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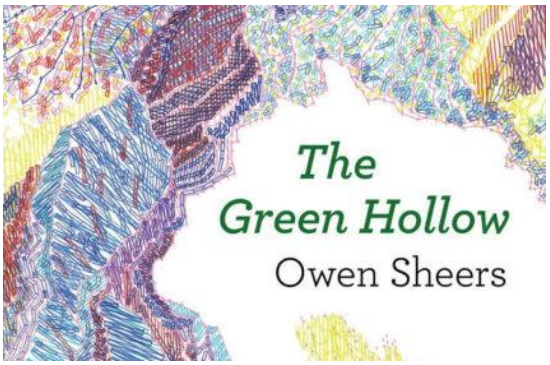


THE GREEN HOLLOW | TALKING TO OWEN SHEERS

Fifty years after Aberfan, the writer Owen Sheers interviewed survivors, parents and rescuers to create The Green Hollow.
In 1966 a coal-mine waste tip collapsed on a school and surrounding houses in Aberfan, South Wales, killing 144 people, most of them children.

Fifty years later, the acclaimed poet, novelist and playwright ***Owen Sheers*** *interviewed survivors, parents and rescuers to create a dramatic poem in the voice of the village, both then and now. Originally created as a BAFTA-winning BBC drama,* The Green Hollow *is a historical story with a deeply urgent contemporary resonance.*
Upon the much-awaited publication of this deeply personal work, Owen Sheers speaks with Craig Austin about his poetic portrait of recovery, resistance and renewal; one fuelled by the loves and losses of those whose lives were shattered by a tragedy that should never have happened, and its especially cruel aftermath.

Owen Sheers | Author of The Green Hollow

The slim hardback book that nestles at the bottom of my bag is bookmarked at roughly 30 pages in; the point at which my mother-in-law, a daughter of the valleys, found herself unable to read any further, the sense of tension and foreboding simply proving too much to bear.

The book itself, *The Green Hollow*, is perhaps even more powerful than the BBC TV film-poem that initially introduced it to public prominence, and as we both cradle dark pints in a dark London railway pub I ask its creator, the acclaimed poet and author Owen Sheers, whether this incremental sense of menace was deliberate, or simply unavoidable.
'I think, interestingly, that it's a feeling that's got stronger with its eventual publication', he tells me, 'because of the physical entity of the book'. One that is stylistically emphasised by the book's design; one that utilises faded passages of text to emphasise the haunted memories of the survivors, and a stark black double-page spread 'so that you can see the seam of coal coming'. 'I was very aware that this had initially been written for the screen and although I was working with a very generous director who told me not to worry about the images and to concentrate only on the words when it came to the publication of the book I worked closely with the designer Kate Ward to somehow bring to life the idea of young voices in old bodies, which is where the use of the lighter text came from. That sense of foreboding wasn't intentional but I think it is inevitable given the subject matter. I did at first hesitate to write about the Aberfan disaster, partly because it's so well known, but in the end that's one of the reasons why I was motivated to do so, to write against that anonymising quality of that kind of story. It's the straightforward endeavour of any writer to try to humanise the subject matter, and even though you can't avoid that sense of foreboding I very much wanted the first part to not be fully occupied with that. I tried to paint a picture of what was lost, what the community was like beforehand, and actually what was there before the community'

'The more and more I interviewed people', the author continues, 'the more I felt in awe of this almost utopian picture; this very self-sustainable community, full employment, culturally rich. When I asked people in Aberfan to share their

memories of 1966 I also heard a great deal about the football team, the boxing, endless drama clubs, the local bands, the charabanc down to Porthcawl. There were two cinemas, *two cinemas!* There was a cultural vibrancy about the place that I wanted to acknowledge. But the flipside to that is that sense of foreboding and for me that terrible sense of loss. It wasn't just about the terrible loss of life, the disaster and what came after it was also the start of the demise of a certain way of life. The sense of trepidation is inevitable but I also tried to draw a reader's eyes and ears to other qualities within the village because for Aberfan – like Hillsborough, like Dunblane, like Grenfell – it's very name has been defined by the event'.

As a child who grew up at the foot of the valleys, not that long after the actual event in real terms, I share with the author my own reflections upon that point in time when the true horror of the Aberfan disaster is finally revealed to you by one's own parents or grandparents. A conversation that more often than not has to be initiated by the curious child given the degree and frequency with which such a horrific memory has been collectively buried by those who were alive at the time; as if it were simply too problematic to talk about:

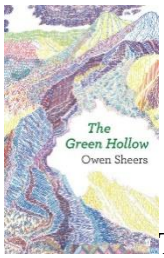
'And problematic is the right word', Owen Sheers considers, 'and not just because of all of the anger generated by the NCB and the inquiry. There was always an awareness of the disaster within my family but mainly because my grandfather was the headmaster of a primary school in Penderyn. My parents, who were both working in England at the time, would talk about how when the initial reports came out that something serious had happened at a South Wales school their first thoughts and sense of concern were for him. But it was only in researching the specific events that I realised the extent to which this was a disaster that was eminently avoidable, and that there's a paper trail of six years' of letters highlighting the imminent threat to Pantglas School. It *is* problematic, and I say that having grown up in South Wales and has played a lot of rugby in the valleys, but going into Aberfan I felt much more of an outsider than an insider when it came to this story. But what that did do was allow me to appreciate the village's a truly problematic relationship with the pit itself. It was the pit that was providing that full employment, and which was in a way providing that

community. Of course, there had been petitions to remove the tips to which the NCB, horribly, said that though they could remove the tips the financial cost of doing so would mean that they'd also have to close the mine. At which point, of course, the community withdrew. So I think that maybe some of that reticence is down to that broader problematic relationship that we have in Wales with that kind of industry, and also partly because nothing has ever really replaced it'

Not least because Owen Sheers ' next work *To Provide All People: A Poem in the Voice of the NHS* will be published this summer to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the National Health Service, I ask him whether he considers *The Green Hollow* to be a political work: 'I don't overtly think of myself as a political writer but in the last couple of years I've been very drawn to those kinds of projects and the energy required to undertake them. I didn't want *The Green Hollow* to be an overtly political piece of work, it's focused more on a human-to-human level, but it is a political story and though I didn't go into great detail about the inquiry I do reference it. With the NHS, the pitch, for want of a better word, was to try and create something both emotional and philosophical and I hope that I've stayed true to that aim. But of course, it's a political piece, and there's probably more of my personal politics in *To Provide All People* than anything else I've ever written. I'm still experimenting with this form and the one thing that I knew I wanted *The Green Hollow* to be was choral; choral in terms of a number of voices joining to form a shared story, but choral also in terms of many stories being rendered in the voice of one character. With *To Provide All People* the volume's been turned up on that even more, especially given that the phrase "a poem in the voice of the NHS" is such a big statement. I'm still learning with the form as I say, but there does seem to be a pattern with both *The Green Hollow* and *To Provide All People* in the sense that the second-half, the last-third of these pieces, is less other people's voices and my words, and more my words and their voices'

I couldn't help seeing
one specific sight –
The curtains of a house in a short terraced street
I'd passed earlier that day.
They were closed, which in Wales

Not at night, means only one thing –
a house where the seeds of death
have been sown.
I walked on, but as I did
I looked down the rest of that row,
which is when I saw –
the curtains, they were drawn
in every window
Behind drawn curtains, 116 children's beds lie empty.



The Green Hollow – Owen Sheers

It is these tender, yet crushing, observations that imbue Owen Sheers' work with such devastating power; the horror of the tragedy underpinned with the communal principles of dignity and quiet convention. 'That's the kind of material that I could only have got through that interview process, having first been welcomed into the community', he tells me. 'It's why I'm so intrigued and interested in this form, this documentary approach. It gives you a strong foundation of authenticity, but artistically it gives you those moments of detail that you hope that people will respond to. It's about finding those points of shared content'.

In Part II of the work, *'Rescuers'*, Owen Sheers – via the persona of Mansel – makes a heart-breaking comparison between the rescuers themselves and the gold rush prospectors of 19th century California, though making explicitly clear that *'these men were digging for something else, and for something more precious too – their little ones'*, the sons, daughters, nephews and nieces of Pantglas junior school, 'the green hollow' of the author's title. ' It was a heart-breaking experience all-round', he continues. 'There wasn't a single interview I did where people didn't break down. People had talked about it before of course, but it's a

very different experience when someone is asking you to hand-hold them through the day itself. But everyone very generously said that they found the conversations to be a cathartic experience. We sent the script to everyone we spoke to, and in the case of the Young Wives Club *(the women who came together to form a community support group),* I read the whole script to them, which was the hardest thing I've ever done as a writer. I was a mess, yet they were incredibly generous, and though I cried at several points during the reading I felt ridiculous given that I was reading to a group of people who'd lost their children in the disaster. But we felt it was so important to let everyone know exactly what we were doing before we pressed ahead'

'The first screening of the BBC production was at Aberfan Library and we invited anyone who wanted to come along. I was extremely wary of creating any sense or perception of emotional exploitation and I am still worried about that. But interestingly the people who were at the screening said that though it was an uncomfortable watch they were grateful that it wasn't in any way euphemistic, that it actually confronted the terror. There's an extraordinary amount of forgiveness and understanding in that community but there's still an understandable feeling of injustice and they were afraid that it might have somehow glossed over the horror. But in avoiding any sense of euphemism there was a point where we needed to take the story into the classroom, and as terribly difficult as that was the community acknowledged that it needed to go there'

Perhaps because of this, the author nevertheless talks about always having wanted to create something beautiful. A beautiful film, a beautiful piece of writing, from a damaged and inconsolable part of our national psyche; one that ultimately concludes with the children from 1966 joining a game in which the calling out of occupations becomes a pattern of voices from then and now, a mosaic of lives hoped for and never lived:

A freerunner, a singer, a soldier, a nurse, a farmer, a miner, a lorry driver, a dinner lady, a footballer, a policeman, an actress, a doctor, a milkman, a postman, an

artist, a ballet dancer, a dentist, a barrister in court, the first man on the moon – an astronaut!

And though the coal-black horror of the Aberfan disaster remains undiminished, Sheers has undeniably mined a work of great beauty from the pit of despair.

The Green Hollow *is out now, published by Faber.*

To Provide All People: A Poem in the Voice of the NHS *by Owen Sheers will be published by Faber in early June.*

The accompanying BBC production will air on BBC2 later that month.

Craig Austin *is a regular contributor to* Wales Arts Review.