

Writing the Isle Fincara Trilogy

Anya Rosenberg puts some questions to the author A G (Andrew) Rivett

When you first started writing *The Seaborne* did you always know it would be the first in a trilogy?

I began writing pieces that became *The Seaborne* back in the nineties. I wrote then just for the pleasure of writing, and the sheer escapism of telling stories. Like other scraps, they fell by the wayside – a whole collection of short stories is now entirely lost except in my memory. Then Gillian, now my wife, encouraged me to work on the one that promised to be a longer narrative. As I worked, I re-awoke to the excitement of seeing my characters come alive and live out their story – not as I want it, but the way *they* whisper it to me.

It was fairly soon after *The Seaborne* started taking shape as a novel that I realised this story needed to come round full circle as a trilogy. And very soon after that, the basic shape of the other books formed themselves in my mind, complete with their titles.

The drivers in each were quite different. In *The Seaborne*, time-traveller John Finlay finds himself in a medieval world and has to come to terms with it. There's much that, bit by bit, he grows to resonate with. But not the patriarchy. I had seen enough patriarchy when I entered the Church. I was ordained deacon along with the very first tranche of women who were admitted to Holy Orders as deacons in the Church of England. But when, the following year, I was ordained priest, the women were conspicuously lacking – still not allowed to enter the priesthood. I felt their absence, and missed them. So in the second book I wanted to write about a strong woman's role, and it seemed that Morag obligingly wanted to fill that.

And the third book? Stories need a beginning, a middle and an end. In one way the story of John/Dhion was completed in his marrying Shinane and finding his feet on the Island. But that wasn't the end of his story, as I found out. He had not yet discovered what he really had to offer to the Island. Then there remained the unresolved matter of his connexion with the world he'd left behind. And I wanted to explore further the religious tensions that came into *The Priest's Wife* – both Dhion and Morag were going to get caught up in that. There was also the story of Shinane to complete – and that's important.

One of the themes of *The Shareg* is the growing tensions between the Church and the Islanders' more traditional pagan beliefs. Can you tell me a little about your own relationship to the Church?

The Christ of the gospels has always been central to my life. But I'm also keenly aware that the institution of the Church, both historically and in the present day, has often told a different story. You ask particularly about the tension between the Church and paganism. The suppression of pagan traditions when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its mainstream religion was carried out with brutal and – if I may say it, un-Christian – efficiency. With that suppression, the mainstream began to deny the sacredness of the natural world, and I think that in doing so Western humanity took a wrong turn that is beginning to prove disastrously wrong. I long for a world that honours both nature and the way of Christ, a holistic combination which I see as grounded and connected to Jesus' teaching: honest, compassionate and centred on Spirit.

Of course, I also have my own lived experience of Church. For twelve years I held full-time clergy posts. For the most part what I saw among my colleagues was hard-working service, sometimes with touches of sanctity. But I also saw neurosis and blinkered vision leading to distorted judgement, naked ambition leading to a compromise of values, and cowardice that strove to preserve public face at any cost. I wanted to write about it all.

***The Shareg* perfectly captures the daily lives of a community of islanders living 1,000 years ago. How did you go about researching it?**

I have shamelessly to admit that I do most of my research in the same way Einstein did. I imagine myself into the situation. I think, *What did my characters have, and what didn't they have?* When you've done that, their way of life becomes fairly obvious.

So imagine an island – a largish island, bigger than Skye or the Isle of Man. It's a thousand years ago, so the only means of transport on land is by foot or, if you're wealthy, on horseback; by sea it's sail or rowing. The Americas haven't been discovered by Europeans, so there's no cotton, no tobacco, no sugar, no potatoes. That immediately dictates what you can wear: it's wool, linen or leather. There are no labour-saving devices, so food production takes a long time: it's your main preoccupation. That doesn't leave much time over for elaborate tailoring. But the human spirit always breaks through where it can, and makes a few really beautiful artefacts. Making everything by hand, a few people become highly skilled in some areas.

In a climate such as I envisage – something like the west of Scotland or Ireland – summers are short and cool and wet, so oats and barley are the main crops, with roots and kale filling in through the winter. Subsistence is too marginal for the luxury of vegetarianism, so cattle and sheep are kept, for milk and wool and leather, but also for meat. And during the hungry quarter – March, April and May, when grain has run low and you've slaughtered most of your livestock (because you don't have enough fodder to see them all through until the grass grows again) – then malnutrition can be very real. (When Morag in *The Priest's Wife* arrives in Kimmoil in early spring, there's already scurvy – vitamin C deficiency – in the town.)

Of course my medical background informs my imagination. So infectious diseases, unrestrained by vaccination or antibiotics, are common. John, recovering from near drowning, goes through the typical crisis of pneumococcal pneumonia. Childhood deaths are frequent, as Micheil recounts in *The Seaborne*, and tuberculosis claims the lives of Shareen's Andy in *The Seaborne* and both Gormagh and Hugh in *The Priest's Wife*. Although never mentioned in the trilogy, there's certainly leprosy on the island.

Gillian read up about medieval clothing and footwear for me, and I had the great help of three people in my researching, who had important roles in building the authenticity of the books. I showed a draft of *The Seaborne* to Cathy Dagg, an archaeologist living close to our croft on the Scoraig peninsula. She pointed out, *No chimneys!* Smoke from a central fire simply seeps through the thatch, or maybe through a smoke-hole, which also lets in the rain. Fine Art restorer Simon Howell, visiting us, picked up a typescript and remarked that had John been wearing a yellow jacket, as in an early draft, the islanders would have imagined it was gold, the only permanent yellow pigment they would know. He made the point that most people in the eleventh century would have lived in a world of subdued colours, brightened only by the flowers of the field. The jacket suddenly became black!

I had the good fortune to meet and listen to Ian Mortimer at a Historical Novel Society conference, and his books on the Middle Ages have informed me considerably. In *The Shareg* a class of people I would not otherwise have imagined make their brief appearance. While not actually named, on the outskirts of the big town we come across the *gongfermours* – shit-shovellers, to you and me.

I didn't have to research the spirituality of the Islanders. All I imagine has its foundation in what I learned through the Church, through the Celtic tradition of the Céili Dé, and through an experiential workshop offered by a shamanic practitioner. Nor did I have to research the flora and fauna of the Island. I've lived on the west coast of Scotland, and that's the terrain I imagine.

The one bit of place research was done by Gillian. Inverness is a city we both know – but one passage in *The Shareg* required acquaintance with some very particular facilities which she went to check out – and from there, largely wrote the epilogue.

Despite lots of trouble and conflict, there is also much hope in the book. Can you tell me a little about that?

We cannot live without hope, and so I could not write a book that lacked it. Of course, we hope for good things to come to us. But even when we run out of reasonable hope of a viable future, there's an inner flame that can still burn. Morag is not overcome – even when she believes she has reached the end of her life. However, the ending of *The Shareg* leaves a flaw that, in time, will deepen – leaving space for another story.

While I'm deeply pessimistic about the immediate future of the West, there are maybe other stories already taking birth. The world will again be a beautiful and wonderful place. Maybe we won't be around to see it, but perhaps somebody else will!

There are many strong female characters in your books. Was this a conscious decision and if so, why?

No, not a conscious decision. But there have been quite a few notably strong women in my life, all with a marked spiritual bent. Aside from them, Jung might also have said that I have a strongly developed anima which I express through these characters.

Nature plays an important role in your writing. Have you always felt a strong connection to the natural world?

What other world is there? Even in the heart of the city we're dependent on the 'natural' world. We can't eat technology. I expect we're about to see this writ large as food prices soar after this driest and hottest of summers. (I read that in parts of England this year has been the driest since records began in 1836, and the predicted trend is for more of the same, and accelerating.)

But aside from all this, I love to walk alone in the woods and the fields, to feel the life going on around me and notice individual creatures – plant or animal. The plant world is just as sophisticated as ours, just as evolved an expression of the underlying Intention that moves through all. But we can't imagine what it's like to be a plant. Outdoors, surrounded by other kinds of creatures, I feel connected to something beyond myself that also joins with something precious that lies deep within.

What inspires you to write?

I have something to say – I want the world to hear it. Nowadays, my writing emerges out of my frustration with the way civilisation is going, both physically and spiritually. I seek to honour what is simple, and to bring in a reverence for the spiritual within the natural world. My longing for authentic community held together by shared narratives drives my urge to write about one.

When did you first know you wanted to be a writer?

I don't think I ever consciously wanted to be 'a writer.' Reading is a necessity for me, and I've written all my life, mostly essays, short stories and poems, but only latterly for publication. Circumstances drew this step out of me. A story that stayed in the back of my mind, a rare interval when there was time and space to develop it, Gillian's

urging to get on with it and her help, all the experiences on my West Coast croft and with the Celtic Céile Dé Tradition that inform it throughout, blending with earlier experiences that needed to find some kind of voice. All of these things came together at last, as if something was being called out of me.

Do you have another idea for a book that you're working on?

I've been working on a story set in early twentieth century Wales, and perhaps the most interesting aspect of it is seeking to write in English from the point of view of a young Welsh-speaking woman. Drawing on three years of Welsh classes, in which I began to learn a language that structures things in a very different way from English – or any other language I've learned – I've tried to keep some of the idioms and rhythms of Cymraeg in my character's words. The result is a strikingly immediate and vivid kind of English.

Also, in response to a reader's question about one of the strong secondary characters of the Trilogy, I've been drafting *The Book of Siorcha*. The Trilogy is complete, but the Island may yet have another kind of story to yield.

What is your daily writing pattern?

I don't have one. When Gillian and I moved to Wales in 2014, it was to build a house on land that once belonged to her mother. It was a self-build and, while largely complete, there's still a couple of finishing touches waiting for me to find the time to do them – while the inevitable maintenance of any building also requires time and attention. The house is surrounded by a wildflower meadow, an orchard, a berry garden, vegetable and flower beds, a greenhouse, a wild copse that I keep an eye on. There's never enough time in the day to do all that's calling to be done. So I write when I can. Long winter evenings are good! My main joy in the writing is getting the story down. It's Gillian, an editor to her fingertips, who picks it up and hones it, and in that way we've developed a writing partnership. It will be interesting to see how this plays out next year, when I'll be reading a first draft of her own novel, and helping her to work on it. I also anticipate copy-editing and typesetting a very different kind of book written by a friend who died three years ago. Esther Aronsfeld's *Grow Your Inner Life* is a book of spiritual well-being with a Jewish perspective, yet applicable to all. A workbook, not a novel – but packed with stories that bring the essential practices Esther describes to life. In its emphasis on spirit and story, I find it relates to my own writing.

A G Rivett, August 2026