

Pearl

Sian Hughes, 2023. London: The Indigo Press.

Sian Hughes is a Cheshire-based poet who describes herself as a “Writer and Other Things” which includes screenwriting, copywriting, community projects and running her bookshop. She won the Seamus Heaney award for her first poetry collection, *The Missing* (2009).

It is not surprising that this, her first novel, is beautifully written and lyrical with layers of meaning which allow the reader space to mull over and gradually understand the mystery at the heart of the story.

Each chapter begins with a children’s song, many of the type children chant to decide who will be ‘it’ when playing a game:¹

Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me
Went down to the river to bathe.
Adam and Eve were drowned
Who do you think were saved?

Pearl, a late fourteenth-century poem written in Cheshire dialect, was Hughes’ original inspiration.² Beautiful and affecting, a man is expressing his unbearable loss, grief and ‘luflongyng’ (love-longing) for his ‘perle’. While dreaming he sees his child across a river, now an adult figure dressed in white and covered in pearls. He tries to swim across to greet her but is prevented by the ruler of the dream land and told he does not belong there. He wakes up.

Hughes’ novel, while very much in modern idiom, also has a mystical, dream-like quality. It was twenty years in gestation until the spur to creating this final version was the suicide of a close friend, who drowned in a river.

Marianne narrates the story, recalling her mother’s disappearance when she was eight. It is believed to be a suicide, potentially by drowning in a nearby river, but her body was never found. Written in the style of a memoir, the story revolves around the lasting impact of a shocking and unresolved loss. It shows how such an experience can isolate someone, leaving them wordless and trapped in a trauma moment; a fragment of herself suspended in time, as if preserved in aspic.

I bought this book for personal reasons. Partly because she is a local author writing about the area where I now live; her village Tilston in the heart of Cheshire is the location for the novel. Also, curiosity to see how she would write of grief following the suicide of a parent, an event I experienced at the same age. It was only while reading I realised *Pearl* might be of interest to our existential community.

In Tilston they still hold annual wakes, an ancient tradition that involves cleaning the graves and dressing them with rushes. Then they party “revenants on our assorted blankets, sitting on our family graves, the resurrected flesh and bones of our ancestors, wearing their handed-down bad teeth and weak

ankles, passing round the sandwiches and cake”.

The book opens where grown-up Marianne attends a wake with her reluctant teenage daughter, and when thinking about her mother she switches back in time. She relates the story through the child's eyes in a phenomenological descriptive style. She not only explores the very particular impact of suicide on survivors but also brilliantly captures what it may be like for a child; how looks and words from adults can be alarming and misunderstood, how a sense of disgrace, shame and need for silence can take over. And then, how overwhelming feelings of guilt and regret may play out as her life goes on. Guilt? Because children often think such shocking events are their fault and, because it cannot be talked about, this remains unexpressed and unquestioned.

I went to a local book group event where Sian and *Pearl* were the focus. This helped with my review in some ways and not in others! I usually stay away from external input when in reviewing mode, but some interesting and amusing stuff was elicited by questions from the floor.

There is a chapter about a visit to a gypsy camp, crucial to the story, which was nearly removed due to fears of the publisher's legal team. Sian stood her ground because she wanted her girl-heroine to receive a gift which would help move her along towards healing. It was an old gypsy woman who saw the goodness in Marianne and gave her back a new version of herself quite different from the self-hating guilty child. Hard to accept from a stranger but would have been impossible from someone in her own family or community; even so it takes a long time before this begins to bear fruit. We all may experience moments like this, chance encounters that are such amazing gifts.

Sian's own mother believed in ghosts, but not Sian. However, the very unlikely event of reaching the Booker long-list, via her tiny publishing company (so small they are only allowed one Booker submission) did lead to a light-hearted suggestion that maybe her mother's ghost played a part. She does, however, believe in traces of the dead person in the scents, foods and songs associated with them and such ghostly mementos of the lost parent are wound into the story.

Marianne's mother disappeared on an ordinary afternoon. She had fed the baby and gone upstairs for a rest. Marianne “did something quietly so as not to disturb”. The home help was there, she remembers seeing her brown stocking tops when she bends over. She remembers the policemen, the younger one had spots on his neck. Her memories are disjointed, a blur of blanks and confusion. She returns to this seminal afternoon many times tormenting herself with ‘what ifs’.

As the story continues, Marianne sinks into increasingly self-destructive behaviour. It starts with not going to school. Instead, she stays at home looking for answers in her mother's books; especially tantalising are margin notes in a copy of *Pearl*, and particularly a single word ‘CONSOLATIO’ with the last

letter missing, but she cannot understand the language and answers remain elusive. Later we realise she has become anorectic although it is never named, and she becomes caught up with a ‘friend’ who is anything but. She goes to art college and tries to create a work that explains the story of Pearl through a series of illustrations, collages made from found objects. She had the walled garden, the herb beds, the child’s grave, the walk to the river and the dreamer. But she cannot make it hang together or capture the meaning.

Gradually the adult voice of Marianne starts to enter her thoughts so things the child has said start to be reassessed by her adult, more knowing, self, saying “but it can’t have been like that because...” memories not tying in with time-lines. So, the narrative expands, certainties start to unravel as they can do when we open our minds to alternatives. Towards the end the voices of the other two family ‘survivors’ become more present, their characters filled out, no longer just players in Marianne’s story. Her father – who has been holding down his job, caring for his children and keeping the family together while also struggling, deeply affected by guilt and grief – emerges as a hero. Her brother, a baby when their mother disappeared, whose different take on things provides an alternative perspective that helps the others move on.

Eventually an earlier loss in the family is revealed, the original Pearl of this story, and so it is as Marianne tells the midwife, after the birth of her own daughter, there isn’t a family history of post-partum psychosis “Only grief. There’s a family history of grief. You can pass it on. Like immunity, in the milk. Like a song.”

It is a sad tale but also finally uplifting. Although dark there are moments of humour and lightness. And eventually some resolution and acceptance and a new way forward. In the poem the narrator finds a path to redemption through his faith, Marianne through understanding, love, and an act of imagination.

*Green peas, mutton pies,
Tell me where my mother lies.
I’ll be there before she dies,
Green peas, mutton pies.*

Diana Pringle

Footnotes

1. Some of these rhymes are very old and dark, for example *Ring a Ring o’ Roses* refers to the symptoms and eventual death (‘we all fall down’) caused by bubonic plague.
2. *Pearl*, set in Cheshire, is considered one of the most important surviving Middle English works. Simon Armitage, Oxford Professor of Poetry, published a new translation in 2015.