

A Stolen Soul and the Revenge of the River; notes on writing The Candleman.

The Candle Man was first published in 1994 by The Bodley Head Children's Books, and was the fourth novel I had written. It was, and remains, special to me for two reasons. The first is its setting.

The Gwent Levels, or the moor, as it's locally known, is a strange, flat, eerie tract of land between the vastness of the Severn, and the hills further inland. The small fields are irrigated by reens,- flooded drainage ditches always green with algae and submerged under the leaning branches of ancient willows and alders. It is crossed by a railway line and narrow grey lanes; houses are few and the villages quiet.

It's a liminal landscape, with wide skies and a strange uncertainty about whether it should be earth or water. Over the centuries it has been both. The Great Flood of 1606, mentioned in the story, was a real event and the floodmarks can be seen in all the churches of the Levels.

Everything here is below sea level, so only the Sea Wall keeps the river at bay.

The Severn itself, or Hafren, as she is more properly known, surges and sinks with one of the greatest tides in the world, and the power of the estuary is immense. It's not surprising that there are legends of a goddess under there, or the drowned Roman princess Sabrina.

I wanted to write a book where the river was a character, intent on reclaiming her land, and to use real places and place-names. Conor's mum's pub is a real one, though transported with the writer's magic to a site directly under the sea wall. There are two lighthouses on the levels, but neither is as tall or remote as Meurig's watchtower, which was imaginary.

Above all, there is a sort of uneasiness about the Levels, as if they survive precariously in the modern world, constantly threatened with motorway schemes which are happy to destroy whole eco-systems for a few moments speed. And this is really a unique eco-system, with its flocks of waders and its rare bees, its blown-in migrants and prehistoric footprints out under the mud. What the future will bring is also uncertain, but perhaps Hafren's power will triumph as climate change drowns men's defenses in the end.



The second thing I like is that the novel uses the folk lore image of the External Soul, where the soul, or heart of someone or something is contained, not in their body, but in an object, which is usually fragile.

This trope has always fascinated me, and the idea of a man trapped in this way was the starting point of the story. The object can be an egg, or a branch or, as in this case a candle, anything easily destroyed, easily broken.

Meurig, like a character in a folk tale, is cursed, and he believes in the curse, and the candle becomes his dearest possession, until he loses it, and the story begins.

He and Conor and Sarah have to recover it, but it falls into the hands of his enemy Hafren, who will use its power against him.

I also liked writing about these characters- Conor's preoccupation with his mother's possible liking for the hated Evan, Mr. Caristan's fussy kindness, Sarah's forthright intent.

The old man who rows the ghost boat owes much to an old waterman once interviewed on an ancient television programme about the river.

"You can never turn your back on her" he said, in a sentence that came straight out at me.

But even he, after a lifetime of learning her ways, was drowned before the programme was aired.

Afon Hafren, heb trugaredd.. as the saying is.

And now the Candleman is re-issued, in a new livery, as the first in the Firefly Classics from Wales series, which is an honour and a pleasure. It has a great introduction from Dimitra Fimi, and a series intro from Nicola Davies. And I hope new readers will discover it, and enjoy it.

CATHERINE FISHER

The
CANDLE MAN

