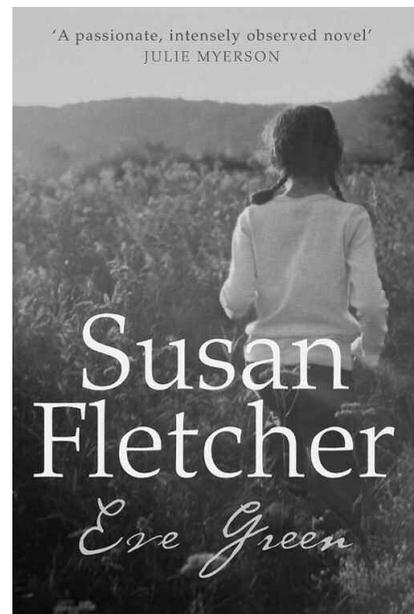


‘Something intimately known’

Sarah Broughton considers three debut novelists:
Carole Cadwalladr, Richard Collins and Susan Fletcher

Judy Finnegan (of *Richard & Judy* fame) recently noted the similarities between the writer Susan Fletcher and her predecessors Charlotte Bronte and Daphne du Maurier. The rural associations of Finnegan’s comparison seem apt: Fletcher’s first novel, *Eve Green* (Harper Perennial), is set in ‘rural Wales’ and was in fact inspired by Lampeter and the surrounding countryside. Fletcher, Finnegan announced, does for Wales what Bronte and du Maurier did for Yorkshire and Cornwall respectively. ‘You can feel and smell these places,’ she added. Two other novelists, also driven by a sense of place, have recently set their debut stories in Wales: Carole Cadwalladr’s *The Family Tree* (Doubleday) draws upon her childhood in suburban Radyr, while Richard Collins, author of *The Land as Viewed from the Sea* (Seren), is clearly influenced by the countryside and coastline near his home in Ceredigion, west Wales. These three novels tell us much about the importance of the environment in locating, not only the story, but the author as well. As Cadwalladr says, ‘There is that dominant notion of the need for a writer to be urban, male and gritty, whereas the setting I’ve gone for is far more domestic and suburban and that makes it “female” and less hip!’ So, if stories belong to their settings – where do the writers themselves fit in? Cadwalladr, Collins and Fletcher have each taken very different routes both to becoming writers and subsequently getting published, yet they share a love of the ‘landscape’ not simply as background scenery but, in Alice Munro’s words, as ‘something intimately known’.

Eve Green has been described as a ‘lyrical celebration of a particular landscape’ and Susan Fletcher acknowledges that reading the ‘rural’ poems of Seamus Heaney, Robert Frost and especially R. S. Thomas while she was writing the novel helped to remind her of the atmosphere and ‘feel’ that she was trying to capture. She grew up in Solihull in the West Midlands, and first ventured to Wales when she was eleven, on a riding holiday with her mother: she would subsequently return to the Lampeter area every year throughout her teenage years. It was a defining experience: ‘Mid-south Wales was the first place (the first *thing* even) that I ever wanted to write about. So it felt right



and proper to set my first novel there,' she tells me. *Eve Green* is a poignant tale of various forms of loss – of innocence, of love and of life itself – narrated by Evie, an eight-year-old motherless girl. The corner of Wales that she occupies is a 'leaky, lopsided house on the edge of a mountain' called Pencarreg – her grandparents' home, where she is sent from suburban Birmingham following her mother's death. In the course of the novel, Fletcher explores Evie's struggle during her first summer in this mysterious, alien community with the horror and grief that accompany death. It is a summer of secrets, revelations, and yet more horror: 'For another death was yet to come – a swift snatched death. It made ditches seem darker and sleep harder to find.' (*Eve Green*) Fletcher admits that 'the landscape was a huge factor' in the writing process. 'I love the area; I love its greenery and ancientness and space and silence and mystery and sheer beauty. I wanted to take all of these things and portray them as best I could,' she says.

It wasn't easy – although Fletcher graduated from the prestigious Creative Writing course at the University of East Anglia with the seemingly prerequisite 'interest from agents', *Eve Green* was far from finished at that stage

– 'it was just a few rough chapters and a very vague plan'. She spent a 'tough' year at home working part-time in the local video store – 'No one takes you seriously when you claim to be writing a book!' – but she stayed focussed because at heart she believed in the project: 'I believed in my characters and my love of Wales.' She spent ten days one March driving and walking around the area where she had holidayed as a child, inhaling the sights she would later portray through Evie's eyes – Carreg Cennen castle and the crows above Llandewi Brefi's church amongst them. After this, the composition of the novel became a process of creating order out of chaos: the tightly-woven plot was late in coming. The landscape had been there from the beginning; the themes of the story slowly grew to mirror its powerful presence. It is a novel, as one reviewer noted, haunted by silences and absences, and its

characters often feel lost in nature. 'I wanted the landscape to seem huge and for people to be dwarfed by it and for their lives to be affected by it constantly,' agrees Fletcher.

In April of this year, Gerard Woodward reviewed *Eve Green* alongside Richard Collins's *The Land as Viewed from the Sea* in *The Telegraph* and drew some telling parallels between the two, 'both set in rural Wales, a marginal land whose ancient, brittle landscapes provide appropriate backdrops for these evocative stories of dislocation and loss.' Both Collins and Fletcher were among the contenders for the Whitbread First Novel Award (as was Woodward himself in 2001 for *August*, which is also, interestingly, set in rural

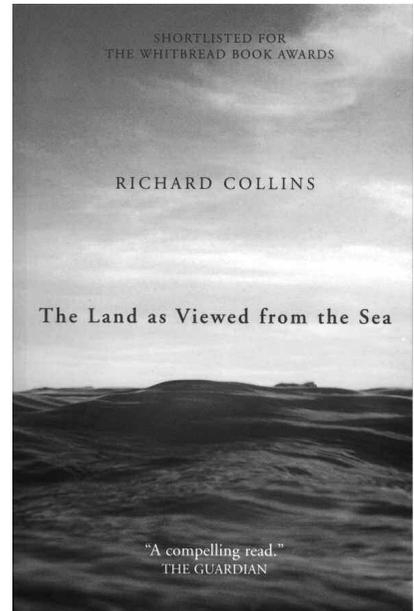


Susan Fletcher
(photograph
courtesy Harper
Perennial)

Wales), which Fletcher went on to win. There are other parallels – neither Fletcher nor Collins are Welsh born; one ‘did a lot of growing up’ here, while the other, originally from Weybridge in Surrey, has made it his home. Both have written novels that explore how their characters attempt to come to terms with pain and loss. But it is the way in which their settings go beyond providing ‘appropriate backdrops’ for their respective books that draws their work onto truly common ground. They are, as Fletcher succinctly puts it, ‘deeply affected by the landscape’ although they express it in very different styles. Fletcher’s is as rich and poetic as the scenery itself, while Collins favours a flatter, more objective style. The opening line of his novel alone gives some idea of the difference in tone: ‘The sea is a great expanse of grey-green and blue cold water stretching under an opaque winter sky’.

The Land as Viewed from the Sea was inspired by a sailing trip Collins took in 1996 and, although he found it an uncomfortable experience in many ways, it did supply him with the title for a novel he had yet to write. It also undoubtedly fed into the central metaphorical strand of the narrative: a man sails single-handedly along the coast of Ceredigion reflecting on the perspective of the land from the sea, re-visiting a past love affair along the way. The influence of Collins’s own profession is also evident in the work: he was a gardener and a farm labourer before taking up his current post as a teacher at the Institute of Rural Studies in Aberystwyth: ‘This field right ahead is moving in the wind while all the rest are still. The wind blows up the slope and moves the long grass in wave-like patterns, each new breeze bending the green blades to show their silvery undersides for a moment. The effect is strange and mesmeric.’ When Collins submitted the manuscript to Seren’s fiction editor Will Atkins, he was immediately captivated: ‘It has a beautiful lyrical voice,’ he tells me. ‘You can tell he knows the land.’ The judges of the Welsh Book of the Year evidently agreed, shortlisting *The Land as Viewed from the Sea* alongside the more experienced Trezza Azzopardi and Owen Sheers. Collins himself is delighted that someone who isn’t from a highly educated background has a chance of being published. ‘People don’t expect manual workers to be writers,’ he says. ‘But I was always a reader and I didn’t find it too hard.’

The plot of Carole Cadwalladr’s *The Family Tree* is neatly summarised by one of the book’s minor characters: ‘Three generations of women, blah blah blah. Triumph over adversity. After many trials it all turns out OK in the end.’ Like *Eve Green*, *The Family Tree* centres around a first-person narrator – in this case Rebecca who, like Evie, has had to come to terms with losing her mother while still a child. Both novels also feature adult versions of Rebecca and Evie who, when pregnant themselves, look back and try to make sense of



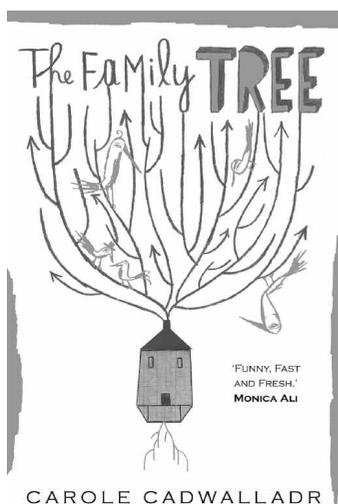
their childhoods. Carole Cadwalladr was never in any doubt about where most of her first novel would be set – ‘in a cul-de-sac because, basically, it’s where everyone in Britain lives,’ she says. She grew up in Radyr and is candid about using it as source material: ‘Visually it was a kind of Radyr. I wanted it to be suburban... Radyr was a small village originally and then it kind of grew into this massive, quite nondescript place with a road going through it.’ Interestingly, perhaps because it’s an all-purpose suburbia (which was exactly Cadwalladr’s intention), it doesn’t feel particularly Welsh, although *she* does,

or at least she does now. ‘I don’t think I felt particularly Welsh when I was growing up,’ she recalls. ‘But subsequently, when I left, it reasserted itself and I realised how different it was to other places.’ There is a ‘sameness’ to much of the UK she thinks, but Wales has got an indisputable identity.

Cadwalladr was still a Physics student at Oxford when she won a travel writing competition in *The Independent*. She progressed from writing travel guides to the graduate training scheme at *The Telegraph*, but later took voluntary redundancy to in order to force herself to fulfil an ambition to write a novel. The first draft – 70,000 words which were written in three manic weeks while on holiday in Greece – was inadvertently wiped off her hard drive when she got home. She is philosophical about it. ‘Now, when I think about it, I just think it’s for the best.’ She took herself off to the Alps to house-sit for three months in order to write the next draft, and

then abandoned it. At this point she stumbled across Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* and found it ‘eye-poppingly illuminating’. She realised she now had a framework on which to hang the novel. *The Family Tree*, an exploration of a very ordinary suburban British family, evolved into a part-mystery, part-romance, part-scientific examination of what makes us ‘us’. Through flashbacks to her childhood and the well-documented tale of her grandparents’ courtship, Rebecca considers the origins of not only her own personality, but the personalities and behaviour of the women in her family tree: how much of herself can she claim as uniquely her own?

Cadwalladr is in no doubt that her background as a journalist was beneficial when it came to the daunting task of completing a novel. ‘It helps you internalise what’s a story; a beginning, middle and end... you don’t mess around, you get into the story straightaway.’ But it was still a long, slow and lonely process. ‘There are no models. It’s not like you can pick up another novel and think, oh so that’s how you do it. I’ll follow your structure... so I’m on page 27 so I’ll do that now. There was never anything that would give you that template, so you had to work it out by yourself, and what I really wanted was to have an editor who could look at it and say, “This is what you need to do.”’ She believes that if she had had some feedback at the beginning, she would ‘quite rightly have been dissuaded from writing that book’ because of the complexity of juggling three plot lines. Beyond that, there was also the



issue of her chosen subject-matter. In her experience there is still a belief out there that men write novels and women write women's novels. When she first began sending out her finished first draft to agents, one commented that *The Family Tree* was female subject-matter, 'so basically what he was saying was, "You can write, but change your subject-matter."' I think that what is perceived as "literary" is interesting, and I think it's still harder for women to break that barrier.' The setting of the novel obviously played a part in this misconception – as I noted earlier, Cadwalladr is all too aware of the importance attached to being 'urban, male and gritty', which is not to say, obviously, that there are no gritty, urban stories written by women out there, just that there are probably fewer suburban, domestic stories written by men.

Susan Fletcher likes to think she would have made it as a novelist without the undoubted leg-up that graduating from the Creative Writing course at UEA gives you, 'but probably not so soon'. It's interesting to note that both Carole Cadwalladr and Richard Collins lived several other lives, as it were, before publishing their novels, and that they completed them in isolation, without the benefit of tutors who could read and analyse the work. Their books have been well reviewed, nominated for awards and been afforded the very vital oxygen of publicity. Cadwalladr and Collins have, in effect, learned through trial and error. Collins's first attempt at writing more than a decade ago came to nothing, but when he took it up again, the result was *The Land as Viewed from the Sea*. Without the setbacks that she experienced, Cadwalladr's novel would not have progressed into a multi-stranded, refreshing take on dysfunctional families. Fletcher, on the other hand, maintains that it was the opportunity to be around other writers that was 'the greatest thing about UEA. Suddenly I wasn't alone in wanting to write. We could share our ideas. That was – and is – the real appeal and benefit, I believe, of writing courses'.

However difficult the route they took, all are agreed that it was worth it. 'There were days,' says Fletcher, 'when it felt hopeless, and a real waste of time. But three or four times a year – no more – I'd have an incredible, magical writing day which lifted me right up, and made me absolutely convinced I'd get there. Those days saved me, and the book. It is a game of perseverance. And of self-belief.' Having signed a two-book deal upfront, she is now working on her second novel. Richard Collins has already finished his second book (which will be published by Seren in the New Year), and continues to write alongside his part-time lecturing. Cadwalladr, who is also writing her second novel, has temporarily returned to journalism.



Carole
Cadwalladr
(photograph
courtesy
Doubleday)