

A sense of endings

This is a novel about endings – lives, histories, the rhythms of the natural world, perhaps the world itself. “Things don’t end all at once, though, but in stages” – and the apocalyptic resonance of the interwoven stories of Lower Eodham, a small village deep in the English countryside, partly emanates from the evocations of the beauty of what is now, inexorably, leaving us. Melissa Harrison is an accomplished nature writer, and her knowledge of the plants and animals that share the land with the village’s human inhabitants – the chiffchaff’s song, the burgeoning hawthorn blossom in spring – adds a lyrical overlay to what would otherwise be a bleak narrative. Harrison insists that we understand the value of what is dying.

The Given World follows the life of the community over a period of six months, spanning the first signs of spring and the arrival of autumn. Some of the locals come from families that have lived and worked in the village for generations; others are recent arrivals. Prosperous middle-class professionals live alongside those who struggle on low incomes. Harrison often focuses on the women of Lower Eodham, but she also pays tribute to the labour of men, from the postman to the local builder. The challenges that confront modern agriculture are not glossed over. If the novel has a hero, it is Alan, a stoical dairy farmer who has been cheated by local landowners.

What unites this diverse group is their uneasiness. Climate change is a persistent theme (never directly addressed), as the weather veers from torrential rain to drought. Wildlife is on the retreat. The last badger flees; the outsized pike that has haunted the river for years has disappeared; crops mysteriously fail. Clare hears news that means she is confronted by her own ending. The elderly Hilda falls and cannot move. Roy loses his nerve while working on a roof, and realizes that his familiar working life is over. “So maybe this is it, then.” Connor, young and hopeful, is nevertheless shadowed by an awareness of loss. “Sometimes he thinks there’s no such thing as nostalgia, that things were genuinely just better in the past.” He, too, leaves the village.

Harrison's evocation of a textured particularity in the life of the village is persuasive, and the sense of certainties "now drawing to an end" gives her novel a sombre coherence. But the serious heft of the story is undermined by the quasi-mysticism that runs through its unsettling events. Old artefacts – one suggestive of an ancient curse – are uncovered. There are repeated hints of a female spirit, both malign and protective, that animates the river. Alan rescues a boy who is drowning, "fighting with something in the river".

"Why did you go into the water?"

"I – I don't know, I didn't mean to, she –"

Roy's crisis among the rafters seems to have been caused by his discovery of a small, carefully stitched child's shoe, hidden in the timbers. When the all-knowing William Welland, who seems tuned into ancestral wisdom, replaces the shoe, Roy finds that he can return to the roof and finish the job.

The disturbing presence of ancient spirits has its place in fiction, but here it becomes a distraction. Harrison's lament for the passing of fertile cycles rooted in the land is invested with the authority of genuine knowledge. To summon folklore, and hint that otherworldly powers are involved in the downfall of older patterns of life, is an unnecessary indulgence. If her readers don't believe in the reality of river goddesses, they might be tempted to think that much else that Harrison has to tell us about what is happening to the English countryside is nothing more than fantasy. And that would be a pity.

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