

Writer Mari Ellis Dunning often explores the themes of Wales and “Welshisms” in her work, stemming from her time across the border and missing her homeland

FEELING landlocked and yearning for home, I put pen to paper and saw the scene unfold before me. A girl, older than her years and running along the shoreline searching for her brother. She was calling for him, wanting to bring him home for supper, but more so, just to bring him home, to unite her family.

Having moved temporarily from Wales to Gloucester about seven months prior to penning the piece, I was desperately missing the grey sea of Barry Island, where my parents live and walk the dogs every day in winter, as well as the stunning coastline of Aberystwyth, where I had spent the previous four years studying and had once seen a dolphin’s fin breaking the water’s surface. The story, which I called “Cartref”, won first prize in this year’s Terry Hetherington Young Writers Award, and has been published in Parthian’s new anthology, Cheval 9, which includes work by a wide variety of talented young writers.

Not long before this series of events, I had been published in another of Parthian’s anthologies, How to Exit a Burning Building, a collection produced following the success of the Robin Reeves Prize 2015. The poem, which won third place, was called Fy Iai and was a piece about Welsh heritage and what I like to call “Welshisms”.

Having graduated from Aberystwyth University with an MA degree in Creative Writing, I don’t believe that I lack intelligence (common sense, maybe, but that’s another issue). And yet, something was holding me back (and it had nothing to do with the knife I had jammed into the toaster to lure out my hot cross bun at the beginning of the academic year). I felt constantly inferior to my well-spoken peers, those students with better pronunciation and Oxford English Dictionary speech. Compared with their Hugh Grant-esque cadences, my South Walian accent made me feel less intelligent, less worthy somehow.

I wrote Fy Iai about reclaiming the Welsh accent, the Welshisms, and it paid off. Rachel Tresize chose the piece for its “voice”, and at this point I began to embrace my culture and my language, and to reflect my way of speaking in my written work. I wrote Cartref in this manner,

‘I was desperately missing the grey sea of Barry Island’

AUTHOR’S NOTES

discarding the previous piece I had written for the competition, and that, too, seemed to be the right move. Another piece about longing for home, and the Welsh concept of hiraeth, came in the top 20 winners in this year’s Welsh Poetry Competition.

It’s not all about Wales, though. I’ve written about Gloucester, too. My debut novel, titled How the Broken Live, is set in and around Gloucester town, although there are some seaside scenes, including one in which the characters holiday in Porthcawl during the Fifties. The novel was written in its entirety in just over a month, and I loved the process of going back and editing, learning more about the characters with each read-through. It’s a story told from several viewpoints, which explores the devastating ripple effect a single act can set in motion. Writing the novel was like being immersed in a fever dream, another world which wasn’t mine and yet was. I can’t yet tell you definitively who the novel will be published with, but with any luck, you’ll be able to read the story very soon.

If children’s books are more your cup of tea, Percy the Pom-pom Bear, a story about friendship and diversity, is available from Amazon and Waterstones online. Last week, we launched a Welsh adaptation of the story at the National Eisteddfod, thanks to Cat Elan and her fantastic translation skills.

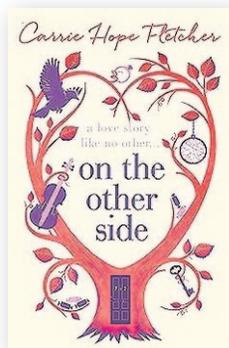
Whether we’re talking about deep dark fiction, poetry, short stories or children’s books, writing has always been my coping mechanism, my driving force and my passion. Some people



believe in a deity – writing is my faith, it is my way of life and my way of understanding and coming to terms with the world around me. I feel I’ve come a long way since the troubled 13-year-old who scrawled poetry over her schoolbooks, her arms and her bedroom furniture (sorry, Mum!) and yet, writing, putting pen to paper and making something happen is something which has remained with me, always. Oh, and one last thing. I’ll be moving back to Wales at the end of August, into an apartment in Swansea with a sea view. Who knows – maybe I’ll spot another dolphin while dreaming up the next short story. I couldn’t ask for more.

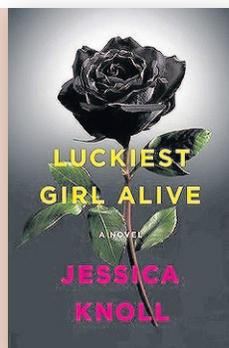
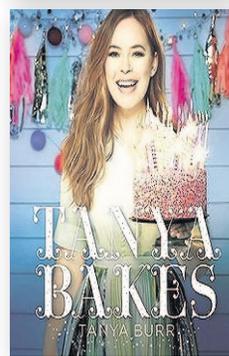
■ Cheval 9 and How to Exit a Burning Building are both out now, published by Parthian Books and priced £7.99

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