



# The Art of Betrayal: Coming-of-Age Through Transnational Writing

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## ABSTRACT

In 2016 I set out, hopefully and somewhat naively, to apply a transnational approach to my work-in-progress, *The Short Knife*. The novel is written in a voice which combines elements of the Welsh language with Standard English and is intended for a Young Adult audience. This article charts the evolution of the work, and of my own relationship with my homeland through the prism of betrayal, ultimately concluding that imbricating betrayal into a work can be generative and even healing.

Part One describes the practical development of the poetics of *The Short Knife* and will offer inspiration to any author exploring transnational creative writing. Part Two charts a workshop with Prof Nicholas Jose, and a fiery online encounter that necessitated a reckoning with the themes of betrayal. Part Three of this article demonstrates how such an existential crisis can have a positive impact on both the text and the author, if that challenge is faced head-on. This account will be of interest to anyone writing about their relationship with home.

## KEYWORDS

Transnational writing, Welsh writing in English, betrayal, coming-of-age fiction.

## INTRODUCTION

I was not afraid to visit home, but I was afraid to stay there.

I grew up in a small village, in a Welsh valley. The terraced houses lined the hills like frills on a petticoat – they were picturesque, from a distance. Up close, they were, in my mind, a hive of twitching curtains where the people within would sit in judgement on each other with the certainty of a fire-and-brimstone preacher. My family spoke a mixture of Welsh and English, depending on the context. My schooling was all in Welsh, a deliberate political choice my parents had made for me. I left at eighteen, and went back only to visit, to perch on the edges of sofas gulping down cups of scalding tea. I have always thought of myself as Welsh, but have not always been comfortable with what Welsh means.

So, it should not have come as a surprise when writing *The Short Knife* – inspired, as it was, by the desire to write in the creative space between my two languages – stirred an uneasy reckoning with the past. And yet, it was a surprise, and a deeply existential one at that.

In *Writing in Practice* vol 3, Amy Coquaz (2017), suggests that writing which allows two languages to come together offers a form of ‘reconciliation’; that there can be healing in the act. However, she also acknowledges that the ‘contact between two languages [reveals] tensions and fragmentations.’ I would go further: not only can contact between languages create tension, there is also potential for that tension to become a valuable creative force. This was the case with *The Short Knife*, as I will articulate in this article.

### PART ONE: THE SHORT KNIFE, A TRANSNATIONAL POETICS

As I begin to plan *The Short Knife*, I know that I want to write a book about Welshness that looks outwards. I want young readers, like my niece who lives in Wales, attending the same junior school that I did, to know that the hills aren’t walls keeping her in. I want her to know that there’s more out there, beyond the chintz front rooms kept for best, where the only songs you know all the words to are hymns, where half the pubs have flat roofs, but the factories and pits that went with them are long gone. Where judgements come from on high, but also from behind every closed front door.

I want her to be able to dream the world, while standing on the pavement outside Spar.

I want to take the language of my childhood,

my niece’s childhood, and blend it with a world language. I want to take it out of the mountains and introduce it to the world. It will be a transnational hybrid: its poetics part-Welsh, part-English.

Poetics, in the broadest terms, are the range of literary approaches and critical schools of thoughts that allow a scholar to consider the nature of a piece of writing; in my own personal conception, the tools available to answer the question ‘how does this piece of writing work?’. In the field of Creative Writing, its meaning has evolved to include the author: ‘How do I make this piece of writing work?’. Implicit in the word is the act of making, the artist’s knowledge of form and medium, reflective thinking and further drafting, each cycle getting closer to a functioning piece.

So, when I imagine a hybrid poetics, I’m imagining a range of stylistic decisions I might make to bring me closer to an appropriate voice for the novel.

I start by searching for a list of rules to follow while writing; rules that might show my niece that there’s joy in crossing borders.

On one day, among many similar days in 2016, I sit in a train carriage. Perhaps the train is travelling towards London, or Cardiff, or Aberystwyth, or Chester.

I have a notebook.

I watch the parallel lines of sidings, plough furrows, forestry plantations whip past the window. The lines are invisible, until the train hits just the right angle and then the geometry of the landscape is clear, breath-taking in its precision, before being lost again as the train moves and the angle is lost.

My notebook is one that closes with a magnetic catch, a satisfying snap. I write ideas for the novel, its style and voice, searching for satisfying snaps of recognition, the sense of finding the right angle on this story that I want to tell, when the words and sentences and paragraphs align in just in the right way to make me catch my breath, and think – there, there is precision. I write waiting for the pattern of its landscape to emerge.

I look at that notebook, in the weeks and months that follow. I look at it now, as I try to articulate the process.

In it, I have written a ‘test paragraph’ in Standard English. It’s short, but it will be my ‘control group’ of words. It is clearly comprehensible; it would meet the demands of commercial publishers. It is not avant-garde. I will use it, again and again, in

order to see how I might deviate from Standard English, how much Welsh I can introduce, before all meaning is lost to monolingual readers.

I write the test paragraph in my notebook: The sea came quickly up the shore and broke upon the rocks. Mai sank her feet into the surf and yelled up at the sky. A seagull cawed back, a devil's cry.

Who is Mai?

I don't know yet. The plot and cast of characters don't matter to me yet. It's her voice I want to find first.

I know that she speaks Brittonic, an ancestor of Welsh, which I'm using as a proxy. And yet the paragraph looks entirely English. I feel a little like that about myself, too. I can speak Welsh, but I've lived outside Wales for most of my life now. I seem entirely English. My Welsh-medium education is another lifetime ago.

There are differences between the languages in terms of grammar and syntax. Exploiting grammar has been a productive method of establishing poetics which has been employed by transnational writers before me. For example, Xialu Guo, author of 'A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers', struggles with the number of tenses in English – literary Chinese does not conjugate verbs, rather time is expressed as complete or incomplete using additional words. As a result, the 'now' of Chinese literature is more elastic. By attempting to eliminate complex verb conjugation in her prose, Guo can engage a 'Chinese worldview' which has a much larger effect than such a simple change might suggest. Here's an example of what she means:

“English: ‘Peter had been painting his house for weeks, but he finally gave up.’

Chinese-English: ‘Peter tries to paint his house, but sadness overwhelms him, causing him to lay down his brushes and give up his dream.’” (Guo, 2017).

Wildly different passages created by approaching the poetics of time, and all it signifies, differently.

There are many syntactic and grammatical differences between Welsh and English that I might exploit.

I scribbled some ideas in my notebook.

Unlike English, Welsh has no indefinite article ('a' or 'an'). When I mentioned this casually to my partner, he exclaimed, 'But what do you do?'. I shrugged. Nothing. There's no noticeable absence there, the grammar just is. Through

experimentation, in the pages of my notebook, I quickly saw that it is perfectly possible to write English that makes sense, without using the indefinite article. To avoid it, you might use a pronoun instead – 'a hall' becomes 'his hall'; you can change from indefinite to definite article – 'it is a terrible risk', becomes 'the risk is terrible'; or you might turn a noun into a verb – 'Tad had a fever' becomes 'Tad lay fevered'. There is also the simple solution of pluralising the noun – 'a hall' becomes 'many halls'.

In my notebook, on the train, the tracks of the novel begin, slowly, to align.

The sea came quickly up the shore and broke upon the rocks. Mai sank her feet into the surf and yelled up at the sky. Seagulls cawed back, with devils' cries.

I found the idea of writing the whole novel without using the indefinite article very appealing. It seemed that by so doing, I would create something that was alienating, but perhaps only at a subliminal level. The average reader, whether they were English-only or bilingual, probably wouldn't be able to pinpoint what was odd, but they might think that something was awry. It also had the added benefit of suggesting something particular about the character of the Welsh – a streak of literalism, even something of the pedantic maybe. We don't talk about 'an apple', but 'this apple here' - 'yr afal hwn' - there is simply no way to be vague about it.

I felt a tiny, tingling sensation that there was more at play here than poetics, as I thought about 'the character of the Welsh'.

What did it conjure when I thought of Wales? Was I thinking of the stereotypes disparagingly listed by Raymond Williams (2003:5) who wrote, "if you say 'Welsh culture', what do you think of? Of bara brith and the Eisteddfod? Of choirs and Cardiff Arms Park? Of love spoons and englynion? Of the national costume and the rampant red dragon?" By thinking of the Welsh as pedantic and too literal, was I adding to the list of stereotypes? Or was my stereotyping, in fact, built on personal experience of literal-minded admonitions? Sticking to the letter of the law, rather than to its spirit. I remembered my childhood streets, silent judgements, cold chapels, plain walls. The stained-glass window made to mark the death of my great-uncle was installed in the vestibule, not the body of the chapel – colourful frippery didn't belong too close to God.

What was my interest in the world beyond Wales

built on? Was it attraction, or repulsion? Was I being tempted out, or was I just running away? But these thoughts were still no more than tingles. Easily ignored.

Another grammatical difference that I found compelling is English's use of the 'Saxon genitive' form of possessive nouns in which the possessor of an item is indicated using 's – English's use. Welsh doesn't use possessive forms of nouns. To say 'John's coat' you would simply say 'côt John', putting the object before its owner in a neighbourly syntactical arrangement. The lack of possessive forms of nouns in Wales also suggested a discomfort with ownership or consumerist display, which is again something I associate with the Wales of my childhood. I wondered whether English could be made to work without the genitive, and what that might look like?

The test passage again:

A seagull cawed back, a devil-cry.

I found this iteration to be very evocative. It forced surprising, fresh language from stale or clichéd phrases. It was at this point that I began to really embrace the creative opportunities of the task I had set myself. Perhaps it wasn't just going to be possible to write a Welsh-inflected version of English, perhaps I might end up writing something that was good as well. Something that would embody and celebrate the transnationalism that I wanted to convey.

As the train journeys continued, from the west coast of Aberystwyth where the sun sets in the sea, to the flat plains of East Anglia where I visited the West Stowe Anglo-Saxon village with its experimental archaeologists recreating a Saxon way of life, my notebook was beginning to fill with passages that felt closer to 'just the right angle'. My poetics were getting stronger.

I listened to podcasts as I walked my dog around Bristol's parks – podcasts in Welsh, or by Welsh people. I listened to their accents and cadences.

As I listened, I thought about Welsh word order. Sentences like, 'I had seen things similar before', reverses the Standard English word order of adjective-noun, to the Welsh order of noun-adjective. I considered doing this with all adjectives, (so 'green tree' would become 'tree green'), but English readers are so used to the word order of descriptive adjectives that I worry using this too frequently will disrupt the reading

experience too intrusively. I would, I decided, attempt to use the technique subtly, perhaps only once or twice per scene.

Idiomatic language is also something I have long been fascinated by. Idioms and figures of speech preserve lifestyles long after whatever act they refer to has fallen by the wayside – we still 'hang up' phone calls, or 'dial' numbers long after changing apparatus has made these terms redundant. Older idioms act in the same way; they have something of ancient, lichen splattered rock about them. Why on earth does a 'stitch in time save nine?' and how does 'many a muckle make a mickle?' If contemporary slang evokes a specific location and time, then so too, might use of ossified slang give a sense of an ancient location and time to a novel. So, I decided to re-translate Alun Rhys Cownie's (2001) *A Dictionary of Welsh and English Idiomatic Phrases*, opting for a literal translation rather than an English equivalent, which is the more usual way to translate such a dictionary.

A second notebook joined the first. Long commutes to schools across the country, to talk about my writing, were spent translating. I felt, as I travelled landscapes that I can't help interpreting archaeologically – Bronze Age barrows in fields, medieval street names in cities, Norman churches dotted like firmly pressed Stickle Bricks in villages – that I was also seeing the archaeology of language somehow. In the Welsh idiom for making a mountain out of a molehill, you make a church and mill of an issue, *gwneud melin ac eglwys ohoni*. To arrive late for something is to arrive after the fair, *cyrraedd ar ôl y ffair*. The phrases suggest a landscape that is pastoral and bucolic. Preserving long-lost lifestyles, even as the train rattled through the scrapyards and warehouses of Birmingham or the graffiti-daubed track of Paddington. The idioms are creatively exciting too. Euphemisms for death include the evocative: to go and get your answer, *dy anfon iwch ateb*; to be collected by your fathers, *cael dy gasglu at dy tadau*; to sleep outside, *i gysgu mas*. To be pregnant is to grow small bones, *magu esgyrn back* or to find your apron strings are too short, *llinyn dy ffedog yn mynd yn rhi byr*. Delicious.

Finally, I sought inspiration for my poetics from Welsh literary styles, namely *cynghanedd* poetry. There are many variants in the use of *cynghanedd*, but at its most simple, it is a stressed meter which uses repeating sounds to emphasize the stress. I want readers of *The Short Knife* to experience

something akin to the experience of reading this sonorous Welsh poetry. Professor M. Wynn Thomas in his foreword to Mererid Hopwood (2004), *Singing in Chains*, calls cynghanedd poetry, ‘A stunning edifice of aural architecture, it is an acoustic environment that has long reverberated to all the mood music of the human imagination.’ I want to borrow some of the features of cynghanedd to show this edifice to English-only readers, who are unlikely to have the same familiarity with the style as Welsh readers, who hear it in schools, Eisteddfods and even at the occasional pub open mike night.

This has been attempted in English before. Here’s an example by Dic Jones (Hopwood, 2004:82):

“No hymn of birds, no tremor – save the sounds  
Of the sea’s sad tenor,  
The stars ascend in splendour,  
And the dark creeps round the door.”

Sadly, I fear I have only been able to give an imperfect impression of this art form in the verses incorporated within the novel. I have focused on parachesis, or repeating sounds somewhat in the manner of alliteration, assonance and sibilance, which are essential features of cynghanedd. I have also incorporated some ‘set piece’ poems which follow something of the demanding form of cynghanedd, with the intention of marking moments of strong connection for Mai with the landscape around her, or her moments of extreme emotion.

By the end of the year, my notebook was full of experiments and notes which allowed me to create the poetics needed to write the novel. I had my original voice. All I needed now was a story to tell.

## **PART TWO: THE CHALLENGE TO THE TRANSNATIONAL APPROACH**

By June 2016, I had a rough idea for a character – Mai, who would find herself embroiled with Saxons somehow. Perhaps as a translator between leaders, or as part of a boundary-crossing love story. It lacked detail and narrative drive. I had focused on the poetics of the piece over the content.

Then, I was invited to take part in a workshop with Prof Nicholas Jose of Adelaide University on Translation Plus. This proved to be a critical a moment in the development of the novel.

Translation Plus is defined by Prof Jose (2015, p5) as: “pedagogic experiments in creative writing

involving literary texts in languages other than English”. During the workshop, Prof Jose explored a translation technique which required no second language knowledge at all. The technique was inspired by Ben Lerner’s 2011 novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*, in which the main character ‘translates’ Lorca by searching for English homonyms for the incomprehensible Spanish words. The resulting cacophony represents the character’s own mental collapse. At the time, I had appreciated the technique’s hybrid approach to language, as this connected with the poetics of my own project.

It seemed to me that there was potential to incorporate the technique into my poetics. I could search for homonyms, or translated homonyms, and onomatopoeia, allowing the tension between the two languages to suggest novel images. I translate, and retranslate as I write – playfully moving from one language to the other, searching for fruitful points of contact. It worked! I was able to incorporate Welsh words, as English onomatopoeia: igam-ogam was used instead of zig-zag, goodi-hoo was used to describe an owl’s call, among many others.

I was so delighted with what was emerging by using Translation Plus that I decided to make use of it in a side-project.

The 6 July 2016 the Welsh football team were playing in the semi-finals of the European Cup. That evening, having acquired new fair-weather fans as they progressed through the competition, I wondered whether Translation Plus might be a way to share joy; a way, perhaps, to widen access to this suddenly desirable commodity, Welshness.

In a moment of enthusiasm, I experimented. The Welsh national anthem, Mae Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau, (usual translation: Land of My Fathers) is sung before each game. I wondered whether an English homonymic rendition, encapsulating joy and sporting achievement, might be possible. I neglected to wonder whether it was desirable. After some 45 minutes of playing, I wrote this:

“My hen lad, fun had I, and willy memes,  
Glad Bears and canned onions, their Wags,  
Graham Obree,  
Hey goo-rolled, ruff-wearing, glad Gary tries  
mad,  
Bros rubbed it, Coles asked it, I’m glad.

Ghoul-add! Ghoul-add! Play Eid all hoof heave it lads!

Try more, in field, here beer, have pie,  
Oh bud-head, here hen Neath par high.”

And I promptly posted it to Facebook and Twitter with the suggestion: “A small gift to the Rest of the UK, to be used on Weds 6th July.”

Significantly, it does require some familiarity with the original in order to engage with it at all.

The majority of interactions were positive – likes, retweets and shares. There was at least one person who was a reluctant retweeter. Lal Skinner (2016) wrote “Hilarious – even a Welsh patriot like me has to laugh at this # sing UK!”. The use of the word ‘even’ indicates a sense of discomfort at aligning themselves too closely with the reworking. The subtext of Lal’s comment is that I cannot be, ‘a Welsh patriot’ in writing this piece; my treatment of the anthem is funny, but disrespectful.

This view was put significantly more forcefully by Dr Dafydd Sills-Jones (2016a). On Facebook, he wrote, “C’mon, Elen, it’s [the reworking’s] clearly a piss take – it could be said that’s intimidating to Welsh speakers, by belittling their national anthem.”

Was I belittling ‘their’, national anthem?

I will answer that question in a moment. But I want to pause here on the significance of Dr Sills-Jones’ use of that innocuous pronoun. Mine is not the first ‘hybrid’ anthem, nor will it be the last, I’m sure. The South Wales Argus, in *Something Fishy About the Anthem* (2006), printed a version, which was reproduced by Wales Online, claimed to be by Swansea poet, Nigel Jenkins. This version is passed around at Welsh matches from time-to-time. But Jenkins, who was a renowned poet and lecturer in Creative Writing at Swansea University is positioned as an ‘insider’ writing for other ‘insiders’.

By using the pronoun ‘their’, Dr Sills-Jones is positioning me, and perhaps both of us, as outsiders. It is not ‘our’ or ‘your’ anthem. My voice does not represent Welsh people, in the same way that a Welsh poet based in Swansea does.

So, by creating the piece, am I belittling an anthem which isn’t mine?

I asked Dr Sills-Jones for further comment, elaborating on his public statement. He kindly agreed, and wrote, “The Welsh language needs careful and respectful handling, and has been subject to several attempts at linguisticicide by the

British state... A piss-take English version is dangerous as it threatens to blank out one of the only manifestations of the language amongst the majority of its constituents.1 Why would you want to do that, or even gesture towards that end?” (Sills-Jones, 2016b)

It was at this point that the tiny, tingling sensation I had felt earlier became impossible to ignore. What I had thought was a stylistic experiment had deeper implications. I’d been squishing down my own disquiet, my own fears, and carrying on regardless. But this challenge forced an internal confrontation that I couldn’t back away from.

Language isn’t just a collection of random sounds. I knew that. The poetics I was using meant something, beyond the game I had been playing. Words can put up walls. Metaphorical bombs were exploding all over the no-man’s land I had wandered into.

The martial landscape was further brought home to me during a conversation with Dr Simon Rodway (2016), in which he said, “Welsh and English are engaged in a battle that is so one-sided, the other lot don’t even know they are fighting.”

Whose side was I on? Did I have a right to speak? If I spoke, was I a representative of Wales? Or was my position, as a writer published by London houses, living in England, too close to the ‘centre’, as Dr Sills-Jones’ use of ‘their’ seems to suggest?

Up to this point, I had been treating the project like a game, a puzzle to solve. Now it was time to put on armour and think more seriously about the endeavour and the implications of using transnational creativity. My actions, in creating poetics based on hybridized language necessitated a reckoning with betrayal.

### **PART THREE: THE RECKONING, BETRAYAL AS A GENERATIVE TOOL**

I had been holding on to childhood memories of a certain kind of Wales where all the houses were built of bricks that had been fired in kilns at the end of the road; the roofs were all made of slate, quarried from the hills that sided the valley. Everything around me had been made within spitting distance. Even the entertainment was stubbornly home-grown, with school plays taken from the Mabinogi, or other local legends. I had decided, long ago, that it was a culture I wanted to shrug off.

But Wales is a place where cultural belonging is hard to ignore.

The challenge from Dafydd Sills-Jones was reminding me of that.

In order to understand the criticism that the use of Translation Plus in a Welsh-English context constitutes a betrayal, it is necessary to understand the cultural role of the Welsh language in Wales.

The Welsh language is, for many of its speakers, simply the language they learned when they were infants – it is their mother tongue. But Dr Andrew G. Livingstone et al. (2009, pp302-5) has also identified a role for the language as, what he calls, ‘an identity management resource’. His research found that it is considered to be of symbolic importance to the national identity of both Welsh and non-Welsh speakers alike. Which is to say that, in this study, even those Welsh people who don’t speak Welsh consider the ability to speak the language as one of the identifiers of nationhood – thus denying themselves full access to their own nation.

Within this framework, where the language signifies an end-goal in and of itself, as an expression of nationhood, any challenge to the language must be loaded and speakers of the language might be viewed as guardians of nationhood. The Welsh language is both a marker of identity and a site of resistance. By trying to use it as an inspiration for a form of English, am I, *prima facie*, not a ‘Welsh patriot’? Is my desire to give a flavour of the Welsh language to non-Welsh speakers a betrayal?

My parents had had a dream for me, when they were young and I was an infant. They had spoken to me in Welsh; a language my grandmother had been ashamed of speaking, a language that my dad had been beaten for using in front of visitors. They had sent me to a Welsh medium school, despite their private worries that it might hinder my educational development. My acquisition of two languages, English and Welsh, had been a deliberate political act by my parents. They wanted me to become an active member of a confident, self-determining nation (they still do).

But I had chosen to leave for England.

So far, I’ve presented this issue in an unemotional way. As though I were writing about someone else, or something from long ago.

But that isn’t how it happened.

I was at Sunday lunch, in a pub, with my partner

and two friends. Our table had a view over Bristol’s Old Town, within seagull-cry of the harbour. I’d ordered, and was drinking a pint, when my phone pinged with a message from Dr Sills-Jones. I read it.

I felt an immediate adrenaline hit, as though someone in the pub had thrown a bar stool. My heart pounded. I had to get up, leave the table and my chatting friends, and head down to the bathrooms. I read the message again, washed my face, breathed.

Read it again.

Yes, this is a cerebral, theoretical discussion, but it is a personal, embodied one too. I felt the effects, as much as I considered them. For a moment, I was a teenager again. Told off by someone in authority. Hiding in the bathroom. A classic scene in many coming-of-age stories. The tingling sensations about the import of my actions become tremors. I felt like a teenager, experiencing the classic teenage emotion of shame.

I’d been enthralled by the puzzle I’d set myself with this project, thinking exclusively about style and the emerging poetics, I’d not considered what it might mean in terms of my relationship with my country, my family and my identity. I found myself confronted by fragmentations – of my own image of myself as a loyal person; and tension – what on earth was I going to do with this project now?

But tension is a necessary ingredient of drama, conflict is at the heart of what makes a story. And these feelings of questioned loyalties, betrayal and shame could all be generative, I realized. The emotional drama could be embodied, in the person of Mai, and become drama on the page. I could make the motif of betrayal the dominant force of conflict in *The Short Knife*. By exposing my readers to multiple instances of betrayal, each thesis and antithesis would a better understanding of the nature of betrayal and why it happens, with Mai also synthesising the betrayals as she grows into adulthood. Betrayal could build the plot.

I made my character Mai experience betrayal – the loss of her parents; rejection by her sister; her own betrayal of her own moral code, and, climactically in the novel, the legendary betrayal of ‘The Treachery of the Long Knives’, which she lives through.

It is a truism of writing for children and young people that writers have to get rid of the parents. Usually this is for practical reasons – an orphan has more narrative agency than a child still protected by family. However, as I wrote *The Short Knife* the loss

of a parent took on a deeper utility. The realisation that parents are vulnerable and fallible people in their own right is a necessary and painful discovery in the lives of young people – coming to terms with that ‘betrayal’ is a crucial step on the road to independence. There are examples throughout fiction of young people being let down by a parental figure, from Todd and Mayor Prentiss in Patrick Ness’ (2008) *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, to Emma and her keeping-up-appearances Mam in Louise O’Neil’s (2015) *Asking for It*.

Mai is further ‘betrayed’ by her sister Haf later in the novel. In the role of surrogate parent, Haf wants to protect her younger sister, but she is not yet an adult herself and an indiscreet moment sees her sharing her sister’s secret with people who then hurt Mai. I don’t want to ascribe a single meaning to this plot point, but it was important to me that an unreasonable burden of responsibility be placed on shoulders that are too young to carry it – Haf is a failed guardian and the repercussions of that failure propel the plot.

Mai experiences betrayal, but she is also disloyal herself – she leaves, often, in the plot. First, she leaves the farm where she grew up, then she leaves the British settlement, finally she leaves the Saxon village. She has good reason for all of these departures, but still, she is turning her back on communities she has been a part of and might owe loyalty to.

Mai was already speaking in a voice that was an avatar for my own linguistic situation – comfortable somewhere between Welsh and English. Now she also became an avatar for my own understanding of loyalty and betrayal, my own relationship with Wales and the community I had once belong to.

Mai’s own greatest betrayal when she is asked to rob a tomb in order to trade in grave goods. Mai reluctantly agrees to the graverobbing, in exchange for food from the leaders at the hillfort where she has sought sanctuary. When I first came across evidence of 5th century grave robbing in an archaeological report, by P. Rahtz (1992), I was thrilled by the creative possibilities. The act of actually robbing a grave, told in first person, blow by blow, or body, horns and hooves, is emotive. Readers will, hopefully, feel some of the squeamishness and doubt about the wisdom of the endeavour that I have felt about writing this novel. On the one hand, she is being asked to pay her own way, to contribute to her society in order to eat. On the other hand, the task she’s been given

breaks a strong cultural taboo. Traditions like burial rites – or using our mother tongue – are bargains we have made with those who have gone before us. We can reasonably expect that our children, and the generations to come will honour those shared traditions, as guardians. By opening tombs – or rejecting a mother tongue – we not only risk desecration, but we are also saying that the bonds of culture are breakable. As a writer who might be seen to be betraying my cultural inheritance, the symbolism of a ransacked tomb is delicious.

So, betrayal forms the bedrock of a beat of action in the novel. Mai is forced to decide which is the lesser evil. The black and white world of childhood morality becomes the shades of grey of adult understanding: a point of transition. Ultimately, the growth through betrayal that Mai encounters is the victory of experience over innocence. Escape looks like abandonment; betrothals turn into massacres; love turns to rejection. Each of these incremental steps allows Mai to reach a better understanding of herself and her position in the world.

The finale of *The Short Knife* is played out against the backdrop of the legend of the ‘Treachery of the Long Knives’ in which the Saxon lord Hengist kills the British at a wedding feast, thus violating all rules of hospitality. The story has additional resonance in Wales as its Welsh name, *Brad Y Cylllell Hirion*, has influenced the names given to other ‘betrayals’ by the state, such as ‘Brad Y Llyfrau Gleision.’ [1] This betrayal, this treachery by those in power, of course offers the perfect place for the climax of the novel. It is this final pain that is the final shift of Mai’s character, propelling her permanently into adulthood. And in the novel’s final moments, she is finally able to construct her own identity, as a Welsh runaway, on the river with the family she has chosen for herself.

## CONCLUSION: THE AUTHOR GROWS UP

I realized, as I embodied my betrayal in the characters in the novel, that I was resentful of my past. But I still cared; I was still emotionally attached to the people and places I’d grown up with. As Mai grew towards adulthood, during writing, I was also growing. The Wales I grew up in wasn’t perfect, but I wasn’t perfect either. I had been sulky and recalcitrant, keen to take offence and slow to forgive. Perhaps the people I’d grown up with had had reason to judge me. I had been a poor guardian. I had betrayed too.



Such a galling thing to realize about oneself.

Mai ends the book floating on a river, away from the Saxons and the British. She still has further to go before she finds a home. Partly because she is still an adolescent at the end of the book, she still has more to learn before becoming an adult; but partly because any kind of belonging is impermanent and negotiable, it is possible to self-exclude or self-integrate, as I was discovering. I could re-write my own narrative through Mai.

English is a rapacious language that has absorbed and assimilated other languages that have crossed its path. I had grown up believing that Welsh was weak in comparison, a little mouse of a language clinging on at the very edges. And, in some ways, it is. But I didn't have to believe that the only way to defend it is to turn westward, to speak Welsh in every conceivable circumstance, or feel guilty for failing.

The division I had perceived, between me and my country of birth, was created and sustained by the stories I had been telling myself.

Perhaps I could change those stories.

Anecdotally, it's common, for those who have left their childhood home, to feel alienated from it. But it seems that 'being Welsh' is a designation which is strangely ephemeral, and can slip away if it's not carefully tended. John Osmond (1992-3:24), writing in the *New Welsh Review*, wrote about one of the border towns, "...on the face of it, you might not readily recognize it to be Wales. You see in that sublime gradation...Abergavenny is not 'very Welsh'. What other mainstream nationalism in the British Isles has such an attribute applied to it, indicating that its identity is a question of degree?"

If it is a question of degree, then there is no 'getting it right', being 'proper Welsh'. Rather, like the formative years of adolescence, I could try definitions on for size, and feel freedom in that playfulness. By 2018, some two years after this process began, I had realized that I could listen to Radio Cymru when Georgia Ruth was playing really interesting, exciting music, and I could turn it off when the interminable Taro'r Post was interviewing planning officers about the relocation of some chapel. I could do imaginative play with my niece in Welsh, but moan to my sister about university admin in English. My language choices could be situational and contingent and there was no need to feel guilty. It was only a betrayal if I allowed that narrative to dominate.

Suddenly, my sense of being an outsider was lessened. We're all outsiders, and policing each other is a hiding to nothing.

To return to Coquaz' statement, I had been through the tensions and fragmentations that writing in two languages might engender, but I was also healing – reconciling not simply within the novel, but within myself.

When I left Wales, aged eighteen, I took a teenage mind-set with me, and it had ossified in the intervening years. In writing Mai's story, I was also finally embarking on my own, very late, coming-of-age.

My next book is set entirely in contemporary Wales, with joyful scenes of community that happen in rugby clubs and pubs with flat roofs. The terraced houses are friendly, even close up. And I'm pleased to say that *The Short Knife* was warmly welcomed in Wales, winning the 2021 Tir Na n-Og award for the best English-language book with an authentic Welsh background.

In reconciling with betrayal, I am finally wearing my guardianship lightly.

## ENDNOTES

[1] D Sills-Jones is likely to be referring to state-sponsored repression of the Welsh language in favour of English. See, for instance, 'Brad Y Llyfrau Gleision', the findings of a mid-19th century public enquiry which concluded that the Welsh language contributed to the laziness and immorality of the Welsh people.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr Elen Caldecott** is a creative writing practitioner with a successful ten-year career in the publishing industry, writing fiction for children and young people. Her first novel, *How Kirsty Jenkins Stole the Elephant* was published by Bloomsbury and was shortlisted for the Waterstones' Children's Book Award. Subsequent titles include *Evie's Magic Bracelet* with Hodder, and the *Marsh Road Mysteries* series with Bloomsbury. Since completing her PhD in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, Elen's creative career has dovetailed with practice-led research in academia. Her work engages with representations of working-class children in fiction, as well as transnational writing for young people. Her PhD novel, *The Short Knife*, was published in 2020 by Andersen Press. It was shortlisted for the Carnegie Award and won the Tir Na n-Og Award. Elen now lectures in Creative Writing at Lancaster University.