Brenhines yr Wyddfa, the Queen of Snowdon, mental apparitions or aberrations made corporeal and true. The prevalence of nicknames is typical of the area, and indeed of mining regions in general. So, some are named after their jobs or vocations, such as the barber Joni Wilias Barbwr and gamekeeper Dafydd Jos Cipar. Others are named after the place they live in such as Defi Difas Snowdon View and Arthur Tan Bryn, whilst the names of some reflect their relatives, so that you have Tad Wil Bach Plisman, Little Wil the Policeman's Dad. These monikers are tender and telling, making everyone seem familiar, and serving to make the community in which they live fully known and close-knit, even to the interloping reader.

Written in the first person singular, *Un Nos Ola Leuad* is an experimental, at times almost formless account of a boy's own life, with ribbons of childhood narrative brightly braided and plaited with dark seams of madness. The boy is never named and at times one glimpses, rather, that this is a story told from the seemingly glaucomal perspective of an elderly narrator, seemingly telling the story of his own childhood. Because of his age – the years are there – the redactor is far from a reliable narrator, as he seems himself a little bit nuts. Nevertheless, in essence *Un Nos Ola Leuad* is the story of his walk, or pilgrimage through the place he grew up, on the way to Pen Llyn Du, an ominous peak above a pool of black, standing water. The peak seems both grail and terminus, drawing the central character to an inevitable and grim conclusion.

It is conventional to refer to this novel's narrative flow as 'stream of consciousness' and it is just that, a bright, hyper-oxygenated spume of twisting and coruscating words. The Prichardian prose-stream is mellifluous and uplifting, but it hides great horrors, like submarine pike, haunting the shallows. So *Un Nos Ola Leuad* mixes violence with tenderness, just as it leavens the first person account with snatches and bright shards of dialogue. The First World War, too, casts a dread shadow over events, with many deaths (the village cenotaph lists no fewer than 50 young men who have fallen in the trenches) and multiple suicides, some of which are witnessed by the young lad, despite his tender years.

The resulting fiction is remarkable beyond. Part of its appeal is the spirited vernacular in which it is written, with the jaggedness of the slate terrain mixed with the uplift of a buzzard's wing. The language is poetic, poised, abundantly energetic and brilliantly engineered too. Although the book's structure may at times be inchoate, the language is consistently deeply considered and brilliant, and well, it sings. Yes, this book sings, like an ouzel on the high tops, telling tall and telling tales of humanity bustling in the workers' terraces below. I will go this far: this is the one Welsh novel that can stand proud on the bookshelf marked 'World's Literary Treasury', alongside works by Italo Calvino, Elias Canetti, Patrick White, Annie Proulx – think of your own names – and Prichard's brilliant book easily passes muster and fully bears comparison. In prose it does not have a Welsh language competitor that comes within a league, so it is veritably within a league of its own. The fact

that is was Prichard's first novel only serves to underline the wonder of it.

One writer whose name might be usefully invoked in discussing it is Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as *Un Nos Ola Leuad* has many characteristics of magical realism. Marquez's extraordinarily influential novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* seems as if it might have been an influence on Prichard, until one remembers that the Colombian's work came out in 1967, while Prichard's novel was first published in 1961. In this, *Un Nos Ola Leuad* seems to adumbrate and anticipate the major arrivals of magical realism, just as did the fictions of Borges. It certainly has that groundbreaking feel to it, and in Welsh writing it not only shattered the literary models of the past but also served as a pathfinder for the future, not least for the hugely engaging and inventive novels of Robin Llywelyn, but also

my own work. In that Prichard is for many of us a benchmark for achievement and a hallmark of quality, like those jewellers' symbols that attest to the purity of gold. And this novel, moonlight-drenched and pulsingly alive, has all the energy, vividness and variety of humanity – raw, venal, duplicitous and vital – and is pure gold. Gold found, unexpectedly, in great measure among the seams of grey slate and the forbidding landscapes of the quarried land of Gwynedd.

We may have slightly overused and devalued the word 'classic' when applied to books, but not in this case. It is a bona fide classic, both enduring and enlightening, a volume yearning to be read and re-read and shared with future generations, which will surely be enthralled by it, for as long as there is a language called Welsh in the scalped high hills.

Awakening by Stevie Davies

by John Lavin

Davies' subject matter is the poetry and emotion of oft ignored historical facts, in the minutiae of real experiences. She is interested in examining how things genuinely were in the past, not how we are told they were in school. And the best tool, with which to go about this, besides, of course, determined historical research, is empathy. What would it *feel* like to be a woman given burns and enemas to flush out psychological 'poisons' simply because you speak your own opinions? To be sexually molested by doctors under the auspices of your own sister, a woman who burns your books and calls you hysterical if you tell the truth? These are the real histories: the histories of those people who have been not so much forgotten by history as deliberately written out of it. And, in *Awakening*, Davies wants to tell us what it was like to be a woman at a time when to be a woman was to have almost no public voice at all: the mid-Nineteenth Century. In order to do this, she examines the lives of two women in particular. Two sisters, entwined in a damaging, symbiotic relationship, that go by the name of Beatrice and Anna Pentecost.

Davies lets the reader know right from the very beginning that this relationship is trouble:

The motherless sisters would strive silently, wielding different weapons. Beatrice, who remembered a time before Anna, would start it. From the first she'd cherished the dream of sending the usurper back where she came from, especially once she'd heard it whispered that the baby had killed Mrs Pentecost. She banged Mama's murderer's forehead against a window clasp, accidentally on purpose, and the tell-tale sign remains to this day, a curved scar between Anna's eyebrows. Beatrice, wincing, smooths it with her fingertips. Other attacks have left further marks. Early in her life Anna mastered a knack of turning blue and toppling backwards, eyes wide but the pupils sliding upwards, mouth squared in a silent scream, not breathing.

And so their relationship repeats itself into adulthood. The Anna we meet in the first stages of the novel is the typical, sickly heroine of a Victorian novel, always weak and having to be in bed. It is as we realise that this weakness

and illness is in many ways brought about by Beatrice (and by Anna's own built-in reactivity to her) that the novel really starts to get its hooks into you.

To begin with it appears as though we are in Wilkie Collins territory and that Beatrice is a kind of Sir Percival Glyde-type figure, trying to drive the Laura Fairlie-like Anna into an asylum, but as the novel progresses we see that the two sisters are each caught in a pattern of self-destruction that seemingly neither of them can escape from. Because this is far from a pastiche of a Victorian novel, Davies is too acute a psychologist for that. There are times when the reader will hate Beatrice in this novel, times indeed, when you will feel that in Beatrice, Davies has created one of the great literary monsters. However, because Davies is interested in the complexity of truth rather than historical falsification, there are times when we feel deep sorrow and even affection for Beatrice, thus enabling the creation of an extraordinarily well-realised character. Beatrice herself describes the technique Davies uses to achieve this, as she reflects on her own perception of Anna's behaviour when their stepmother died in childbirth (the baby dying soon after):

There are times when you see into a soul. Quite nakedly. The core of a person is revealed, terrible as the pink, nude heart of a field mouse Dr Quarles exposed in vivisection.

It is Davies' own epiphanic realisation of this nakedness and her knowledge of how to find it in her characters which marks out her quality as an artist (although, no doubt she would not use that word 'terrible' as emotionally thwarted Beatrice tellingly does). It is also this realisation which serves as the driving force behind the novel. Because this is what history rarely, if ever, shows: what it feels like to be alive, and how events and actions can warp and diminish and expand and do all sorts of complicated things to an individual's consciousness.

Davies is particularly good at looking into the abused mind, first at Anna, and then at Beatrice. Anna suffers abuse from at least three different sources; from her dead step-mother Lorne Ritter, by whom, from all we can gather, she was sexually abused as a child; by the local doctor, Quarles, and his accomplice, Dr Palfrey, who manhandle

her to her bedroom and poke about inside her vagina in order to release 'the blood flow' and bring about something called 'hysterical paroxysm'; and of course, by her sister (who in her most chilling act, arranges for those doctors to visit Anna while she herself is away on honeymoon).

In turn Beatrice's abuse is more subtle. From an early age, Lorne's brother, Christian, a preacher, takes a shine to her and asks her father, also a preacher, if he may marry her when she is old enough. Her father assents and from then on Beatrice feels that her childhood is stolen away from her because he

is constantly trying to mould her into his idea of how a Christian (in both senses) wife should be. She also remembers an incident when he had bounced her up and down on his knee in a way, which while not ostensibly inappropriate, in terms of emotional atmosphere felt deeply inappropriate (Anna corroborates this by remembering it separately and by remembering how disturbing she found it to witness.) 'Beattie hates, Beattie loathes' is what she used to say to herself about Christian whenever she had spent time with him, a mantra made all the more unsettling when she picks it up again after they eventually marry. (Something which Christian, a master of manipulation, tricks her into doing by telling her that she accepted him when he unexpectedly embraced her. Beatrice meanwhile is sure she never agreed to any such thing.)

There is a strange duality at the heart of what happens to both Anna and Beatrice and in both cases it is caused by the Ritter siblings. Lore, having had a sexual relationship with the child Anna, dies in childbirth, leaving a baby which, before it dies, Anna takes as her own, nursing and even trying to breastfeed it. It is as though it is a product of their relationship rather than of Lore's relationship with Anna's father. And as such it is only a phantom and can never live. When it inevitably dies, something in Anna does so too, much as if it were her own

child, and she subsequently tries to kill herself. This most forbidden of acts contributes towards Beatrice's judgment of her sister as hysterical and morally weak, although it increasingly becomes clear that Beatrice's attitude towards her sister is predominantly that of someone who is frightened by the truthful mirror that Anna represents.

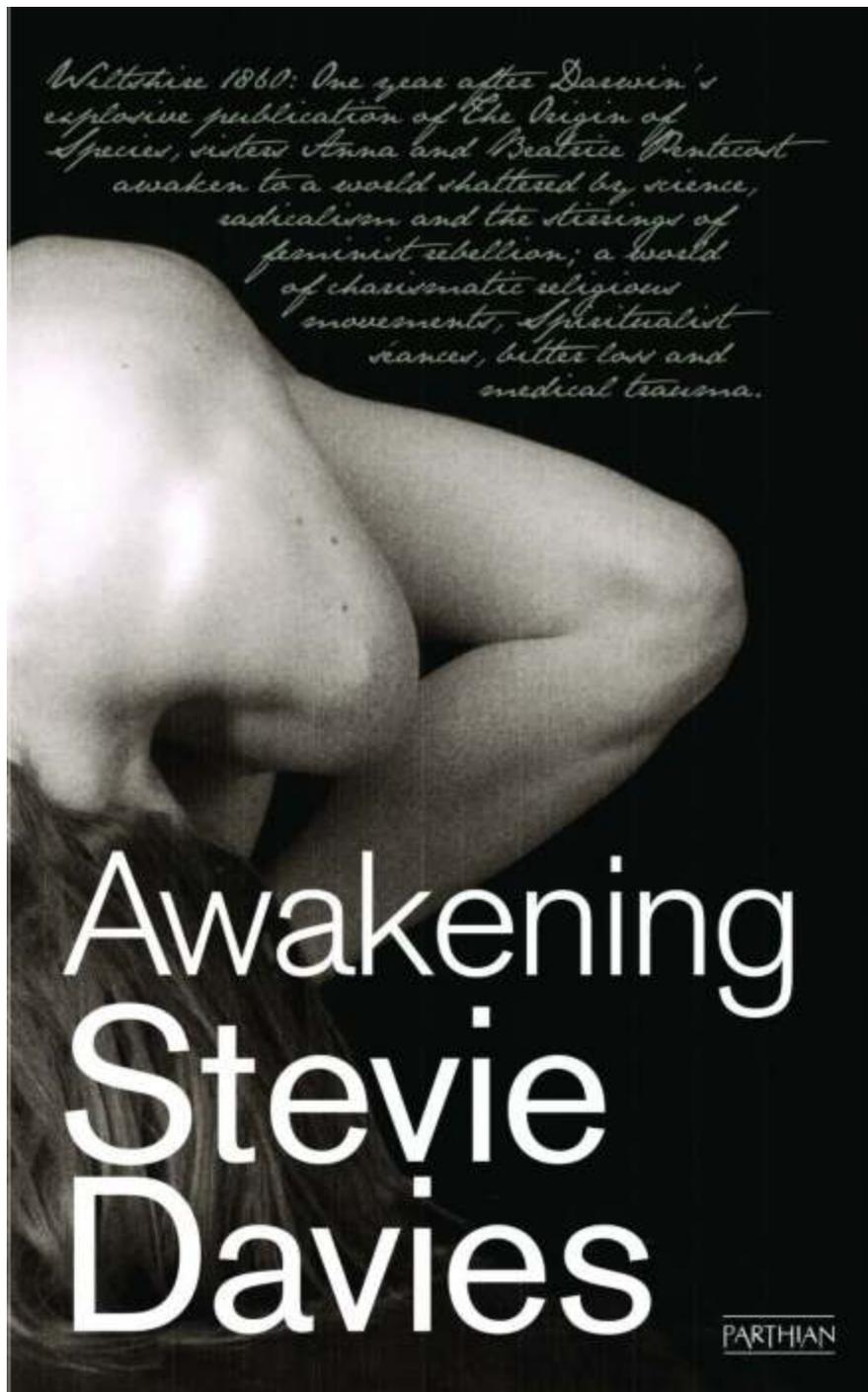
Meanwhile the child Beatrice has by Christian also dies after a few weeks. This is particularly harsh as Beatrice adores the boy and is so filled by love for him that she begins to change as a person. When he dies Christian

counsels that they should be happy because he has gone to Jesus and Beatrice thinks again, 'Beattie hates, Beattie loathes.' It is almost as though there is something warped and malignant about Lore and Christian, almost as though they are a virus or a poison caught up in each Pentecost sister's bloodstream. This is something which is underlined when we finally (not until page 274) hear Beatrice's opinion of Lore, and learn that she thinks of her as a 'demon'.

It is a mark of both Davies' cunning as a novelist and of her psychological acuity that up until this moment we have largely only heard nice things about Lore because we have only really heard about her from Anna. Anna who, of course, would have been conditioned to think well of Lore by Lore herself, her abuser. It is then that we realise that both sisters' childhoods have been stolen away by the Ritters.

As this conclusion may attest, *Awakening*, is

a sad work but it is also a deeply moving and profound one. It is also a novel which embodies its title; a title which, as well as reflecting the book's setting, (the time of Darwin, the beginnings of feminism, the time of variously oddball religious 'awakenings'), also reflects this writer's deep concern with personal awakenings. Indeed, you leave these pages feeling more fully conscious of yourself and the world around you than you did when you began them. What more can you ask for from a book?



So Long, Hector Bebb by Ron Berry

by Craig Austin

This Wales of ours is going to rack and ruin. I tell you, brawd, what's wanted is a bloody revolution. Wipe the slate clean; start all over again as if we'd just lost our bloody tails.

Ron Berry's 1970 Valleys masterwork *So Long, Hector Bebb* is a great Welsh novel, maybe the great Welsh novel, because much like its ultimately doomed pugilist of a protagonist, it defiantly refuses to play by the antiquated rules of its predecessors. This is no work of dewy-eyed, verdant-valleyed whimsy; there are no heroes here, no bleeding hearts of solid Welsh gold, no ultimate redemption, or hackneyed working class valour. It is a work ultimately defined by fatalism and claustrophobic conditions, and given that it was written in the raw aftermath of the Aberfan disaster, by a former coalminer no less, one wholly devoid of the voices of children; an entire generation erased in a single moment of unfathomable catastrophe.

Though ostensibly a story about a boxer, and boxing itself, Berry's novel nobly resists the trite notion of 'triumph over adversity' that besmirches so many of its oeuvre; if 'oeuvre' is even an appropriate term – this is no sports book, despite its contemporary marketing. If anything, *Bebb* endures, defiantly and assuredly, as the anti-'Rocky', a granite-hard thriller entirely bereft of romance; a story underpinned by an unholy ragbag collective of lumpen,

wanting men and duplicitous, disillusioned women. Masterfully, Berry utilises fourteen different interior monologues to cumulatively plot the preordained destiny of Hector Bebb, a mercurial Valleys prize-fighter who punches, and inadvertently kills, the man who has been openly having an affair with his sexually frustrated wife, a woman long-since resigned to her warrior of a husband never being able to replicate his athletic prowess within the conjugal bed:

You'd think him terrific. Ramping-tamping for a husband is what I mean. The shock came first and no improvement ever since. Dead loss very nigh. Hardly any resemblance to himself inside the ring when he's up against some fella trying to knock lumps off his face.

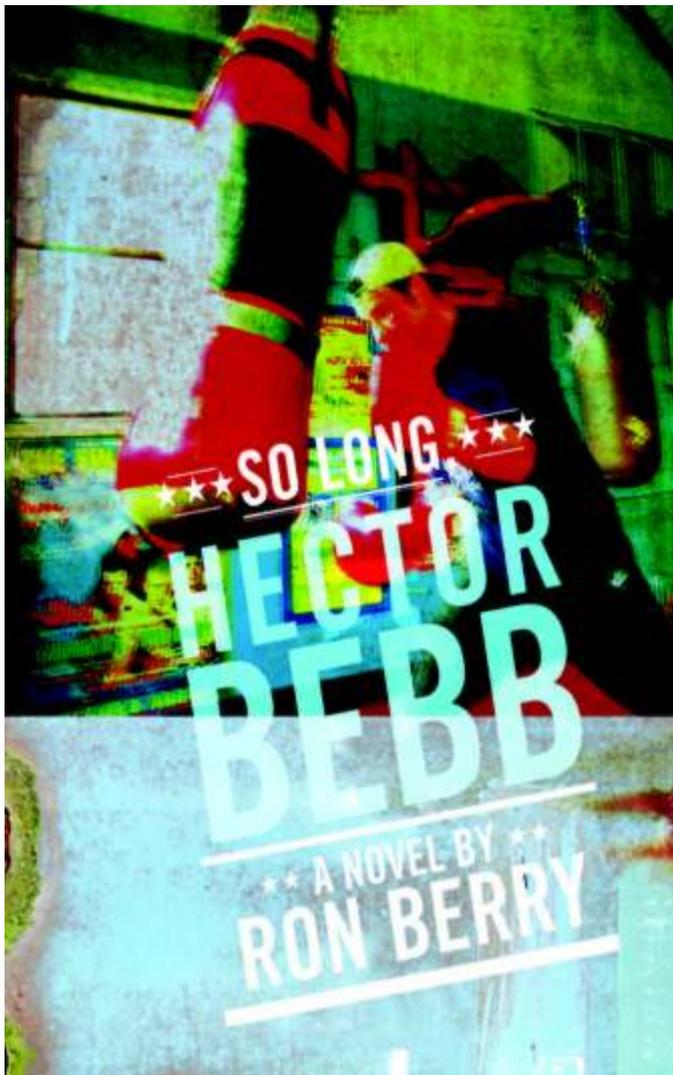
The all-pervading influence of sex is writ large throughout the Rhondda village of Cymmer (its suggestive pronunciation not lost on the author), aggressive, ugly, mechanical sex. Sex as the pre-emptive weapon of choice, the principal currency of a community that – boxing, excepted – has long since ceased to dare to dream.

I'm not selling this to you, am I? It's OK, I can tell. And given exposure to the brutally industrial language that punctuates Berry's prose like '80s hedgerow pornography, you may grow to like it even less. But what language! Berry's dialogue – the sound of the English language having gone 12 brutal rounds with the Rhondda valley – is the real thrill here. Words mangled and disfigured by razor-sharp tongues and broken teeth to create a brutal beauty of indeterminate virtue. Even the swearing, and there is plenty of swearing, has its own deliciously delightful appeal, its vulgarity achieving an almost Chaucerian level of ingenious creativity. The 'faaqen' phonetics of the White Hart pub imbued with a vibrant authenticity that positively reeks of stale beer and cheap perfume. Here's Bump Tanner on the untimely death of Emlyn Winton:

What Millie Bebb does is fling her what's-it at him for Em to touch up her clout. Em sticks his hand there in open public! Like I say, God stone me cold, the man isn't born who'll take such. He was always on about Mel Carpenter's bad luck. Luck, by Christ. They reckon you could hear Emlyn's head smacking the counter from outside the Transport Café. LUCK! Em's mouth spilling the old tomato sauce.

Berry is no interloper, no opportunistic cultural tourist. He refuses to sit in judgment or to cloak his characters in mawkish sentiment. Though left-wing by nature, these characters are far more driven by hedonism and self-gratification than they are by either politics or religion. Here is a writer embedded at the core of his community and one not shy about airing its seismic imperfections alongside its admittedly fleeting moments of kindness. These voices ring true, and the fact that they don't conform to clichéd museum-piece images of rolling hills, kindly hearts, and earnest noble toil only adds to their aggregated impact upon the reader. Or as the author's Tommy Wills would have it;

I suggest it's time we members of the general public came to realize that life isn't a monastery garden with



nightingales hopping about in the bushes. It's us as we are. It's you and me. It's one and all.

It has been said that *So Long, Hector Bebb* is the Welsh *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and whilst this book shares a number of common themes and tropes with Sillitoe's significantly more famous work, this is where the comparison between books and authors should ultimately end. Whilst Sillitoe's landmark work acted as a springboard for a lengthy and highly successful career, Berry's output ultimately waned after the release of his artistic triumph and – much like Bebb, alone and on the run – he simply

disappeared from view. *So Long, Hector Bebb*, in common with its author, could, and should, have been a contender, and over forty years after its initial publication it is once again. Back up off the canvas, its jaw jutting defiantly outward, inviting you to give it your best shot. Berry's book stands resolutely as Welsh literature's 'Bill Grundy' moment, its artistic year zero and a clarion call to those who sought to follow in its gritty, uncompromising path; a pair of nicotine-stained fingers flicked defiantly in the face of Richard Llewellyn's sugar-coated fabrication: *How Mean Was My Valley*.

Fantastic Mr Fox by Roald Dahl

by Gary Raymond

A childhood must be hardly worth having if it is one protected from the dark. The universal success of the children's books of Llandaff author Roald Dahl has a lot to do with his Mephistophelean delight in the darkness. His cantankerous refusal to pull back to either save the small reader their nightmares or the larger reader their blushes is what makes his work so irresistible, so necessary. His masterpieces, from *The BFG*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Matilda*, to his lesser (but just as puckishly wonderful) works, such as *The Twits* and *George's Marvellous Medicine*, are stories that revel in the gloopy, sticky nastiness of faery tale villainy and phantasmagorical threat, and they are, quite rightly, an integral part of the formative literary landscape of most people of my generation.

Dahl's work now, on close inspection, sits rather awkwardly with contemporary children's books with their conventional family issues, flatulence and sassy protagonists. Dahl's work is from a more adult place, a place where death is the colour of the peril, where the villains truly are the stuff of nightmare, where cruelty is often a motive in itself, and protagonists are usually bright-eyed (and sometimes bushy-tailed). Dahl's worlds are ones often where the dangers of a supernatural undercurrent pierce the mundanity of the world we know, and it is a place that interweaves with the fabric of the world that adults know. His books are not easily classified as 'Fantasy', although they are certainly fantastical, and

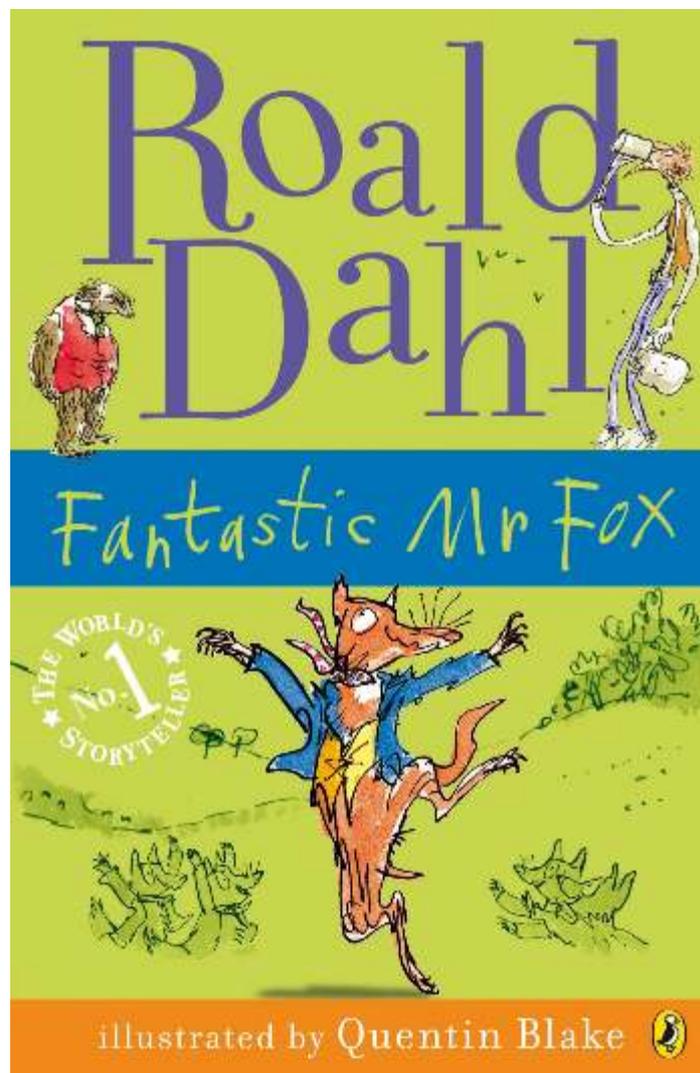
sometimes surreal, hallucinogenic, and dappled with the mood altering stuffs of the adult experience. Sometimes his books are so bleak, his villains so dark, you wonder if Dahl was not writing out of a hatred of children rather than an affection for them.

Despite all this, *Fantastic Mr Fox* is a bit of an anomaly in Dahl's *oeuvre*, in that there is no telekinetic schoolgirl, no giant airborne fruit, no humungous bumpkin dispensing dreams through kids' windows – just a wily fox and his three-pronged nemesis. It could be argued that *Fantastic Mr Fox* is less a novel and more an Aesopean fable, and this would be true, but it contains the stuff of novels, the themes and characters, and has the potential to linger just as long. Structurally it has little interest in the precepts of 'the novel', and is set out in very clear patterns of three; something often powerfully adhered to in faery tales. The story hangs wonderfully on the mocking nursery rhyme the local kids have invented for the three farmers, the despicable villains,

Boggis, Bunce and Bean
One Short, one fat, one lean,
These horrible crooks,

So different in looks,
Were nonetheless equally mean.

So here we begin to understand the basis for the attraction of the story – kids eyeing up the grotesque old mean person who lives in the community – in this case the three farmers. Mr Fox, the complicated protagonist, is all set to outwit them, to run circles around them as the children who made up the rhyme whoop and holler in approval. That



this is not quite how it works out is just one of the reasons why *Fantastic Mr Fox* stands out as a dark and rather odd romantic fable, with real moments of sadness and elation. That it is so short, and prosaically aimed at young children, and yet manages to draw characters of real insinuated depth, is testament to Dahl's craft and intellectualism. That, taken as a rural tale, *Fantastic Mr Fox* contains many of the themes, analogously, that smatters much of great Welsh literature (and more than a few are on the Greatest Welsh Novel list), makes it a serious contender for this main prize.

Mr Fox's ongoing battle with the ugly farmers – who are made almost demonic in their depiction – is an interesting take on the literature that looks at humankind's relationship to the landscape. There are flashes of Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, but also of writers like Chatwin and the more nervous poetry of Edward Thomas, who forever shook at the thought of the iron blade of modernism cutting through his beloved countryside. Boggis, Bunce and Bean are not old fashioned farmers, leaning on fence posts and tilling the soil – they are industrial employers, who, when hunting down Mr Fox, circle his hilltop home with the combined forces of their 108 employees, armed to the teeth with a Fox-obliterating arsenal. Mr Fox, you see, has been feeding his family with the farmers' wares, most likely a fraction of one percent of what they have in their gulag-like store rooms. He pinches a chicken from one, a goose from another, and a bottle of cider from Bean, the meanest and most terrifying of the lot. When the farmers have finally had enough, their retribution is so overblown – that dark psychotic comedy that Dahl was so good at – that you wonder for the mental health of the three.

A sort of madness had taken hold of the three men. The tall skinny Bean and dwarfish pot-bellied Bunce were driving their machines like maniacs, racing the motors and making their shovels dig at terrific speed. The fat Boggis was hopping about like a dervish and shouting, 'Faster! Faster!'

Boggis Bunce and Bean, unable to find Mr Fox with shovels, bring in the heavy mechanical diggers and dig into the hill where Mr Fox and his family live until it looks like a 'volcanic crater'. But Mr Fox, perhaps surprisingly, is a flawed hero. Not only is it his arrogance that has endangered his family in the first place, but when the shovels come, he panics. It is one of his cubs who slaps the panic out of him and tells him he needs to man-up and quickly devise a plan. This he does, and they dig down, further and further away from their pursuers, but at the same time further and further away from food.

There are many interesting allegories you can draw out from the conflict between Mr Fox and the farmers. There is some fun to be had reading the farmers as Lords of the Manor and Mr Fox as the Robin Hood character living up in the woods. In Wes Anderson's marvellous animated film version of the book, Boggis, Bunce and Bean are dressed in gentlemanly tweed rather than the rags Quentin Blake illustrates them in the book; they are given a sinister air of human respectability. Anderson takes the Robin Hood idea further, with Mr Fox becoming leader of a band of animals who are all seeking to outsmart their oppressors up on the surface.

In the book, however, the Foxes are alone for much of the adventure (apart from Badger who joins, and acts as a moral barometer to Mr Fox's devil-may-care philosophy). Dahl is a lot more stark in his depiction of their predicament than Wes Anderson is. In their deep subterranean hideaway

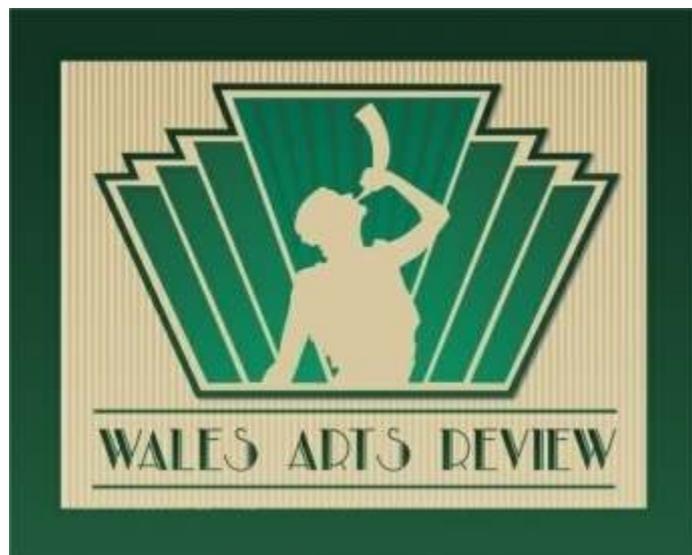
the Fox family begins to starve, and the reader is not entirely sure that Mrs Fox is going to make it. Dahl has no issues with putting this awful scenario right up front. One chapter is even titled 'The Foxes Begin to Starve'. The language of the book is quite uncompromising throughout.

'How will they kill us, mummy?' said one of the small foxes. His round black eyes were huge with fright. 'Will there be dogs?'

At one point, early on, Bunce declares of Mr Fox, 'I'd like to rip out his guts!' The action is as earthy as the digging.

In many ways I imagine that Dahl's phenomenal sales figures meant that he was able to write pretty much whatever he wanted – no editor was going to mess with such a formula as this. But he never strayed from what children like in a good story – adventure. Here his hero is extremely charismatic, and although flawed, wins out in the end. His villains are truly awful. His partnership with Quentin Blake is positively harmonious throughout the pages, Mr Fox appearing nimble, dandyish in actual fact, in his waistcoat and cravat – like a furry Stewart Granger. The mechanical diggers are pushed back by Blake to an ominous and demonic silhouette as they carve up the hillside, the scenery literally filling with inky blackness.

Fantastic Mr Fox is a fable that is just as Welsh as any of our nation's lauded rural novels – stories of the heartland, of the people of the earth, of the working man doing what he must to provide for his family. Dahl, with just a few careful sentences, sidesteps one-dimensional characterisation, and brings the horror of man's dominant relationship with the countryside to the fore. It is very easy to forget that this is a children's story. That he can be as wincingly dark as he is here and get away with it, means that generations more children will be allowed to experience a classic tale of countryside conflict.



Gold by Dan Rhodes

by Jaime Woods

Dan Rhodes' third novel, *Gold* (2007), may well prove to be one of the more contentious nominees in our search for The Greatest Welsh Novel. Not only is Dan Rhodes English, but the novel has already won the Aye Write! / Clare Maclean Prize for *Scottish Fiction* in 2008 – it qualified due to the author's time living in Edinburgh. It should also be noted that Rhodes studied at the University of Glamorgan. However, I do not believe that the nationality of the author really should be of consideration here. *Gold* is a Welsh novel, and is an exceptional book, and that's what this type of accolade should be based upon.

Just as the sun was a thumb's width from the horizon, she felt a shiver as she saw what she had come to see. She had stumbled upon this sight on her first visit to the village, and had found herself returning to it year after year. Whenever the sky was clear at the end of the day, one of the rocks in the cove below looked, for just a few minutes, as if it had turned to gold.

Set in Pembrokeshire, *Gold* manages to evince the beauty of this stretch of ragged coastline through the eyes of Miyuki Woodward, a woman from a small town in the Valleys who visits the same coastal village each winter. Leaving her girlfriend at home, she spends two weeks walking and reading, and most of her evenings in the lounge bar of The Anchor, along with tall Mr Hughes, short Mr Hughes, Mr Puw, and Septic Barry & the Children from Previous Relationships. Miyuki's mother is Welsh, her father – who she has never met – is Japanese. Miyuki, we are told, described herself as 'about as Japanese as laverbread' until she discovered there was a Japanese food-stuff that was 'more or less identical' to the Welsh delicacy, at which point she attempted to learn all the important facts and figures about

Japan and Japanese culture. This knowledge not only stands her in good stead for making small talk, but also for participation in the weekly pub quiz in The Anchor.

Throughout his *oeuvre*, Rhodes has proved himself a master of concise character building. He has written two

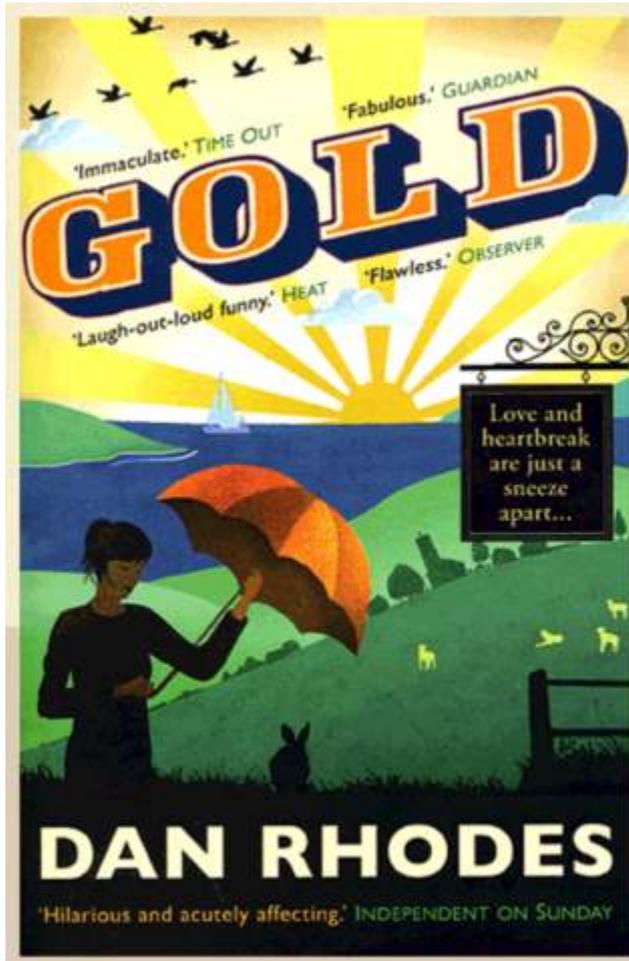
quizmaster with his Mark E. Smith inflections; and the story of the stuffed pike, under whose gaze Miyuki sits each night.

There is something wonderfully poetic about *Gold*. Rhodes uses repetition, and variations on ideas throughout, and this rhetorical technique allows the reader to recognise the commonplace events from the bursts of adventure and excitement, and to engage with the cyclical nature of the novel. Each chapter is one day of her fortnight's holiday; and each night Miyuki throws her contact lenses onto the hot stove where they 'hissed and danced the mambo', 'danced a two-step', or 'a lacklustre fandango'.

The underlying theme of the novel – permanence – is also reflected in Rhodes' clever use of repetition. Miyuki, in the central moment, spray paints a rock in gold paint, so it would be gold at all times, not just in the few minutes referred to in the quotation at the start of this essay. But it does not last, it washes off. This is matched by the flecks of gold paint she sneezes out, the beautiful golden haired barmaid who doesn't stick around, the flashes of gold she desperately looks for to tell her she's with the right person, and the golden light that shines on her partner, and the village on her last day there.

The people remain though, the idiosyncratic locals, the regular visitors, normality. Despite the comedy – and it really is a funny book – there is a strong footing in reality, in human nature, and in belonging, all weaved within its pages. This degree of rationality, to engage with and to find joy in the small moments of daily life, is so far removed from the aspiration of so many novels, that it resounds for long after reading.

Gold is the perfect antidote to the jaded cynicism and misanthropy of *The Old Devils*. It is a wonderful comical portrayal of Welsh life, and it is never patronizing, the humour comes from entirely the right place. It's beautiful and lovely and a little bit heart-breaking, and worthy of its place in the Welsh literary canon.



collections of micro-fiction, *Anthropology* (2000) and *Marry Me* (2013), in which real lucidity and emotion are presented in stories as short as 101 words; and in his debut novel, 2003's *Timoleon Vieta Come Home*, where entire lives are played out in small chapters as a travelling dog passes through their respective worlds. Miyuki's status as an outsider, albeit a warmly welcomed one, allows Rhodes the opportunity to examine the village residents with both a bar-room familiarity and a real sense of curiosity and intrigue. In *Gold* we read of the holiday romances of Septic Barry, the lead singer of a band who have never as much as played a gig; the strange disappearance of tall Mr Hughes; the

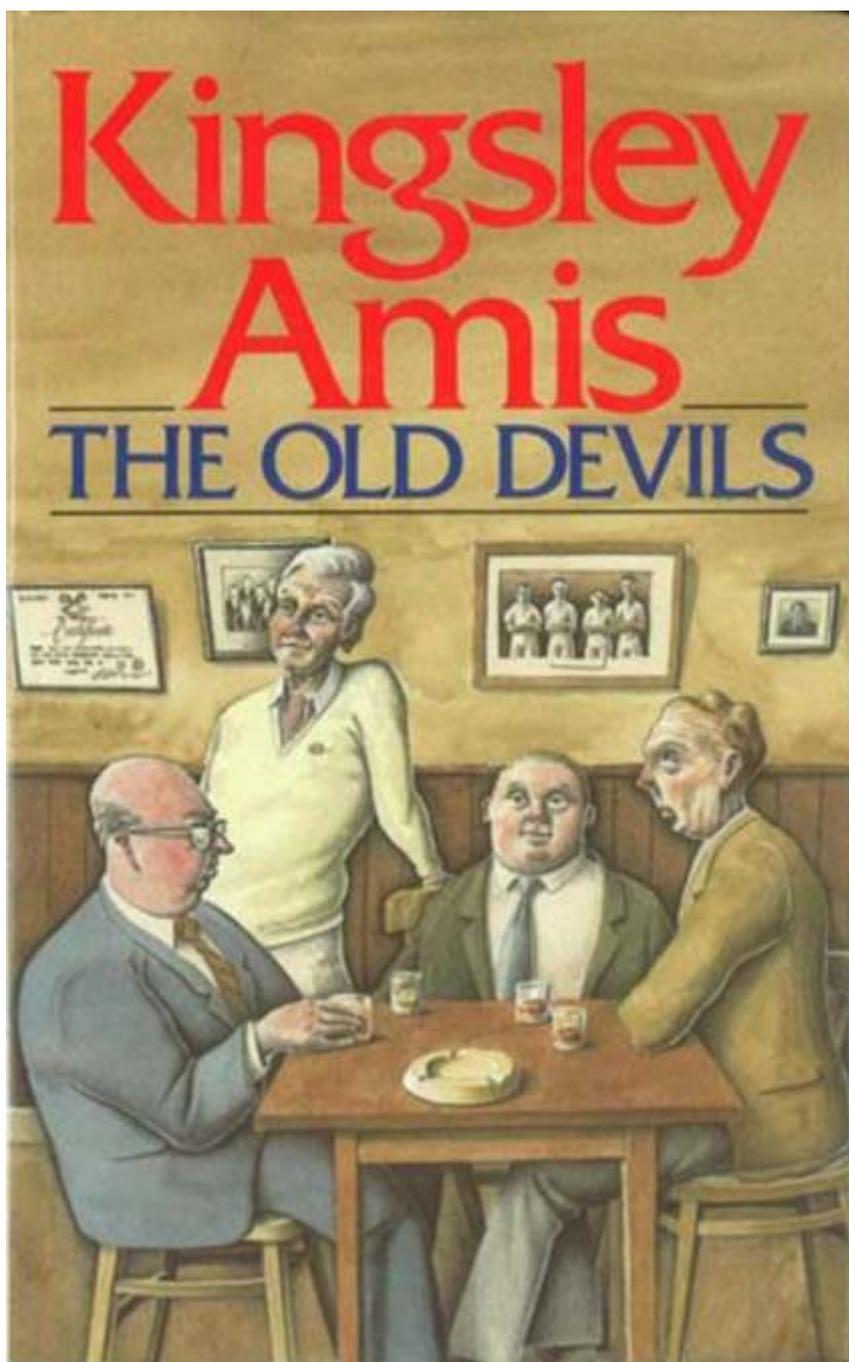
The Old Devils by Kingsley Amis

by John Lavin

Can the Greatest Welsh Novel be written by a writer who is not technically, er, *Welsh*? Generally I would say not, perhaps even *very obviously* not but in the case of Kingsley Amis and *The Old Devils* things are different. Quite especially different. The twelve years Amis spent in Swansea (and his corresponding tenure at the University there) is one thing. The fact that he described himself as being most at home and at his happiest anywhere when in South Wales another. However, the two most obvious and incontrovertible facts are *Lucky Jim* and *The Old Devils* themselves. Two of the greatest novels of the twentieth century without doubt, and Amis' only two unequivocally great books to boot. Both of them inspired by, written about and largely written in South Wales.

Lucky Jim was forged within the corridors of Swansea University, where Amis worked as assistant English lecturer when he and his young family were living first in a series of rented rooms and eventually 'in a house within a stone's throw of that Cwmdonkin Drive that Dylan Thomas had been the Rimbaud of' (*The Old Devils*, incidentally, contains an amusing and somewhat unflattering portrait of a Dylan Thomas-like poet named Brydan). *The Old Devils* was written after the demise of Amis' marriage to Elizabeth Jane Howard (who had apparently never taken to Swansea), when the author began to return to Wales regularly to reconnect with old friends. And somehow, just as that initial time in Swansea had produced Amis' first period of intense creative productivity, so too did this return to South Wales call to a halt what had had been a long fallow period for Amis, populated by dismal books like *Russian Hide and*

Seek and Jake's Thing – works that offered the reader little more than grim evidence of a brilliant mind lost to drink. Not only, in fact, did Amis' return end this dismayingly last orders-like sinking of his talent but it also resulted in his greatest single creative achievement. A book about regret and the implacability of time. A book, certainly, about drink. But a book, also, which examines South Wales with forensic skill and a great deal of humour and affection.



The South Wales Amis shows us is seen through the eyes of his characters. Recently retired academics and professionals, who like Amis himself appear to have grown increasingly conservative with age, these people are – even if not specifically – the characters from *Lucky Jim* grown old. Perhaps, in fact, this is a reason for the books success. Returning to Swansea appears to have reacquainted Amis with the mainline to his generation. Because the sparkling, pretension-stripping humour which so characterised his debut novel is back with considerable force. When a novel, and a novel that speaks to and for a different generation than your own, makes you laugh out loud on upwards of ten occasions, then that novel is surely something very special indeed. When it also does this in an elegiac tone that appears to suggest that all of the wit, rage and brilliance that so defined *Lucky Jim* was a terrible, vain waste of time, then you also know that you are in

very complicated company indeed.

Because *The Old Devils* is Shakespearean in scope. It is funny, yes, but also complex and philosophical and at its core, swollen with tears. 'Swing low in your weep ship,' began *The Information*, the novel Amis' son Martin wrote in his father's final years and in the aftermath of his own

divorce. 'With your tear scans and your sob probes.' His own novel also deals with male regret and male emotional constipation ('Cities at night contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing') but he could just as easily have been speaking about his father's deeply autobiographical, *The Old Devils*.

Indeed sadness and regret watermark these pages but they do so especially in Amis' handling of the relationship between the kind, beautiful Rhiannon and both her husband Alun and her former lover, Peter. For Rhiannon read Hilly, Kingsley's first wife, whom he left to marry the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard. Here is the final verse from the poem he wrote to her, 'Instead of an Epilogue', at the end of his Memoirs, (published six years after *The Old Devils* and four years before his death in 1995):

In '46 I met someone harmless, someone defenceless,
But till then whole, unadapted within;
Awkward, gentle, healthy, straight-backed,
Who spoke to say something, laughed when amused;
If things went wrong, feared she might be at fault,
Whose eye I could have met for ever then,
Oh yes, and who was also beautiful.
Well, that was much as women were meant to be,
I thought, and set about looking further.
How can we tell, with nothing to compare?

There are elements of Amis in both Alun – in his philandering and his love of being brilliantly rude but not, of course, in his literary charlatanism – and Peter, who gives up Rhiannon for a short fling with the stunningly beautiful Angharad:

Well a girl like that, you can understand it in a way, and
understand it even better if you allow for the bloke being
a selfish shit who's rather thrilled to be the object of it.

Meanwhile Charlie's fear of being on his own in the dark mirrors more or less exactly the night terrors Amis himself encountered in the latter stages of his life (leading eventually, and rather sweetly it has to be said, to Hilly and her husband Lord Kilmarnock allowing him to become their lodger). It is both the handling and the implicit acknowledgement of these vulnerabilities, self-deceptions and betrayals that make this novel the remarkable achievement that it is.

Amis is justly famous for writing about drink (his collection of essays on the subject, *On Drink*, is supremely funny) and one of the things *The Old Devils* is likewise justly famous for is drinking on an epic scale. Here is Alun and Charlie's lunch while holidaying in Birdarthur (a thinly disguised Laugharne):

He continued satisfactory through the pub session, another couple back at the cottage, and lunch off the pickled fish and chopped onion, the whole firmly washed down with aquavit and Special Brew and tamped in place with Irish Cream. By a step of doubtful legitimacy the men thinned their glasses of the heavy liqueur with Scotch.

Amis was, as we know, a notorious drinker but while the writing on drink throughout *The Old Devils* is carried out with a good deal of zest and affection, it is also shot through with the inescapable knowledge that drinking on this scale is a coping mechanism. A way not so much of forgetting the reality of one's actions as of anaesthetising oneself to them.

Indeed for all of its Conservative overtones (which are, in any case pretty self-knowledgeably crabby), this is a book written in homage to women, art and to Wales itself: three subjects which are, or should be at least, the very antithesis of conservatism. In fact, besides from the ever-prevailing Amis-ian influences of Waugh, Wodehouse, Larkin and Shakespeare, this book even admits modernism (if most decisively *not* post-modernism – no author-as-character incidents here, as in *Money*, his son's most famous novel and the one he felt impelled to fling across a room) into the conversation – calling to mind, as it almost *bizarrely* does, *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf. An outlandish comparison you might at first say, and one I had not noticed before the recent re-reading occasioned by this piece. However, it's influence is there nevertheless, from the way that Amis goes into the heads of several different characters throughout the book (look at those chapter titles, 'Alun', 'Charlie', 'Malcolm, Muriel, Peter, Gwen, Alun, Rhiannon') to the way that he lets his characters slip into stream of consciousness when talking (he hardly ever allows this when they are thinking, but then that would have surely been too overtly modernist for Amis).

But it is most prominently there in terms of subject matter. In its dissection of the ageing process of a group of friends, as well as in its reflections on their youth, *The Old Devils* summons to mind the swiftness, sadness and beauty of the life cycle. But most, of all, like *The Waves*, it summons to mind its implacability and inexorability. When shortly before Alun's dramatic, fittingly hilarious death, Peter relates to Charlie how he came to leave Rhiannon for another woman and is rendered more or less immobile by the memory, the reader feels such an enormous sweep of lost, squandered time – of time squandered so easily and of life come and gone – that it really is difficult not to cry (or at the very least hard not to be stimulated into moments of both inner and outer reflection, which is surely the purpose of art):

Not swallowing the pill, keeping it under his tongue, Peter held himself rigid in his seat with his eyes shut. Now and then he winced sharply, once so sharply and with such a screwing-up of his face that Charlie thought he was going to die the next moment. Charlie also stayed still, with his hand ready in case Peter should want to hold it.... It was not really so long before Peter's colour improved and he began to breathe more normally. After another minute he opened his eyes, smiled a little without parting his lips, as he always did now to keep his teeth out of sight, and sipped his drink.

Just as in the poem to Hilly, Amis seems to be saying, 'How can we tell, with nothing to compare?' In other words: we only have one life and so how can we be expected to get it right at the first time of asking? But what he is also saying, and what *The Old Devils* is saying with great poetic intensity, is that these mistakes hurt and that they are even a kind of suicide. Which is to say that when we hurt those that we love we hurt ourselves too, lessening our capacity for brilliance, wit, rage and above all, love.

Amis once famously said that, 'Only a world without love strikes me as instantly and decisively more terrible than one without music'. Well, *The Old Devils*, which ends, pointedly, to the strands of Amis' beloved jazz, takes its readers into a place *that* terrible. It is a world, he says, that we can only make ourselves, and a world that he maps without flinching. For this and for many other reasons, it is a very worthy contender for the title of Greatest Welsh Novel.

Downriver by Iain Sinclair

by Steve Hitchens

Downriver is a novel about London. The author, Iain Sinclair, is not usually thought of as a Welsh writer; though born in Cardiff and brought up in Maesteg, he has lived in London since the late-1960s and become known as a London writer. But I want to suggest that Sinclair and his novel *Downriver* demonstrate a Welshness that is nomadic and not fixed by national boundaries. 'My father was Scottish,' Sinclair writes, '– which is not to say that he didn't feel at home in Wales. Scottishness is the condition of feeling comfortable everywhere, except within the borders of Scotland.' Sinclair apparently had his Welsh accent teased out of him when he attended Cheltenham College in the 1950s. 'I had a comic Welsh accent,' he said in an interview, 'so I was aware of a double life – of subverting what I was.' Sinclair's Welshness is characterised by this duality; it is something he subverts. Welshness is defined in its relation to the other, often depicted as the enemy. Sinclair's double identity makes him his own 'other', a stranger to himself. Sinclair is 'on the move from one other to another other,' as Pierre Joris puts it in *A Nomad Poetics*. *Downriver* might then be thought of as what Joris refers to as 'The practice of outside': the Welsh novel outside Wales.

Sinclair's baroque, grotesque style absorbs Welsh literature by a nomadic route: tapping into Dylan Thomas via Allen Ginsberg and the Beats, Welsh writing filtered back through America. 'Ginsberg was very drawn to the apocalyptic, deep rumbling resonance of Dylan Thomas,' he says, 'and I knew its relationship to chapel sermonising and natural Welsh speech rhythms. I could feel how Thomas's work had been appropriated by the Beats, while knowing the thing itself. And so I took on both.' Thomas himself drew on Rimbaud and Joyce for his anglo-cynghanedd and found fame in the US. This nomadic Welsh lineage offers an alternative to the usual static nation-based notions of literary heritage.

While the novel can be seen as nomadic, there is a sense that, as Joris might say, the deterritorialised re-territorialise: Sinclair makes East London his territory. The novel begins with the character Milditch about to

move out of Hackney: 'Milditch, up to now, had kept his life in separate compartments. But, with the move out of Hackney, everything was coming to pieces'. Sinclair, by contrast, is one of those who 'cling so stubbornly to the cities', possessed with 'the bloody-mindedness of hanging on'. There is a sense of rooting in.

But unlike many of his Anglo-Welsh peers, Sinclair's interest in place is not concerned with a nostalgic return to roots. His exploration of place, from his early poetry onwards, has been closer to the psychogeographical *dérive* of the Situationists. The *dérive*, meaning 'drift', was recommended by Guy Debord as the practice of navigating the city without purpose. It enables the walker to step out of the familiarity and complacency bred by routine, to defamiliarise their locality in order to recognise it as a historical construct rather than something natural and eternal.

Downriver is relentlessly peripatetic, taking place almost entirely on foot, on public transport or in public spaces. The novel's geography gravitates around the area of Hackney, Homerton, Spitalfields and Bow, moving towards the river through Wapping and Shadwell across to Rotherhithe, then following the river East past the Isle of Dogs, Silvertown and Tilbury, out into the estuary and the Isle of Sheppey. This is complicated by a couple of excursions into the suburbs, one North to Leyton and another South to Orpington. It does not follow this route in a linear trajectory but jumps back and forth. As readers we conduct our own *dérive*, mapping and remapping the book as we attempt to navigate its shifting terrain. We too give ourselves up to the drift.

As well as psychogeography, *Downriver* adapts the methods of modernist poetry and conceptual art to the novel. It might be thought of as an 'open field' novel. Sinclair's early poetry works from the 1970s, such as *Lud Heat*, are composed in the open field style promoted by Black Mountain poets like Charles Olson. Often taking place as its subject, open field poetry allows the poem to incorporate any material with which it comes into contact. *Lud Heat*, for example, takes East London as its focus and

juxtaposes poetry and prose, including discussions of churches, sculpture, film and hay fever alongside descriptions of Sinclair's home-life and his job as a council grass-cutter. While *Downriver* sticks more consistently to the novel form, its chapters are often only tenuously connected, allowing the book to move between realism, satire, history, fantasy, documentary, dream, letters and even an interview.

Like much conceptual art, the novel is process-based; like the walks of Richard Long or Vito Acconci's 'Following Piece', for example, it is a process that develops overtime. Rather than beginning with a plan or synopsis before writing the novel, Sinclair sets himself a task, a certain geographical area to cover, a certain time frame. He doesn't know what will happen in the novel when he begins. The meeting with the book-dealer Milditch in the first chapter ends with the narrator deciding to follow up the tip-off about a book shop in Tilbury, only because 'I had the queasy sensation there ought to be a story in it'. From then on, Sinclair gives himself up to the process, allowing the novel to be steered by chance encounters. By the third book, he has abandoned the idea of a 'Spitalfields' novel to pursue a fantastical story about a dancer-nurse-prostitute named Edith Cadiz:

We no longer believed in 'Spitalfields' as a concept... We had something much better: a story we didn't understand. It is always more enjoyable to play at detectives than at 'researchers', who gather the evidence to justify the synopsis they have already sold.

What makes the novel equally baffling and compelling seems to be that Sinclair is a detective who gathers evidence without knowing exactly what the crime is yet. Though a process-based way of working is acceptable in modern art, and to some extent poetry, it is incomprehensible to the TV producers and book publishers to whom Sinclair pitches his ideas: 'how could we write *anything* down before we knew what was going to happen? And if we didn't write it down, so that it could be approved by three producers and a finance watchdog, then nothing

would happen... ever'; and later in a rejection letter from Granta, 'Pencilled comments speared the margins: ... "Who is 'I'?"'. It satirises the deep-rooted belief in the hierarchical top-down approach to art, where the writer is expected to know what will happen before it happens, so that it can be approved, so that accidents don't happen. Sinclair's work, by contrast, relies on accidents: you set something up and something will happen. While his practice is about letting go of the ego, control, conscious intentions, the culture industry is concerned to maintain static models of identity.

I would suggest, however, that Sinclair's methods of process, *dérive* and open field juxtaposition are entirely appropriate for the nomadic Welsh novel. It is a Welsh novel that is not bound by borders, whether of nation, identity or form. A synopsis, like national identity, is a way of fixing something in place, rather than allowing it to be ongoing and always in process. Sinclair walks to lose himself, to break the bonds of territory and identity, to be, as Joris puts it, 'everywhere estranged'.

Notions of displaced identity are not simply promoted as desirable, however. Many of the novel's characters are exiled figures experiencing a breakdown of identity:

there are stories of colonial subjects like Prince Lee Boo and King Cole, and contemporary characters like the Nigerian antiques dealer Iddo Okali, the Canadian Edith Cadiz and the Polish Jew David Rodinsky. Colonialism is a theme that runs through the novel: in the dilapidated imperial nostalgia of the Tilbury docklands where the novel begins and ends, and in their current references to Joseph Conrad and his *Heart of Darkness*. 'And this too was one of the

dark places of the earth,' Sinclair quotes as he looks out over Essex. And it still is, *Downriver* suggests, as the colonialist ransacking of Thatcherite neoliberal capitalism continues to displace communities in its fervour for development opportunities and enterprise ventures.

Sinclair himself might be thought of as a product of colonialism. The

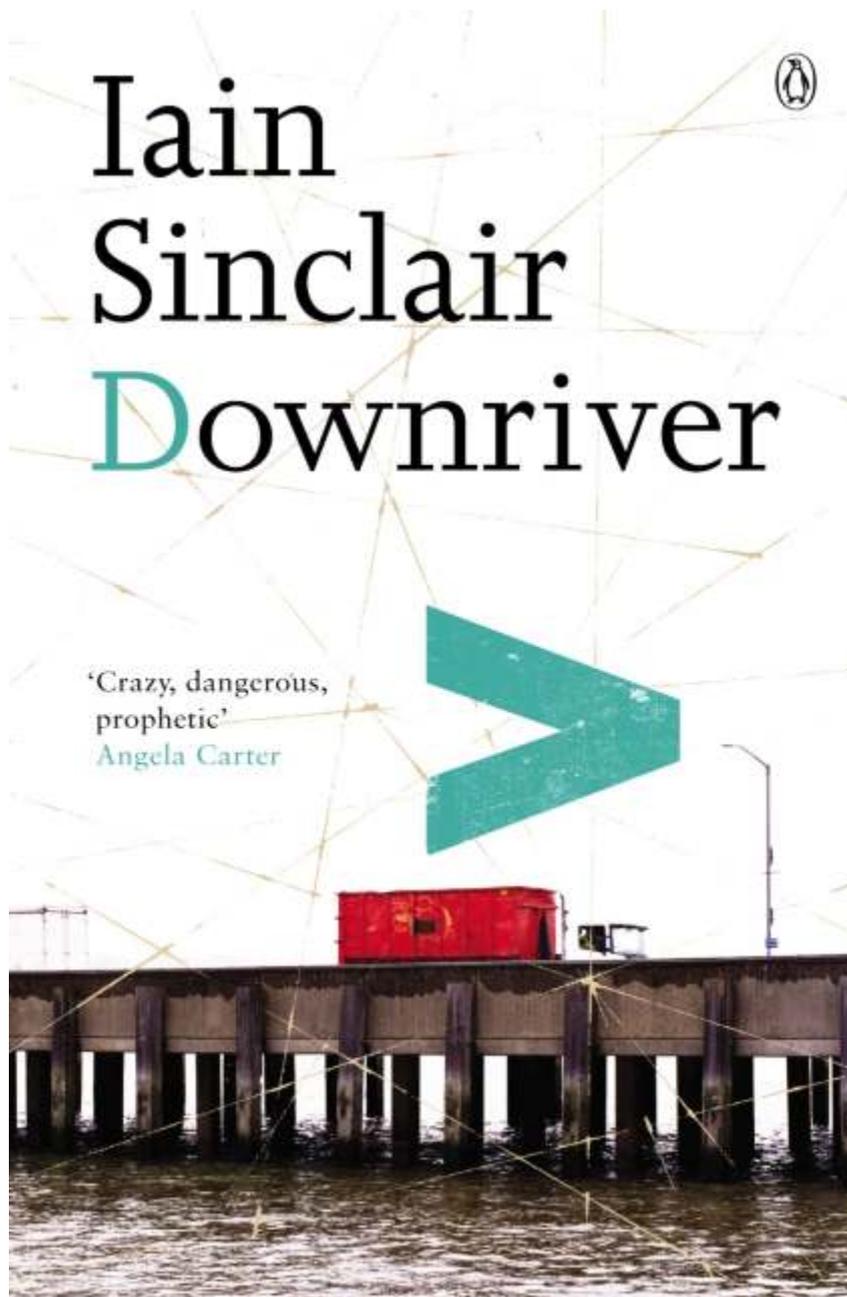
English. As Jeremy Hooker writes of Tony Conran, 'it is clear that he thinks it is better for a writer to respond to the pain inflicted by living on the March [border, frontier] than to rest in complacency on either side of it'. Rather than trying to return to some original sense of roots, as if the colonial displacement had not happened, Sinclair explores the nomadic situation of the postcolonial subject, a permanent exile, always outside or between.

This is reflected in the style of *Downriver*: rather than think of the author as a single, coherent identity who plans what will happen in the novel and then writes it, Sinclair writes as an outsider with unstable, plural identity who gives himself up to the always moving drift of nomadism, so that the drifting becomes the novel.

This is why I want to propose *Downriver* as a great Welsh novel. On the back cover of my Penguin edition there is a quote from Don Anderson from *The Sydney Morning Herald*: 'Not just a great novel, it's the first novel of the twenty-first century.' Written at the end of the Thatcher era and published in the last decade of the previous century, *Downriver* points a way for the Welsh novel in the current century. Though set in London, it is in a sense about Wales: within the capital it conducts a psychogeographical

Welsh-language writer Bobi Jones once referred to Anglo-Welsh writing as the 'colonialist predicament', calling it 'a perversion of normality... a grunt or a cry or an odour rising from a cultural wound of a special kind'. Whereas Jones feels that Welsh people speaking English is a colonial perversion and advocates a return to the 'normality' of the native Welsh, Sinclair is more interested in exploring the nomadic situation *between* Welsh and English, of being both Welsh and

interrogation of the neo-colonial forces that had torn apart communities in Wales and throughout the UK. In this sense *Downriver* can be called a Welsh novel, the Welsh novel outside Wales, writing about Wales by a 'practice of outside'. And in its methods of process, *dérive* and open field, it offers a mobile model for the Welsh novel of the twenty-first century, the tools for a nomadic Welsh novel that can deal with a globalised world.



Cwmardy & We Live by Lewis Jones

by Jon Gower

Cinemascope. Technicolor. Panavision. Full Dolby. If you want movie technique and scope in a novel here's the place to come. Buy some popcorn, then settle back to enjoy Jones's fantastically filmic novels. The former collier who went underground for the first time at the age of twelve, then became a full time worker for the National Unemployed Workers' Movement – now there's an irony – penned books which seemed to say watch this, this is life, pulsing, passionate and problematic. He writes with uncommon brio and panache, although there's always an undertow of anger as he rails against unfairness, inequality and exploitation. Ok, so it's a bit of a cheat to argue for two novels as one, but that is the way they are packaged in the Library of Wales series, so that's my excuse.

Talking to my academic friend Claire Connolly one time we found ourselves discussing Lewis Jones's novels and she introduced me to the term 'sensational realism' and I thought how perfect, how extraordinarily apt.

Cwmardy is nothing if not sensational: it's like one of those Brazilian telenovelas where one action-packed, or emotionally-soaked incident follows on from another and all at a breathless lick. In Jones's blockbuster (the first of two vivid works showing the vibrant, testing lives of people in the coal mining communities around and during the General Strike of 1926) there is hardly a page without something happening, which makes it a page turner comparable to any airport thriller. There are accidents underground, heedless coal barons, thwarted love, militancy, police truncheon charges – and when those don't work soldiers with bayonets – not to mention explosions, unexplained murders and almost nightly fist-fights. It's a tough world, and even a first day at work is not without its terrors. Strike that: it's full of terrors for young Len, the young hero at the heart of the book:

Once inside the cage, Len held his breath and waited. He heard the knocker clang three times, and the tinkling of a bell far away in the engine-house. Then suddenly he felt the floor of the cage press against his feet as it

lifted off the stanchions that held it to the pit-head, and in another second the breath was torn from his lungs by the sudden drop as the cage plunged its way into the depths of the pit.

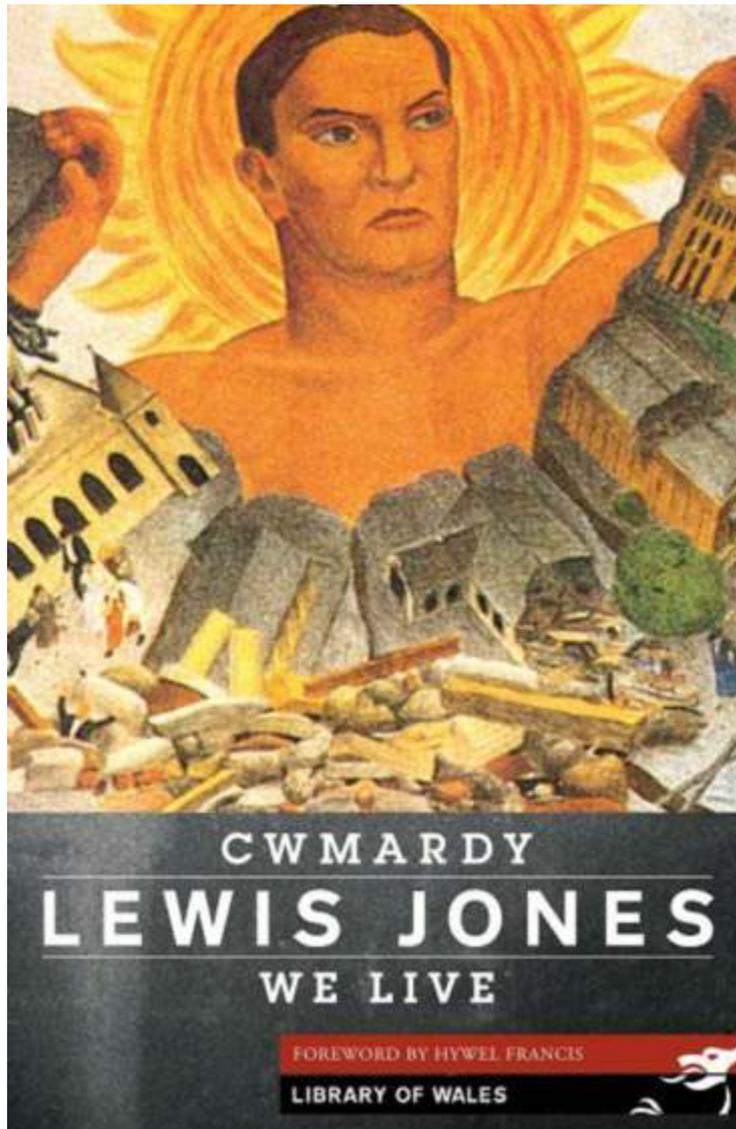
The novel's main focus is Len and his brawling, Boer War veteran father Big Jim and tough-because-she-has-to-be-mother Sian, although there are plenty of other principal characters walking across the Cinemascope screen of the book. There's miners' leader, Ezra, whose ideology finds itself at loggerheads with Communist Len, as he is increasingly drawn into a public roles and speech making on makeshift stages. There's Ezra's daughter Mary, who loves her father so much that she finds herself conflicted when Len courts her and eventually marries her. There's the dastardly Mr. Hicks, overseer of the misery at the pit. And there's the Strike itself, a huge dark character, who can drain the marrow of your bones through nothing more sophisticated than the act of starvation.

Hywel Francis, in his introduction to the books, maintains that Jones, a 'people's remembrancer' who had also contributed actively to the people's chronicle' was 'unique in the political culture of Wales in the twentieth century, standing alongside only Saunders Lewis (and what an intriguing contrast) in combining political activism with literary aspirations and, indeed, with literary achievement.'

Lewis Jones's novels are not without their flaws but they are pre-eminently

readable, often grippingly so, keeping you up at night when good sense is telling you to sleep. The energy that kept him addressing audiences all over the place as he drummed up support for the Spanish Republic, and which probably contributed to his early death at the age of forty-three from a heart attack, is the same energy that galvanizes his books. They are huge slices of life, lived with dignity through so much despair. In that they are DIY manuals, showing us how to live, by telling us how others lived theirs.

If its predecessor volume *Cwmardy* is an example of sensational realism then Lewis Jones's follow-up novel *We Live* dollops out plenty more of the same. Our hero, Len, is



by now a fully committed Communist, and the book, if anything, is about collective struggle, of the workers, the unemployed and their families against the iniquities of the class system, where the coal owners seemingly own the police and the army and also control the justice system. Furthermore, men such as Lord Cwmardy and dastardly mine manager Mr. Higgs are bent on destroying the Federation of Miners, replacing it with a non-political union, and beyond that they are doing their utmost to reduce wages. Individually a worker could feel insignificant, powerless, an ant to be crushed under heel. But standing together, as Len finds out during a mass demonstration, quite the opposite is true:

Len momentarily felt himself like a weak straw drifting in and out with the surge of bodies. Then something powerful swept through his being as the mass soaked its strength into him, and he realized that the strength of them all was the measure of his own, that his existence and power as an individual was buried in that of the mass now pregnant with motion behind him. The momentous thought made him inhale deeply and his chest expanded, throwing his head erect and his shoulders square to the breeze that blew the banners into red rippling slogans of defiance and action. Time and distance were obliterated by the cavalcade of people, whose feet made the roads invisible.

Despite the strength offered by such solidarity it is not enough to dispel the general poverty and suffering which has the whole community in its grip, nowhere more

devastatingly exemplified than in the the tale of shopkeeper John and Maggie who find out their son – well educated despite his parents' poverty – is getting involved with the 'Bolsheviks' and take their own lives: he taking a razor to his wife's throat before hanging himself. Yet this domestic bloodbath, albeit being very affecting, is also an example of one of the book's weaknesses as the consequences of these desperate acts on their son Ron, and on the wider community are barely touched upon.

We Live was not finished by Lewis Jones, but rather, it is believed, by his partner Mavis Llewellyn, so that the final chapters are tenderer and the action switched to the killing fields of the Spanish Civil War. It also details the love between Len and his wife Mary, a relationship based on that between Lewis and Mavis. The change of register and novelistic terrain does not mar the novel, and after so much brutality and suffering, news of Len's death, conveyed in a letter, is delivered with compassion.

His story, and that of his companions and family, is one of light and dark, nowhere more so than when the miners orchestrate a lock-down strike, refusing to come to the surface at the end of a shift. There the darkness is terrifying, 'more dense and heavy than black ink.' The strikers have to fight in the dark, when fellow miners come down to take over, they have to sleep in the blackness and go without food and water. But their indomitable spirit, individually and collectively, eventually wins the day. It is the same indefatigable spirit that imbues Lewis Jones's titanic achievement in shaping the tumultuous, teeming cinematic canvasses of *Cwmardy* and *We Live*.

On the Black Hill by Bruce Chatwin

by Gary Raymond

The story of the Jones boys is the moment of beautiful poignant subtlety and poignancy from a writer who always liked to go big and bold, who was a showman, a *bon vivant*. When Chatwin died in 1989, his funeral was, as someone cheekily noted, the literary equivalent of the Charles and Di wedding. It was 'an event', and Chatwin was a figure who lived to be at the centre of events. There is, of course, the 'scandals' around Chatwin's most famous non-fiction works. How much of his non-fiction writing was authentic and how much was fabricated for effect? His books about Patagonia and Australia, though regarded as highpoints of their form are also looked at with a sideways glance. There are clearly more than blurred lines here, and Chatwin's reputation has always been somewhat dependent on whether you can admire a writer who employed fiction in his non-fiction. We could argue all day about Chatwin's worth as a documentarian, but one thing will be left when the dust settles, and that is his vital prose, his dauntless authorial voice, and, well, his *character*. Chatwin is a writer like few others, whether you like him or not.

And so it is a relief that he managed to contain in his life cut short a moment of his considerable irresistible talent into a book that courts none of that controversy. *On the Black Hill* is the finespun, still novel of a man who had soul at the centre of his bluster and theatrics, who had real heart beneath the Italian silk and Parisian moleskines. It is the life story of Lewis and Benjamin Jones, twins who are born, live and die on their farm, 'The Vision', on the borderlands of Wales and England. In the book Chatwin cuts deep into

a notion of Welshness, of rural isolated living, of an almost Druidic connection to the breathing earth. Although an Englishman, Chatwin is a mighty specimen in the pantheon of outsiders who have taught a culture more than a thing or two about itself. Chatwin looked in and saw a great deal. *On the Black Hill* is a marvellous novel, but it is also a very important one.

We are here in a land full of sharply drawn memorable characters, often of an identifiable Welsh picture of a bygone era. But forget the flashes of *Under Milk Wood*; this is a fully formed narrative that has equally weight and depth, not a series of frivolously compiled snapshots masquerading as a dynamic portrait gallery. There is perhaps the influence of the Cwmdonkin boy in *On the Black Hill*, but Chatwin's novel is unified and enriched with such greater purpose, such towering maturity, compared to the eventual radio play. Here Chatwin is drawing on a grander tradition of World literature – the works of the Russian folkists like Gorky and Turgenev, but also of classic rural English literature. Hannah Jones, the boys' grandmother, not 'an agreeable woman', has a mouth as sharp and twisted as 'a leaf of holly'; Sam the Waggon with the face of a sad clown, 'fifty years of fisticuffs had flattened his nose'; the Reverend Thomas Tuke – 'A tall bony man with a mass of curls, he had a habit of fixing his parishioners with an amber stare before offering them the glory of his profile.' Such incisive writing is typical of a book that doesn't like to linger. Chatwin draws characters often with the one Tolstoyan essence and then allows them their weighty presence in the room.

On the Black Hill carries its forefathers extremely well, and the unlikely humility of Chatwin in its composition makes for a warm but still weighty read. The prose resonates out from the pages. In here is Lawrence and Hardy, the watermarks of great rural English literature, and also flashes of the gods, Tolstoy and Eliot. But the framework of the novel is cinematic as well as literary. Chatwin creates a masterpiece of temporal flow, giving over entire chapters to snits of time, whereas whole years will pass within a subclause of a trailing sentence. Structurally, the novel is quite simply perfect.

Emotionally engaging, structurally perfect, and prosaically endearing and impressive – what of its *Welshness*? The book has pre-Raphaelite mysticism to it – a Holman Hunt engraving hangs in the farmhouse and watches over much of the action – that enhances Chatwin’s ideas on Welshness. *On the Black Hill* is a book about people to whom the ‘world of men’ is at most an irrelevance. There is a crackling sense of the old world – the old world the Romantics looked to, as well as the one nostalgia gives to us. Wars go on away from here – after the boys bury their mother, her memory unites them, removed as they are from the fact that ‘Europe was in flames’. One of the final images of the book is of Meg the Rock, neighbour to the Jones boys, a demented figure to the encroaching civilised world, as, tattered and caked in mud, she

whispers to the creatures of the wood. There is more heart in the observation of Meg than there is in the new video game that has appeared in the local pub, there is more heart, essentially, in what is being lost. Of course, Meg, like the Jones boys, will never be won over, they will be built around. And if you’d like to read one of the dichotomies of the novel as of that between Wales and England, then Chatwin’s message becomes even more interesting.

That Wales and England come up against each other here is obvious – The Vision, the farm where the Jones Boys live for their eighty-odd years, is bisected by the border of Hereford and Radnorshire. Lewis and Benjamin, connected almost telepathically at times, are also to an extent mirror opposites. They come to be defined as individuals entirely on what differentiates them from each

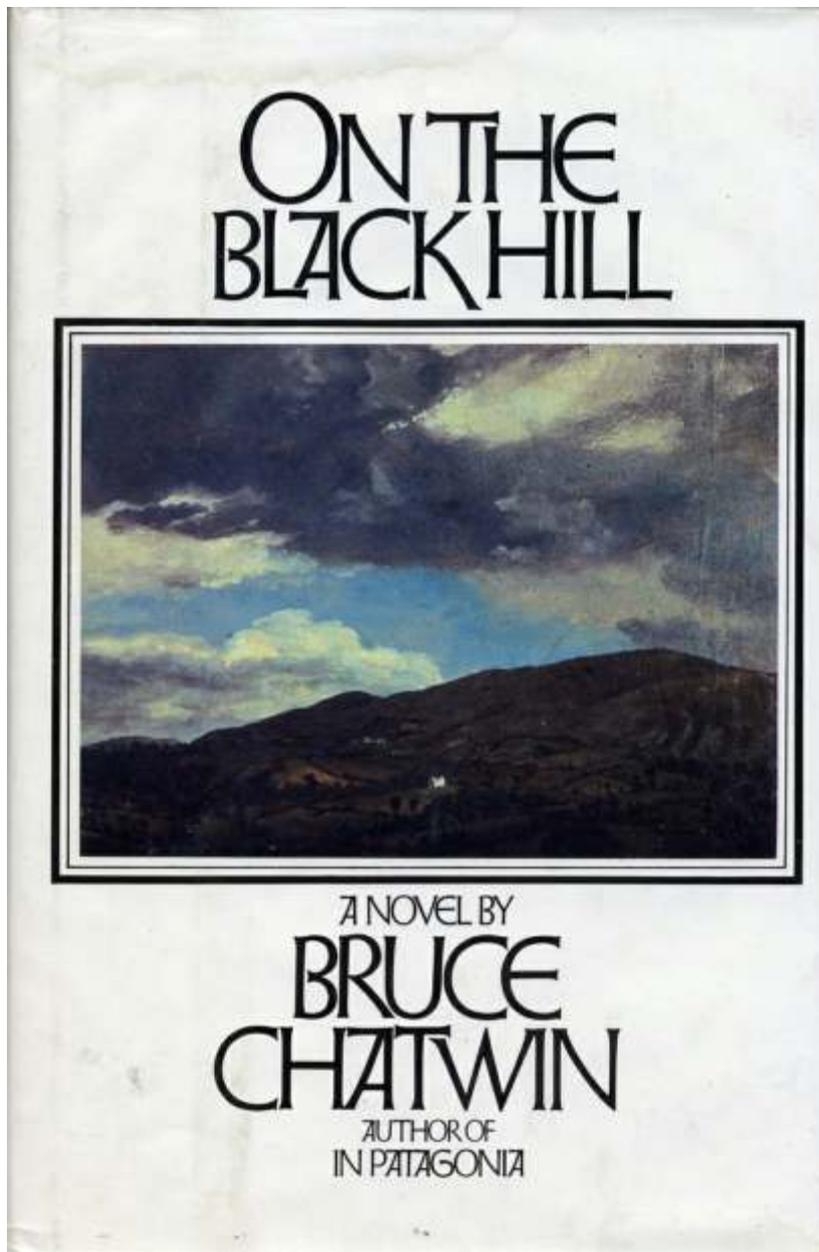
other, not by what they solely encompass. Apart from those instances they are the same, they move as one and even share dreams and wounds. Benjamin and Lewis are like earth-myth versions of Vonnegut’s Wilbur and Eliza, the giant genius twins who live in the ruins of the Empire State Building in *Slapstick* (1976). But whereas Wilbur and Eliza, who share a brain but use separate sides, represent a garish satire on science and art, Lewis and Benjamin are the push and pull of nation neighbours who may spend a

great deal of time resenting one another, but are too tightly entwined to ever be wrought apart.

All around the static journey of the Jones boys are fascinating cameos – other characters and the potential of their own stories splay outward from the pages – Chatwin observes his characters as the astute do the passing of strangers in life. And with just a swift swish of his brush a wider world, a wider Wales, is on show. When Hannah and Amos first purchase the farm, for example, Chatwin notes the previous ‘tenant had died in 1896, leaving an old unmarried sister who had carried on alone until they fetched her to the madhouse.’ Here we have a glimpse at the dangers of seclusion, and also at a moment in time, a suggestion of a story perhaps even more interesting than the one we are presented with. But Lewis and Benjamin will never be left alone to go mad. They have each other.

There are countless other moments. Professor Gethyn-Jones, with his bad breath, coming to get a good price on the books of a dead friend – but does he also have a passing interest in Hannah? Whatever, getting a deal on the books is the priority.

Chatwin, over and over, reminds us that communities are built up of stories, of characters: a communal identity, a national identity, used to be about the sum of its parts, not its television output nor its economy. It was a thing apart from that. The reason why *On the Black Hill* should be considered for the accolade of the Greatest Welsh Novel is because it separates our notions of national identity from crude modernist ideas of commerce, and the crude modernist ideas of commodified tradition. In *On the Black Hill* you will find Wales in all its complexity and colour.



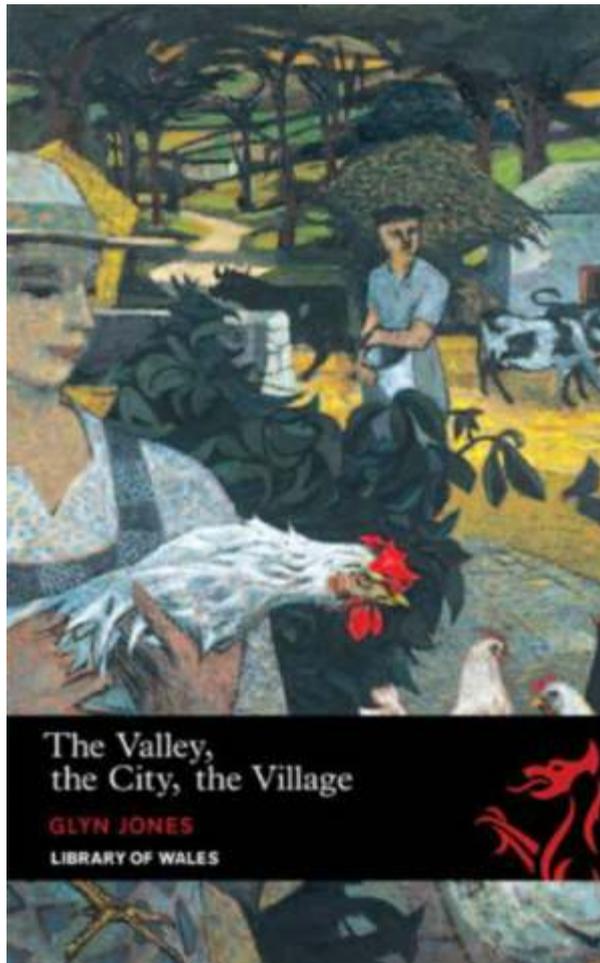
The Valley, The City, The Village by Glyn Jones

by Jon Gower

I remember the novelist Euron Griffith raving about Glyn Jones's *The Valley, the City, the Village* over a pint in Chapter but I didn't get round to reading it despite his paean of praise. More fool me. I had no idea I was missing out on such a fabulous treat, a book which sings, which soars, written in prose that compares easily with Annie Proulx, James Salter, Wells Tower and the like, and scales the same dizzy and dizzying heights. The extravagant, poetic passages come as bravura flourishes, as if the novel – which first appeared in 1956 – has itself been painted and the author had just discovered a palette of colours and pigments that are new to the world. Which is thoroughly appropriate as the main character in this dense, Dickensian and memorably populated novel – with its Anna Ninety-Houses, its Dai the Fan and its big-nosed Auntie Tilda – is Trystan Morgan. He is a wannabe painter who is steered down a more rigid and less rewarding academic path than the one his heart desires.

The novel charts the course of his life, starting with Trystan's early days in his gran's cottage in a mining village in south east Wales. Here he comes under a lot of pressure to become a preacher, when what he really wants to do is paint people rather than save their souls. They say that painters, even the great ones, can never paint hands, but in luminous and tender prose Glyn Jones compares Trystan's hands with those of his grandmother:

They were red and rugged, the hands of a labourer, their knotted erubescence evidenced familiarity with the roughest work, they seemed as though the coarse substances at which she had laboured had become an element of their conformation. Often, when I was older, and knew the meaning of those bony and inflexible fingers, I turned my gaze from them with shame and pity and watched my own painter's hand, culpable, indulged and epicene, as it moved adroitly in the perfect glove of its skin.



The grandmother is just one of the characters extravagantly and vividly drawn in the book, an old lady who can appear almost god-like, 'a tall black figure' which 'seemed to float out of that bonfire as though riding a raft of illumination.' The language employed in creating the vignette of her owes more than a hint of debt to Dylan Thomas, for 'she was my radiant granny, my glossy one, whose harsh fingers lay gently and sweet as a harp hand upon the curls.' But this is not to suggest that Glyn Jones is in any way derivative of the boozy bard: in fact quite the opposite is true as Glyn Jones writes radiant prose that fair shimmers with epiphany and carries an often superior melody. Take this painterly description of a skyscape:

Over our heads as we cooked, large masses of lathery clouds were blown through the blue like frondent soap, silvered and convolved, sloshing vast bucketfuls of brilliant light over our whole mountain. The majestic swimming ridge on the far side of

the wide valley rose convulsively into the sunshine; as I watched I saw it constantly sloughing the teeming cloud-shadows off its head and shoulders.

Jones is not scared of using arcane words and there are passages which carry a fair burden such as 'conventicle', 'vedette' and 'eleutheromania', which can bring to mind the language-scapes of Anthony Burgess at his most showy.

Trystan's time at university finds him introduced to all manner of undergrad nonsense and clubbery, and he finds escape from the ministrations of the likes of academics such as Professor Ailradd, Dr Di Enaid and Professor Anfoesgar in extra-mural art lessons. There he learns to paint pictures with all the heightened sense of colour as that employed in full and rich measure by Glyn Jones, who can weave a tapestry of landscape that is so rich and textured, detailing 'the glowing pastures of suede-smooth emerald; the furzy wool of gold-flecked, gorse-fleeced heathlands; and the chocolate acres under plough, formally embossed with lime in white studs arranged in rows along the tillage.' Trystan fails his exams, falls in love with the wrong woman and brings twin disappointments in their train. He is an artist, and his place in the world is an awkward one. But we are on his side, wanting him to be allowed to create more beauty, find expression.

The Valley, the City, the Village is quite simply an astonishing achievement, moving deftly between a myriad registers of language, offering some breathtakingly bravura passages of prose, and plentiful evidence of a deeply sensitive, organizing intelligence at work.

It is, for me, the discovery of the Library of Wales series. It is a stunning work of art by a gentle, unassuming man I had the good fortune to know. Read it and weep, weeping at the sheer beauty Glyn Jones marshals and arranges, as he fills with luxuriant life every inch of his lush and lovely novel-canvas.