

Tall Trees Short Stories Vol 21

by Dr Gabriel Hemery

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Review by Robin Walter (Feb 2021)

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This collection of 20 pieces uses a wide range of narrative vantage points to build its composite perspective – it takes us to back in time to ox-gangs hauling timber in the 12th Century, to Ypres in WW1, to Nazi-occupied France in WW2; also forward in time to 2044 and a new wood technology, and to an imagined age where book fragments are archaeological treasures.

Gabriel Hemery has ‘unfurled his net’, as he puts it, to catch stories of people living with trees in an extraordinary variety of contexts. As with the previous Vol 20, this collection of stories is not so much *about* trees as a vivid depiction of human dramas played out in the company of trees.

Sometimes an individual tree plays a central role, such as the plane tree obscuring a voyeur’s view, or the mighty oak as lifelong mentor; sometimes we see a tableau unfold simply framed by the trees, such as wild young lovers on derelict land or a startling floor-show in the woods. Yes, there is lots of sex in this book, but also tender first love, gentle humour and harrowing terror.

Themes run through successive stories, handing the narrative baton on as they proceed, complementing each other and constructing a multi-faceted whole. Appropriately, one such theme is the balance of opposing forces, the yin and yang of a tree growing both upwards and downwards, the differing accounts of the under-dog and top-dog, even a trans-gender christmas decoration.

Several pieces reflect on the art of writing and imagination. One of my favourites is ‘Fragments’, where a character coins the word ‘blough’ to describe the barely visible ingredients of life swirling round us, the ‘. . . silken cocoons, fungal spores, beetle eggs, homeless feather mites, seeds seeking scarification. Life passing by, life in waiting, life in motion.’

Creative imagination, writing and books can help to catch some of these ephemeral elements of life, as amply demonstrated in these stories.

I recommend this book, both for tree-lovers and for anyone who appreciates a quirky collection of tales.