

Introduction

by Robert Macfarlane

LET ME tell you a story about the first time I read these astonishing novels. It was the hot summer of 1989 – the summer I turned thirteen, the summer the Berlin Wall was torn down, and the summer I began to believe that the world might *just* escape being destroyed by nuclear war before I had a chance to grow up. A momentous few months. But the *really* big events of that summer for me were these five books. I read them one after the other, gulping them down in big greedy swallows like cold water after a long walk. I truly did read parts of them under my blankets by the light of a torch (a black mini-Maglite; I was very proud of it). Their titles glowed in my mind – *Over Sea, Under Stone*, *The Dark is Rising*, *Greenwitch*, *The Grey King*, *Silver on the Tree* – and set my spine tingling for reasons I couldn't explain then, and still can't explain now. The landscapes in

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which their stories unfolded – Cornish coves and headlands, Welsh mountains, the copses, fields and pathways of southern England – were at once utterly familiar to me, and profoundly alien. Their characters – tall Merriman, capable of such calmness and such wrath; wise Will Stanton; Bran the Pendragon; horned Herne – entered my imagination and have simply never left.

Soon I came to learn by heart – as I suspect you will also learn by heart – the chant that echoes through these books. Once heard, it is not easily forgotten: ‘When the Dark comes rising, six shall turn it back; / three from the circle, three from the track . . .’ This is a spell-song against harm, and it is sung – incanted – to keep evil at bay. Even now, when I am out walking on my own I sometimes find it looping in my head, such that my feet start to keep pace with its rhythms: ‘Wood, bronze, iron; water, fire, stone; / Five will return, and one go alone . . .’ I taught it to my two older children one autumn day nearly ten years ago, as we followed an old path through wet woods hung with yellow leaves. And then a few years after that I named my youngest son Will, because . . . well, you’ll know why when you’ve read the books.

As is often the way when you encounter art of huge power, I at first felt absurdly possessive of these five novels. I was jealous of other people who’d read them – don’t you know these are *all mine*?! – and it

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was inconceivable to me that anyone else could have responded to them as strongly as I had. Now, of course, I know that I am only one among millions of readers of all ages whose imaginations have been deeply shaped by this sequence. These are not books for children – they are books for people. When I meet fellow fans, I often find us trading favourite lines or phrases from the novels, or completing one another’s quote, like spies swapping passcodes: ‘*This night will be bad . . . and tomorrow will be beyond imagining.*’ Each year around the world on Midwinter Eve, thousands of people – young and old – begin an annual re-read of *The Dark is Rising*. It is to them a ritual of winter as much as Christmas, a means of marking the shortest day, the turn of the year’s tide and the beginning of light’s slow flow back.

Speaking aloud is very important in these books. Words hold force when given voice. You must watch what you say. Objects and places, too, carry auras and the ability to shape human destinies. Cliffs and crags and caves here *feel* and *see*; not in the anthropomorphic manner of Tolkien’s talking trees, but in stranger, quieter, older ways. The landscapes of these novels have watched humans arrive, and they will eventually watch them leave, once the great struggles are over. Through all this move children: brave, curious and resourceful, not always beyond corruption or error, wrestling with wisdom they do not fully comprehend, trammelled

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often by the idiocy or malice of adults, and taking action in the name of what they perceive to be good.

Not long ago, I was lucky enough to spend a few hours with Susan Cooper. People say ‘Never meet your heroes’, but of course she was as wise and sharp and funny as Merriman in his best moods. She is, unmistakably, an Old One. Susan now lives on a small island in a saltmarsh in Massachusetts, on America’s Atlantic coast. But she was born in Buckinghamshire in southern England, four years before the start of the Second World War. On the evening we spent together, she told me how, when the Germans began to bomb England in 1940, an air-raid shelter was dug in the back garden of her house, and covered over with corrugated iron and tamped earth. Whenever a warning siren sounded that the bombers were coming, her mother would hurry Susan and her brother out of the back door and down into the shelter. There she would put a match to a candle – and by the light of its flame she would tell stories to the children to take their minds off the danger around them. What Susan recalled – and here is the detail that lifted the hairs on the back of my neck – was that as the bombs fell, their detonations would cause the candle-flame to quiver. The nearer the explosion, the more the flame would shake. Boom . . . shiver . . . *Boom . . . shiver . . . Boom! Shiver!*

People have been telling stories to each other around fires of one kind or another for tens of thousands of

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years. Susan learned the power of storytelling in the air-raid shelter as bombs fell around her. I read her books by torchlight, and they helped me cope with the panic I felt almost every day at the possibility of nuclear conflict. Now new fears – climate breakdown, civil wars, mass extinction – menace the minds of children. The dark is always rising, and the work of the greatest stories is to hold it back.

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Although all the characters in this book are fictitious, the places are real. I have however taken certain liberties with the geography of the Dysynni Valley and Tal y Llyn, and there are no real farms where I have made Clwyd, Prichard's and Ty-Bont stand.

The Brenin Llwyd I did not invent.

I am grateful to the Rev. Kenneth Francis, Mr J. L. Jones and Mrs Eira Crook for kindly checking my Welsh.

*On the day of the dead, when the year too dies,
Must the youngest open the oldest hills
Through the door of the birds, where the breeze breaks.
There fire shall fly from the raven boy,
And the silver eyes that see the wind,
And the Light shall have the harp of gold.*

*By the pleasant lake the Sleepers lie,
On Cadfan's Way where the kestrels call;
Though grim from the Grey King shadows fall,
Yet singing the golden harp shall guide
To break their sleep and bid them ride.*

*When light from the lost land shall return,
Six Sleepers shall ride, six Signs shall burn,
And where the midsummer tree grows tall
By Pendragon's sword the Dark shall fall.*

Y maent yr mynyddoedd yn canu,
ac y mae'r arglwyddes yn dod.

PROLOGUE

‘ARE YOU awake, Will? Will? Wake up, it’s time for your medicine, love . . .’

The face swung like a pendulum, to and fro; rose high up in a pink blur; dropped again; divided into six pink blurs, all of them spinning madly like wheels. He closed his eyes. He could feel sweat cold on his forehead, panic cold in his mind. *I’ve lost it. I’ve forgotten!* Even in darkness the world spun round. There was a great buzzing in his head like rushing water, until for a moment the voice broke through it again.

‘Will! Just for a moment, wake up . . .’

It was his mother’s voice. He knew, but could not focus. The darkness whirled and roared. *I’ve lost something. It’s gone. What was it! It was terribly important, I must remember it, I must!* He began to struggle, reaching for consciousness, and a long way off heard himself groan.

‘Here we go.’ Another voice. The doctor. A firm arm, propping his shoulders; cold metal at his lips, a liquid tipped deftly down his throat. Automatically he swallowed. The world wildly spun. Panic came flooding again. A few faint words flashed through his mind and away like a snatch of music; his memory clutched, grasping – ‘*On the day of the dead* –’

Mrs Stanton stared down anxiously at the white face, the dark-smudged closed eyes, the damp hair. ‘What did he say?’

Suddenly Will sat upright, eyes wide and staring. ‘*On the day of the dead* –’ He looked at her, pleading, without recognition. ‘That’s all I can remember! It’s gone! There was something I had to remember, a thing I had to do, it mattered more than anything and I’ve lost it! I’ve forgotten –’ His face crumpled and he dropped back helplessly, tears running down his cheeks. His mother leaned over him, her arms round him, murmuring soothingly as if he were a baby. In a few moments he began to relax, and to breathe more easily. She looked up in distress.

‘Is he delirious?’

The doctor shook his head, his round face compassionate. ‘No, he’s past that. Physically, the worst is over. This is more like a bad dream, an hallucination – though he may indeed have lost something from his memory. The mind can be very much bound up with the health of the body, even in children . . . Don’t worry.

The Grey King

He'll sleep now. And every day will be better from now on.'

Mrs Stanton sighed, stroking her youngest son's damp forehead. 'I'm very grateful. You've come so often – there aren't many doctors who –'

'Poof, poof,' said little Dr Armstrong briskly, taking Will's wrist between finger and thumb. 'We're all old friends. He was a very, very sick boy for a while. Going to be limp for a long time, too – even youngsters don't bounce back from this kind of thing very fast. I'll be back, Alice. But anyway, bed for at least another week, and no school for a month after that. Can you send him away somewhere? What about that cousin of yours in Wales, who took Mary at Easter?'

'Yes, he could go there. I'm sure he could. It's nice in October, too, and the sea air . . . I'll write to them.'

Will moved his head on the pillow, muttering, but did not wake.

PART ONE

The Golden Harp

THE OLDEST HILLS

HE REMEMBERED Mary had said, ‘They all speak Welsh, most of the time. Even Aunt Jen.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Will.

‘Don’t worry,’ his sister said. ‘Sooner or later they switch to English, if they see you’re there. Just remember to be patient. And they’ll be extra kind because of your having been ill. At least they were to me, after my mumps.’

So now Will stood patiently alone on the windy grey platform of the small station of Tywyn, in a thin drizzle of October rain, waiting while two men in the navy-blue railway uniform argued earnestly in Welsh. One of them was small and wizened, gnome-like; the other had a soft, squashy look, like a man made of dough.

The gnome caught sight of Will. ‘*Beth sy’n bod?*’ he said.

‘Er – excuse me,’ Will said. ‘My uncle said he’d meet me off the train, in the station yard, but there’s no one outside. Could you tell me if there’s anywhere else he might have meant?’

The gnome shook his head.

‘Who’s your uncle, then?’ enquired the soft-faced man.

‘Mr Evans, from Bryn-Crug. Clwyd Farm,’ Will said.

The gnome chuckled gently. ‘David Evans will be a bit late, boy *bach*. You have a nice dreamer for an uncle. David Evans will be late when the Last Trump sounds. You just wait a while. On holiday, is it?’ Bright dark eyes peered inquisitively into his face.

‘Sort of. I’ve had hepatitis. The doctor said I had to come away to convalesce.’

‘Ah!’ The man nodded his head sagely. ‘You look a bit peaky, yes. Come to the right place, though. The air on this coast is very relaxing, they say, very relaxing. Even at this time of year.’

A clattering roar came suddenly from beyond the ticket office, and through the barrier Will saw a mud-streaked Land Rover drive into the yard. But the figure that came bounding out of it was not that of the small neat farmer he vaguely remembered; it was a wiry, gangling young man, jerkily thrusting out his hand.

‘Will, is it? Hallo. Da sent me to meet you. I’m Rhys.’

‘How do you do.’ Will knew he had two grown-up Welsh cousins, old as his oldest brothers, but he had never set eyes on either of them.

The Grey King

Rhys scooped up his suitcase as if it had been a matchbox. ‘This all you have? Let’s be off, then.’ He nodded to the railwaymen. ‘*Sut ’dach chi?*’

‘*Iawn diolch,*’ said the gnome. ‘Caradog Prichard was asking for you or your father, round about, this morning. Something about dogs.’

‘A pity you haven’t seen me at all, today,’ Rhys said.

The gnome grinned. He took Will’s ticket. ‘Get yourself healthy now, young man.’

‘Thank you,’ Will said.

Perched up in the front of the Land Rover, he peered out at the little grey town as the windscreen wipers tried in vain, twitch-creak, twitch-creak, to banish the fine misty rain from the glass. Deserted shops lined the little street, and a few bent figures in rain-coats scurried by; he saw a church, a small hotel, more neat houses. Then the road was widening and they were out between trim hedges, with open fields beyond, and green hills rising against the sky: a grey sky, featureless with mist. Rhys seemed shy; he drove with no attempt at talking – though the engine made so much noise that conversation would have been hard in any case. Past gaggles of silent cottages they drove, the boards that announced VACANCY or BED AND BREAKFAST swinging forlornly now that most of the holiday visitors were gone.

Rhys turned the car inland, towards the mountains, and almost at once Will had a strange new feeling of

enclosure, almost of menace. The little road was narrow here, like a tunnel, with its high grass banks and looming hedges like green walls on either side. Whenever they passed the gap where a hedge opened to a field through a gate, he could see the green-brown bulk of hillsides rearing up at the grey sky. And ahead, as bends in the road showed open sky briefly through the trees, a higher fold of grey hills loomed in the distance, disappearing into ragged cloud. Will felt that he was in a part of Britain like none he had ever known before: a secret, enclosed place, with powers hidden in its shrouded centuries at which he could not begin to guess. He shivered.

In the same moment, as Rhys swung round a tight corner towards a narrow bridge, the Land Rover gave a strange jerking leap and lurched down to one side, towards the hedge. Braking hard, Rhys hauled at the wheel and managed to stop at an angle that seemed to indicate one wheel was in the ditch.

‘Damn!’ he said with force, opening the door.

Will scrambled after him. ‘What happened?’

‘There is what happened.’ Rhys pointed a long finger at the nearside front wheel, its tyre pressed hopelessly flat against a rock jutting from the hedge. ‘Just look at that. Ripped it right open, and so thick those tyres are, you would never think . . .’ His light, rather husky voice was high with astonishment.

‘Was the rock lying in the road?’