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Owen Sheers

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Drawing from two medieval Welsh manuscripts with roots dating back many centuries earlier, this series of 11 stories sheds light on Celtic mythology and Arthurian romance while providing a new perspective on Great Britain itself. From enchantment and shapeshifting to the age-old dichotomies of conflict versus peacemaking and love versus betrayal, all of these tales are uniquely reinvented, creating fresh, contemporary narratives that portray the real world as much as they depict the past.

Based on the fable of Branwen, Daughter of Llyr, this interpretation revives one of the most action-packed stories in the whole myth cycle. Moving this bloodthirsty tale of Welsh and Irish power struggles and family tensions into the 21st century, this retelling retains many of the bizarre and magical happenings of the original. After being wounded in Italy, Matthew O'Connell is seeing out WWII in an obscure government department, spreading rumors and myths to the enemy. When he is assigned the bizarre task of escorting a box containing six raven chicks from a remote hill farm to the Tower of London, he soon finds himself ensnared in an adventure that leaves him powerless.

White Ravens Details

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From Reader Review White Ravens for online ebook

David Smith says

An interesting and emotive modern retelling of the Second Branch of Y Mabinogi.

Andrew says

Owen Sheers is one of those writers you probably haven't read, but definitely should. He's the author of dozens of novels, works of poetry and plays – and he's only just turned 40. This was my first taste of his writing.

'White Ravens' is part of a series of re-workings of the Welsh medieval epic, the Mabinogion, commissioned by publisher Seren (Sheers is Welsh). One of the persistent themes in his work is the effect of violence on the human psyche - he's worked extensively with soldiers returned from the Gulf Wars. 'White Ravens', set between the present day and the Second World War, deals with the same themes.

It is loosely based around the true story of Winston Churchill's belief that the ravens in the Tower of London must be maintained at all costs to ensure that the British Isles remain protected. In the best epic tradition, Sheers creates stories within stories, conjuring up a world that oscillates between a secret government department in London and a remote hill farm in Wales. Sheers' remarkable achievement is to make the story at once believable and magical.

By the bloody conclusion to the book, we're left in no doubt as to the stark reality: violence begets violence. But there's another message - whatever our background, we all have a choice: we can be part of that violence, or we can 'be a bridge' and break the cycle.

The writing is exceptional, and the pacing excellent. The Afterword gives a fascinating insight into the importance of leaping across the boundaries of logic and making unseen connections in the imaginative process.

Lynne says

Modern re-working of the Second Branch of the Mabinogion tale of Branwen and Bendigeidfran set in two different times but linked by the main narrative. Sheers' story opens with Rhian, a disenchanted young woman trapped with her two brothers on a remote Welsh farm. Following the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001, the brothers turn to sheep stealing and persuade their sister to drive their illicit cargo to London. Sickened by the sight of the debris left from the illegal butchering, Rhian takes refuge in the Tower of London and meets an elderly man who offers to tell her a story. He speaks of Irishman Matthew O'Connell, entrusted to bring six raven chicks to the Tower during WW2 from a distant Welsh farm. Anyone familiar with the original myth will recognise the story of Branwen, and Sheers makes no pretence of changing the names of his retelling, primarily as there is no need. Written with his usual lyrical poise, there are, at times some scenes of shocking animal cruelty which again echo the violence of the original. Being familiar with

the original, I skipped these.

A surprisingly quick read, this is part of Seren Books' series on reworking the Mabinogion, published a few years ago. Other writers involved include Nial Griffiths; I should imagine that would be VERY different from this :-)

Sandra says

I have always preferred my stories to be rooted in reality, consequently myths and legends have contributed very little to my reading. It is, therefore, a pleasure to read an updated version of a Welsh one, and equally fascinating to read Owen Sheers' - a writer I have read before and much enjoyed - account of how he brought ancient to modern; what spoke to him about the old and his interpretations and garnering of more recent incidents to support the story he wanted to tell.

Nikki says

Seren's series of retold stories from the Mabinogion is a fascinating endeavour, and even though I didn't really feel very enthusiastic about the first one, I was ready to try this one. I'm glad I did, because I enjoyed the way Sheers picked out the themes of the original story that resonated with him and made a companion story, an echo, that evokes them for his readers.

White Ravens is well written and easy to read, and it could only be more Welsh if someone promised to do something now in a minute, or told someone that what they're looking for is over by there.

(Which reminds me of the I Loves the 'Diff cards, which are hilarious, but make sense only to people familiar with Wales. "Llanishen Impossible" is my favourite.)

Lee says

I should probably say right up front that I wrote a dissertation on the Mabinogion last year (although on the Fourth Branch, rather than the Second), and therefore have Strong Opinions on it. That should probably be a standard disclaimer on most medieval-based stuff I review, to be honest. *Branwen* has never been my favourite Branch - I like *Pwyll* for having vaguely non-horrible characters, and *Math* for having a set of entirely amoral bastards for protagonists, but with Branwen, the poor girl just spends the entire story being kicked around by her brother and her husband and having terrible things happen to everyone she loves until she dies of a broken heart, and who can blame her?

So actually, I like this modern retelling rather better than the original. At least Branwen finally gets to have her own voice for once! And Efnysien/Evan's actions have some explanation rather than being a pure act of disproportionate spite. The thing I didn't like was that as soon as I figured out who everyone was meant to be, it was entirely obvious what was going to happen - even down to the 'twists' that linked the Matthew/Branwen story to the framing story. I was enjoying the framing story much more than the Branwen one, to be honest, so I'm sad we didn't get told what finally happened between Rhian and her brothers.

So yes, it was kind of predictable, but that's pretty much expected with modern retellings. What really got me was when Ben gave Matthew a copy of the Mabinogion and was like 'You should probably read the Second Branch before you marry my, Bendigeidfran's, sister, Branwen. Just a thought.' And Matthew didn't! Not until everything had gone to hell in a handcart, and while it may be believable that in a rushed wedding he wouldn't have had time, and then in a miserable marriage he wouldn't have wanted to, it was so immensely frustrating to know that this guy had a roadmap of exactly how everything was going to go down sitting next to him the whole time and he never once looked at it! Rage.

I just don't know, with this book. It didn't sweep me away with poetic beauty, which is what I'm usually looking for with mythologish books - there was too much grim reality for that, which is fine in its way, but not what I was looking for, and then on top of that, it was overly predictable, but there were some lovely bits, like basically any time Ben talked about ravens, so overall... Eh.

Miriam says

I'll have to reread the Mabinogion first, as I can only recall the few most well-known tales.

Jane says

I was very taken with the first of a series of short works published by Seren Books, retelling the stories of The Mabinogion for twenty-first century ears. And so I tracked down this, the second.

A short work yes, but there is much going on. Stories wrapped about stories, stories wrapped around stories, rich with themes and ideas. And at the centre is a striking modern take on the original story.

But let's start at the beginning:

“Let me tell you something. If you wanted to curse someone, I don't know why you would, but if you did, if you wanted to make their life hard, if you wanted to leave them as vulnerable to grief as possible, I reckon you could do a lot worse than make them a woman in a house of men.”

It's quite a start. Rhian grew up on a Welsh hill farm and she had hopes and dreams. Her parents both died and she found herself pulled away from her friend and tied to her brothers and the family farm. A farm that would be decimated by foot and mouth. Rhian's brothers take to sheep rustling: taking sheep from the hillside, butchering them in the back of their van on the road to London, and selling the meat to London restaurants.

The writing pull you in and takes you with Rhian as she finally reaches breaking point and runs away, leaving her bloodstained brothers in an alley, counting out their profits.

At the Tower of London she meet an old man who begins to tell her a story. A story set many years earlier, during the war. A very different story that I every bit as gripping, every bit a intriguing as what came before.

Superstition has it that if ravens leave the Tower of London the tower will crumble and disaster will befall

England. But how could the ravens survive the Blitz with bomb raining down on the city of London? How could disaster be averted?

The true story, that I had never even considered until I found it here, and the fictional account are both fascinating.

But they aren't the main event.

A young man named Matthew was sent to Wales to bring ravens back to the tower. There he meets a woman, Branwen, and their story will echo the much older story of Bran and Branwen that is recorded in the The Mabinogion.

The story is poetic, powerful and dramatic. Themes echo from the old legend, through the framing story to the contemporary retelling. And it works beautifully because the human emotions at its heart are utterly real.

I was so captivated by the wonderful storytelling that it was only when I read the fitting final words that I realised quite how much this little book had held.

My anticipation for the next two installments in this series, due to be published this month could not be higher.

Jade Quarrell says

This is part of a series of retelling Welsh myths published by a company that specialises in English language Welsh authors (niche?).

It was a really good short book- very clear strong voice. Excellent characters and a feeling of events repeated or connected through time. Its set after WW2 and makes reference to the way people are changed by war. I don't know any Welsh myths so as well as enjoying the story I enjoyed the telling of the myth summarised at the back for those of us who lack culture.

Bill Tillman says

Still reading, first impression. A Wizard of Wales, a story teller with a subtle pen for a wand. Owen Sheers has a rare talent. Like a Florida gator is both ancient and today. On page 66 this Welsh gator closed his jaws on my leg, it wasn't painful it was delightful. Seren commissioned eleven Welsh writers to do some retelling of the national treasure 'The Mabinogion'. Theme keep these old tales at the heart of a new story.

I know I'm bait by page 73 where Sheers throws a splendid Welsh bomb at me. [['E couldn' come' the boy said, cutting Matthew's search short. "E said a 'e wouldn't be wastin' any petrol on some Londoner. 'E said as yer can have a 'orse 'stead, 'cos an 'orse is good enough for every one else, so its as good enough for yew.':]]

Lee Razer says

An acceptable re-imagining of a medieval Welsh myth, the Second Branch of the Mabinogion, in which the Welsh princess Branwen is given to the Irish king Matholwch, whose mistreatment of her results in a war leaving only seven men alive to repopulate Ireland. This version, in which an old man in the present day tells a story from WWII to a young woman, putting me in mind of *The Princess Bride*, leaves out the genocide and royalty but translates the rest pretty effectively. Unfortunately the first 50ish pages are used to set up the young woman's part in the "reveal" at the end which dumbs down the myth's story by trying to too literally neatly present the reader with an Important Moral Lesson. However the main purpose of this series seems to be to spread knowledge of the stories of the Mabinogion outside of Wales, and that this book did, for which I'm glad. Probably better just to read the original though.

latner3 says

A re-interpretation of the Second Branch myth from the Mabinogion. A story of love and violence and the way passion connects them. Captivating wonderful storytelling.
'Llawn yw'r coed o ddail a blode,/Llawn iawn o gariad ydwf inne.'

Andrea Dowd says

Fascinating stories interwoven between myth, family myth, and present day family pathos. I had never really delved into Welsh mythology and this take on a Welsh myth has made me interested in digging a little more into this realm and continue reading this collection of re-told tales.

"White Ravens" is a quick read and yes, it is a little dark, but well worth it.

Nick Davies says

The idea of commissioning modern adaptations of the ancient folk tales of the Mabinogion is a fascinating one, and certainly in Sheers' capable hands this results in a powerfully plotted and beautifully told novella inspired by '*Branwen, Daughter of Llyr*'

It's a thought-provoking tale of family and how people react to the stresses of change, war, death etc. I also found the author's discussion of his inspiration in the appendices to be enlightening. When so well-formed as this, the novella can be a powerful format - there's almost a resonance of the early oral tradition about this for certain.

Marie Bouteille says

I cried throughout the book and it left me shaken up. I was bewitched. It is beautifully written. I had never heard of the Mabinogion and it makes me want to read it. I liked that that the story about Branwen, daughter of Llyr was summed up at the end so one can see how the old is woven into the new.
