

Stormteller

David Thorpe

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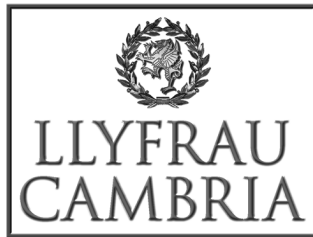
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Praise for Stormteller

"David Thorpe's Stormteller is an intriguing and enthralling novel about the relationship between two teenage boys, leading totally different lives yet strangely alike. The novel is set in a coastal Wales ravaged by climate change and rising sea levels. Underpinned by fascinating parallels with local folk tales, the story of two boys who both love the same girl at a time when fear stalks the land is sure to appeal to a wide audience."

– Multi-prize-winning children's author Malachy Doyle.

"Stormteller is a fabulous piece of story telling."

– Richard Collins, author of *The Land As Viewed From The Sea* (shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award) and other novels.

"David Thorpe has written a compelling story in which elements of ancient Welsh legends of drowned lands and villages combine with a prescient account of a near future in which global warming is causing catastrophic flooding. Set against this background three teenagers are caught up both in the throes of ancient magic and a modern tragedy."

– Frances Thomas, author of many children's and adults novels.

About the author

David Thorpe has twin careers in writing and environmentalism. He is a novelist, non-fiction author, journalist, scriptwriter and comics writer, the winner of a HarperCollins contest to find a major new children's writer with his novel for young adults, *Hybrids* ('A stunningly clever novel' – *The Times*). A *Doc Chaos* e-book is also published by Cambria Books. He has written and been the commissioning editor of many comics and graphic novels for publishers such as Marvel, HarperCollins, Titan Books and Macdonald-Futura. He is a co-founder of the London Screenwriters Workshop and co-author of the *Doc Chaos* comics series and TV scripts. He has written a number of non-fiction books about sustainability. His non-fiction book *The One Planet Life*, being published by Routledge concurrently with *Stormteller*, is a guide to living the kind of life described as the Woodies' settlement in this book. A member of the Welsh Climate Change Commission and the One Planet Council he lives in south Wales with his wife, the musician Helen Adam. Find out more on www.davidthorpe.info.

Also by David Thorpe:

Fiction

Published by Cambria Books:

Doc Chaos: The Chernobyl Effect & Perfection

Published by other publishers:

LifeTheft

Hybrids

Captain Britain

Satirica (two short stories in this anthology)

Non-Fiction

The One Planet Life

Energy Management in Buildings

Energy Management in Industry

Solar Technology

Sustainable Transport Fuels

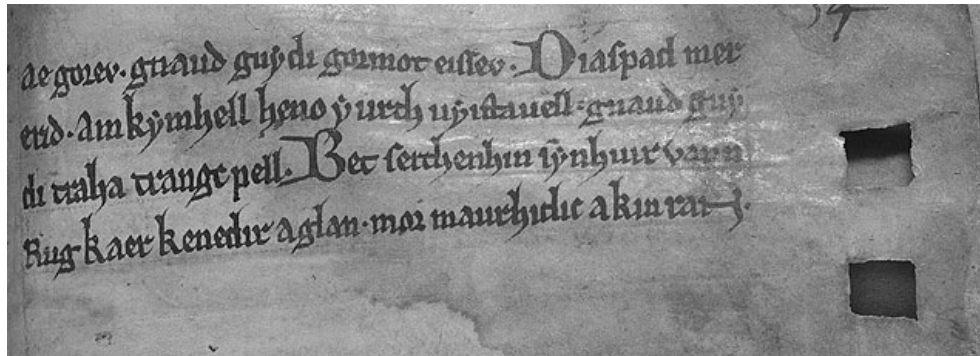
Solar Photovoltaics

Sustainable Home Refurbishment

How The World Works

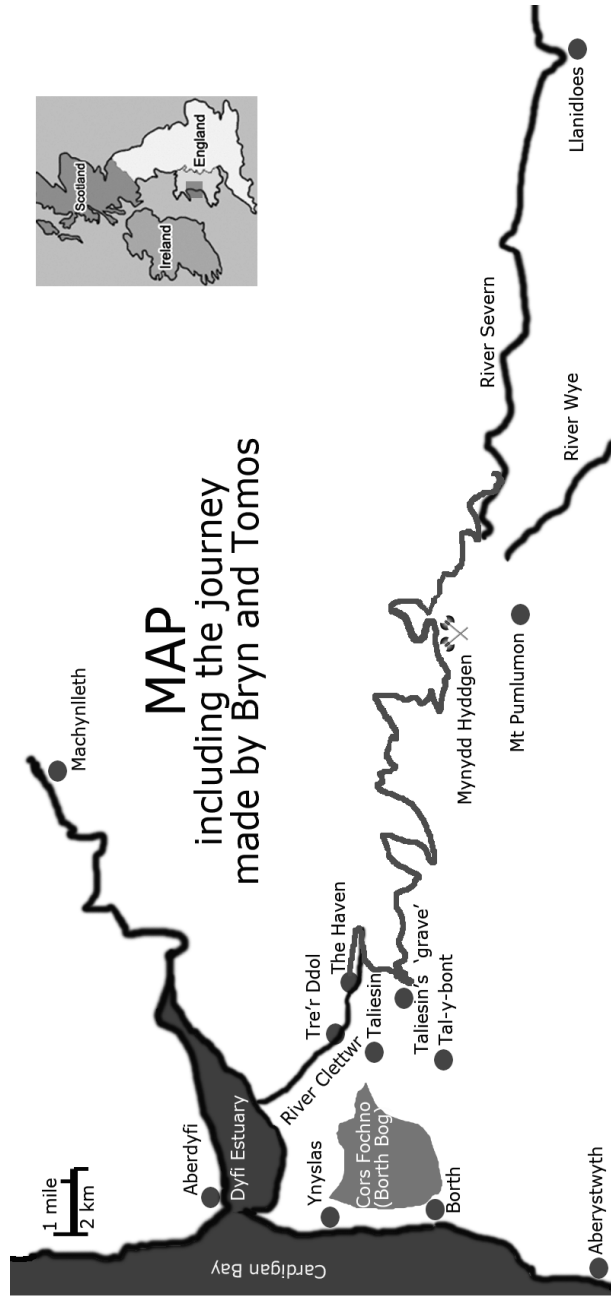
The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union

For Dion



Translation: *'Mererid's cry:
it compels me away from my room tonight.
Distant death is common after the sins of arrogance.'*
- Seithenhin

from *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, folio 74.r.
Currently housed at the National Library of Wales,
Aberystwyth, the Black Book of Carmarthen (Peniarth MS 1)
is a manuscript dating to the middle of the 13th century
recording poems from much earlier.



1: August 15, 2029

'It was somewhere round here that I left the baby,' mumbles the old woman. 'But it's all changed now.'

The boy is trying to catch his mother's muttered speech.

'Of course it has, mama. That was hundreds of years ago!'

'Yes, yes,' she says. 'But it seems like only yesterday.'

The elderly lady, draped in so many layers of dark clothing that she looks like a walking sack of sheep's wool, is wandering round the mud banks and reed beds, peering everywhere. She is completely unaffected by the blazing sun that is blasting sheets of light off the tide-filled Dyfi estuary, where it empties into Cardigan Bay.

'And the sea was much further out,' continues the boy.

He looks like he might be in his young teens, though it is hard to tell. He is ugly. So very, very ugly. His clothes are tatters in the wind, and his bony hunchback pokes through the holes, exposed to the sun's burning rays. He is struggling to keep up with the old woman.

The boy loses patience and suddenly jumps into the sky, looking for all the world like a hooded crow. 'Why are we here?' he shouts into the wind as he heads over the woods and fields of Ynyshir. 'Again. It hasn't worked before and it won't this time.'

His mother springs upwards and joins him in the air, her robes flapping like an old buzzard's feathers. A startled lark

flits away.

'Psch! Always the pessimist! This time it will be different, I promise, Afagddu.'

'You promised before, mama. You always break your promises. You said you'd make me clever and wise and you didn't. You said you'd kill the baby and you didn't. We wouldn't be in this mess if –'

'Shut your beak! I won't have you talk to me like that!' she squawks.

The boy shrinks before her. He's overflown the mark. She is a predator, after all.

'I'll show you!' She leads now, drawing him inland and higher. 'Look! Down there!' She points with her vicious mandibles.

They are circling above a settlement behind some woods. Swifts and swallows give them wide berth. Below is a sprinkling of roundhouses and timber homes. A boy is running over a field, wild as the sea. His hair is golden tufts. The hooded crow spots him.

'Who is that?' Afagddu asks.

'He will be Gwion.'

'The clumsy thief?'

'Aye. See how fit and fleet and handsome he is!'

The hooded crow studies the boy as he stops to pick berries.

'He shouldn't be too fit, too fleet, too good looking,' he says. 'I wouldn't like that.' Then he asks his mother, 'And me? Who will be me, this time?'

In answer, his mother banks away towards the bay, over a village and fields and marsh, to a line of houses that turn their backs on the land and their faces towards the Irish Sea and the setting sun. A cloud of starlings scatters at their approach. A pair of arctic terns turns from their path.

There, on the beach, another boy with ginger curls sits on the pebbles beside a girl with raven hair.

'Him?' asks the hooded crow. 'He doesn't look like me.'

'Nonsense!' says his mother. 'You are as pretty as he.'

'Only you could say that,' says the son. 'Have it your own way. But if I wasn't ugly, you wouldn't have had to make the broth. What made you choose those two humans as our recep- – recep- – what did you say? – recep-tentacles?'

'Receptacles. I said receptacles.'

'Yes, them.'

The old bird sighs. 'Ah, Afagddu! Do you know how many things must be in place for this to work? The receptacles must be the distant seed of the First Ones. Secondly, they must dwell in this valley, which is the stage of the First Performance. Thirdly, they must be of the correct age, and have a similar attitude to each other as you, and I, and Gwion did. And finally – they must be ripe for it.'

'And these boys are?' he asks. 'Are you sure?'

'As sure as I can be. Such a confluence of conditions is exceeding rare. Most descendants of those who lived here in our time have left the valley, leaving few from whom to choose.'

'But who will be you?' he asks. 'Who will be the great Ceridwen?'

'You'll see,' she says. 'Soon.'

Afagddu squawks. 'It's never worked yet. The last two attempts were disastrous.' He shuffles away. 'I wish you'd stop trying to do this!'

'Ach!' she screeches. 'What do you know? This time, I have a new idea.'

Later, back in human form and perched upon an outcrop on the edge of Nant-y-Moch, Ceridwen and her unfortunate offspring continue to dispute. To the north, Cader Idris, the

chair of Arthur, is cloaked in cloud. Westward, the sea is mottled with cloudshadows and sunsplashes.

'People are stupid,' says Afagddu. 'They make the same mistakes over and over again. They never learn. That's what I think, after watching them for generations. We, on the other hand...'

'Oh, we're so much wiser, aren't we?' says Ceridwen. 'Because we stand outside of time, outside of human chronology.'

'But I've forgotten. Tell me again: what are we?' asks Afagddu. 'Are we gods?'

'If only you weren't so slow! No,' says Ceridwen. 'The stories of the Cymreig gods died when the Romans massacred all the druids. We are all that survived. The fabulous ones.'

'Fabulous – like, brilliant?'

'Fabulous – as in fables. Fabled ones. Ours are the stories that humans tell, which motivate and inspire them. They use us as we might use a staff to walk, or a spear to kill – as a tool, or for sport and entertainment.'

'I don't understand,' says the boy.

'No. You would though – if you'd got the broth,' she says. She grips his shoulders, her fierce eyes fixed on his. 'And you will this time! Or –'

'Or what?' he asks, flinging her off him. 'Nothing! Just – hundreds of years of the same. You said, every now and again, when conditions are right – I still don't know what that means – we have the chance to have humans live out our story, just as we did the first time. And when that happens, the story might play out differently – according to you. With a different ending. One in which I get what was meant for me. We've done this twice so far. Each time, the wrong boy became Taliesin instead of me. And in between each time, I've had to wait hundreds of years!'

'I, too,' she interrupts.

'Now it's the third time. And you say it's special. Well I'll tell you what I want now. I don't want the broth. I don't want wisdom. I don't want wit. I don't want to be a shaman, a magic man, a poet, or 'at one' with the universe. I want –'

'What?' cries his mother. 'What could possibly be better than that?'

'Revenge!' he cries. 'Revenge on Gwion! Revenge on the ignorant peasant boy who got what was meant for me. We had waited a year for that broth. A whole year! You insisted on getting it right. And what did he do – steal it from under my very eyes! Just three drops, that's all it took – your gift meant for me went to him! And why? Because you left the room. You said it needed more ingredients! Well, if it did, why did the magic work when he tasted it? Why did he get the gift? You're such a perfectionist! You should just have given it to me as it was–!'

Ceridwen tries to hug the boy's hideous head to her chest but he breaks away. 'Precious! Stop it! I didn't know! Don't you think I blame myself every day?'

But the boy won't stop. 'A year we waited for your precious magic potion! It seemed like forever! I bet it would've been ready after a week! Well, that year has been nothing compared to the fourteen hundred we've spent since! And all the while we've been forced to listen to humans singing that pretender's praises. Hero-worshipping him! Yet he's nothing but a common thief. I should have been the one they sang about! It should have been me!'

'Afaidd! Stop winding yourself up! You'll give yourself an asthma attack,' coos Ceridwen, stroking his angry, angular shoulder. 'Now, listen. That's exactly why we're doing this! One way or another, you'll get what you want this time. You'll see... I'll prove it to you. Here, let me peel aside

Stormteller

the days and show you how this will end...'

And with that she shuffles the playing cards of time as much as she is able to, and the landscape blurs as if a veil is being drawn across it. When its milky film dissolves, another scene, quite different, resolves...

2: January 6, 2030

They'd kept the reporters and the rubber-necking crowds outside. The public gallery of the oak-panelled courtroom was almost empty but for his nan and her husband. Tomos couldn't bring himself to look directly at them. His right hand kept smoothing down his ginger curls, and his gaze was flicking around for somewhere safe to let itself fall, somewhere free of accusing or judging eyes. But it found only the well-worn floor of the dock where he stood.

His stomach felt queasier than it had on the night of the storm, or the time The Haven was attacked, or when he nearly died of fever up on the moor. He was only half in the courtroom – one leg still stood on the sodden mountainside where Bryn had died.

He dimly heard the judge's corrugated-iron voice begin and forced himself to glance at him; his wig was corrugated too. The colour of iron. He forced himself to listen. His words were like thorns thrown by a gale.

'Tomos Davies.'

A pity. A pity that's my name. If it weren't I wouldn't be here.

'You stand accused of the murder –'

Not me. Can't be me. Me, I blame the millions what caused global warming that made the ice melt that made the storm happen that started all this. No one'll punish them. Yet it's me that suffers...

'– on the night of the 3rd of September of this year –'
*That would have been the start of a new school year. Normal,
like.*

'– of Bryn Edwards.'

Now, there were no words in his head, just a spinning, bottomless hole opening up inside him. A swirling of hate and love and rage and wishing and grasping and smashing in his heart.

'How do you plead: guilty or not guilty?'

And even the sound of the fidgeting jury stopped. He refused to look at them, waiting with their prejudiced minds for what he would say next. He wouldn't look. He wouldn't speak. He wouldn't give them anything. He wouldn't play this game.

He knew that was a lot of wouldn'ts.