



The Welsh Girl

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From the acclaimed writer Peter Ho Davies comes an engrossing wartime love story set in the stunning landscape of North Wales during the final, harrowing months of World War II.

Young Esther Evans has lived her whole life within the confines of her remote mountain village. The daughter of a fiercely nationalistic sheep farmer, Esther yearns for a taste of the wider world that reaches her only through broadcasts on the BBC. Then, in the wake of D-day, the world comes to her in the form of a German POW camp set up on the outskirts of Esther's village.

The arrival of the Germans in the camp is a source of intense curiosity in the local pub, where Esther pulls pints for both her neighbors and the unwelcome British guards. One summer evening she follows a group of schoolboys to the camp boundary. As the boys heckle the prisoners across the barbed wire fence, one soldier seems to stand apart. He is Karsten Simmering, a German corporal, only eighteen, a young man of tormented conscience struggling to maintain his honor and humanity. To Esther's astonishment, Karsten calls out to her.

These two young people from worlds apart will be drawn into a perilous romance that calls into personal question the meaning of love, family, loyalty, and national identity. The consequences of their relationship resonate through the lives of a vividly imagined cast of characters: the drunken BBC comedian who befriends Esther, Esther's stubborn father, and the resentful young British "evacuee" who lives on the farm—even the German-Jewish interrogator investigating the most notorious German prisoner in Wales, Rudolf Hess.

Peter Ho Davies has been hailed for his "all-encompassing empathy that is without borders" (*Elle*). That transcendent compassion shines through *The Welsh Girl*, a novel that is both thought-provoking and emotionally enthralling.

The Welsh Girl Details

Date : Published February 12th 2007 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (first published January 1st 2007)

ISBN : 9780618007004

Author : Peter Ho Davies

Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, War, World War II

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From Reader Review The Welsh Girl for online ebook

Sam says

This is a beautifully written book that pulls together the stories of Esther (the Welsh Girl) who lives in a small town in the North Wales Mountains, Karsten a German POW who gets sent to the camp that has been built in the mountains beside the town, and of Rotheram a German Jew who is sent to mid-Wales to interview/interrogate Rudolph Hess while battling his own demons (although this is only a small part of the overall story). Some have said the book is slow to start but I honestly didn't feel that as it suited the pace of life in the mountain town superbly, making the reader slow their pace to suit the lives lead in this quiet part of the country while chaos reigns elsewhere as the War rages across Europe. Davies' subtle writing captures not only the pace of life in the town but also the town itself. His descriptions although detailed do not bog down the story and still allows room for the reader's imagination to add it's own unique twist.

Each of the characters are realistic and well written, with each showing their own quirks and traits throughout the book, none of which seem contradictory or out of place. Davies' attention to detail has created not only believable main characters but every character within the book from Esther herself to the town folk and guardsmen has been considerately written with care taken to keep everyone and every action as real as possible.

Davies' addresses many different themes with this book from devotion to one's family and home to the need for escape, from love to hate and bravery to cowardice. Each is dealt with in a subtle and careful manner without the reader realising the gravity of the issues raised half the time. It is only as you ponder each of the characters' stories that you begin to realise the depth of Davies' writing and his ability to tackle big emotive issues in a simple yet respectful manner. The big issues of the War are also addressed in the book, but rather than being the focus of the stories they are written into the fabric of the characters individual experiences. In this way Davies doesn't overwhelm the reader with big issues of losses, missing soldiers, death and destruction but introduces as it would have been, slowly through town gossip and weekly news reels.

The only flaw was the slightly anti-climatic ending for all of the characters and thus for the reader. However on reflection you can imagine that to many that is how the War itself ended, as an anti-climax, no big finish, no final big push, just an end to the War but continued hardship and struggle as the rebuilding began.

A very different WWII book that is subtle in it's complexity yet simple in it's approach. A very good read and an excellent first novel, one that I'm sure I will read again and one that will give the reader something different each time.

Trisha says

You'd think I'd have learned by now that just because a book was nominated for the Man Booker prize doesn't mean I'll like it. Even though it got good reviews when it was first published several years ago, and even though many other readers have raved about it, and even though the description sounded interesting and even though it had been recommended to me, I just didn't like it. I probably should have put it aside right away because it didn't take long for me to realize that I just wasn't getting into it the way I usually do when I'm reading something that engages me.

Almost from the opening sentences, which sounded a bit hackneyed and cliché-ridden, I had my doubts and was tempted to put it aside. Instead I kept reading right on through to the end and I'm not even sure why. Probably because of the setting (Wales), the time period (the Second World War in the months following D Day) and what sounded like a good premise for an interesting story (what happens when a German prisoner of war in remote camp in rural Wales falls in love with the daughter of a fiercely patriotic Welshman?) In the hands of a different writer this might have turned out differently. But unfortunately that didn't happen here. The characters should have been more carefully drawn and the plot less driven by situations and scenes that were either totally unbelievable or disappointingly predictable.

To make matters worse the book opens and ends with a parallel plot line involving Rudolph Hess, the Nazi war criminal, which might have been interesting except that it was never clear just what, if anything, it had to do with the rest of the novel. I kept wondering why it had even been included. In fact all the way through this disappointing book I kept wondering why I was still reading it. But I suppose if there's any benefit at all from reading books that are less than satisfying, it's in knowing there are so many other ones waiting to be read that will be much more enjoyable.

Amanda says

Why?? Why?? Why???????? I really, really tried with this book. I've been having trouble finding a good book, and I pinned a lot of hopes on this one. Alas, it wasn't meant to be. I love WW2 fiction, but this one just didn't cut it for me. Hopefully, one of my other library books I checked out will be the golden ticket I need.

Lela says

My interest was held by this historical fiction novel set in England at and after DDay. Several really good characters and two stories interwoven -- one in a Welsh village with all its touchy locals & the incomer English and the other about the determination of Rudolph Hess's sanity. The best and most compelling character is Karsten, a German POW captured by surrender on DDAY who was eventually held in a POW camp in the insular Welsh village. He was a very sympathetic character, surprisingly so. His interactions with the London boy sent for safety to Wales & with "the Welsh girl" are both painful and beautiful. The earlier interaction of the girl and an English "soldier" sent to build the camp are just painful. Her naivety is difficult to imagine but believable under the circumstances. I didn't expect to be drawn into the book as I was. There are moving passages; there's so much sadness but not really darkness. I'm still pondering whether or not the common German soldier really didn't know what their hierarchy was up to with the camps until the end of the war. I would like for that to be true. Whatever you believe about that, this is a very good read!

Kristine says

Well-written, cinematically rendered WWII novel of interwoven stories of a 17-year-old Welsh barmaid and daughter of a sheep rancher, a German POW who surrendered, and a British interrogator who is a German Jew. Very interesting exploration of cowardice, pride, dislocation, and nationalism with well fleshed-out characters and vivid scenes.

Clay Olmstead says

Not the usual war / romance story. More thought provoking than I expected. The standard views on belonging, courage and cowardice, freedom and captivity are upended and re-examined. Will keep thinking about this one for a while.

Lynette says

Good, though I saw little point to the Hess/Rotheram storyline.

Kirsty Darbyshire says

This was a great book that I raced through and couldn't put down. I've read about a hundred good reviews of it and no one seems to have a bad word to say about it - at this point I would be disappointed if it doesn't at least make the shortlist. It's the third book I've read from this year's longlist, and so far it's my favourite.

The setting is the end of the second world war, the location is a small remote village in Wales and the central character is really Esther, the Welsh girl of the title. Esther's holding the small family farm together, looking after her father and a wayward Liverpudlian evacuee, and being romanced by an English soldier. A lot of the narrative takes place in the mind of a German prisoner of war held nearby.

There is also a second story in the book involving Rudolf Hess and one of his interrogators who seem to be in Wales at the same time. There's not much in this book that you could call weak, but I did find myself wondering why the book had started with this story and then moved away to the story centred on Esther. The first story does become relevant and the ending ties together very nicely, but I did feel that this thread of the book was left hanging in the air for a long time. That was pretty much the only negative thing I can think of to say though.

This is also a first novel (Ho Davies has published short story collections before) and on the basis of how well written and enjoyable it was I'm very much hoping he can keep up the quality and provide me with great books for years to come. If I were the Booker Prize committee I'd worry about what happens if he gets given the Booker at the first attempt and then proceeds to produce fabulous novels over the next few decades. Good problem to have I guess!

Jackie says

I always hesitate to read WWII books or any books on war for that matter. I always think they are going to be depressing, dry or too violent, but usually I'm pleasantly surprised when I take the time to read one. The

Welsh Girl was one of those that pleasantly surprised me.

The first couple of pages (prologue) were a bit dry, but I was glad that I pushed through it because I discovered a gem when I got to Esther's perspective of the story. The book follows the perspective of three characters: Roth, Esther and Karsten, but really Esther's and Karsten's perspectives predominate the book. Having the different shifts in character views was really interesting and made it a unique story because of the background of each character. The characters jumped off the page for me and at times I found myself wanting to hug them. The writing was simply beautiful.

My only critique is the ending. I won't say much, but initially I wished the ending could have been happier. However, after thinking about it for some time I felt like the ending was left a bit open so that readers could make up their own ending.

SarahC says

This novel is about conflicts of nation, loyalty, and identity. Novels trying to construct this kind of story sometimes become cliche, but this one has a very sincere tone that is refreshing. English intelligence officer Rotherham has trouble dealing with his German Jewish heritage. A German officer surrenders under heavy fire, is sent to a camp in Wales, and begins to see the uncertainties of his life overall. A young Welsh woman wonders where the definitions are set - enemy? traitor? fatherland? And where does a woman's future play a part in all this?

Even though telling the story of the Welsh girl is given more breadth, it doesn't necessarily have the most depth. Actually, it is the smaller passages in the book that make this story more powerful. Rotherham's conversations with the war criminal and his own outcome after the war are key to the novel. In the latter part of the story, German soldier Karsten is brought to despair, not by his army's defeat, but ultimately learning what they had fought for. After he watches postwar newsreels of Belsen prison camp, he says "To be fighting for that. And I was ashamed of *surrendering*."

This is a thoughtful story on many levels. Most importantly, it describes the fact that when nations declare war, individuals are not so simply divided into distinct citizenship nor do they form instantly clear personal truths.

Carl R. says

The Welsh Girl has been following me around. Even before I finished the book, I found myself thinking about it in the same way a tune runs unbidden through your brain. I'm still fascinated by the meaning of the title of this piece, but I'm not going to explain it here. You'll have to read the book to get it.

It's said that there are often writers who are novelists, others who are short story writers, and that the crossover can be difficult. It's also said that Raymond Carver tried all his career to write a novel and couldn't do it. Peter Ho Davies, a celebrated author of short stories for whom this is his first novel, doesn't have that

problem.

A friend of mine has been highly infatuated with Davies ever since she met him in a workshop a few years ago. I've admired him as one of the better short story writers around, but never been enthralled. That's changed.

I believe Davies' long stint in a medium where every second counts contributed to the excellence of *The Welsh Girl*. Nothing is wasted. Not a character, not a description, not a rumination. And it adds up to a beautiful whole.

The Welsh girl in question is Esther Evans, a seventeen-year-old who feels stuck in her village but feels destined for a wider future. Others see her as a potential globetrotter, too. But there's this war thing. The action begins just before D-Day, and in short order, the world comes to her before she has a chance to leave. First there's an English adolescent evacuee (two, actually), then an English sapper, then a bunch of German POW's, then a German Jew sent to interrogate the POW's. There's also collection of other characters who never would have come near the village but for the war. Esther's yen for the exotic gets her in trouble even before the English army infests the countryside, and the complications get even more complicated afterwards.

Though this is unquestionably Esther's book, she shares main billing with two other primary characters--one of the POW's and the aforementioned German Jew. Each of them, interestingly enough, has lost a parent. Each of them has a question of honor to settle. Each of them has at least one identity problem to deal with. Such dilemmas are shared by various of the less major characters as well. Putting the layers on the onion, the individual crises are reflected by questions of German, Welsh, English, and Jewish nationalism and cultural identity. (You didn't know about Welsh nationalism? I didn't much either till I visited a few years back. I can attest to the continuing truth of the hostilities reflected in the book.) We even get to spend some time with Rudolf Hess, and the conversations with him provide both a psychological and an historical dimension that is not only interesting in itself but informs--even transforms--the thematic and dramatic texture of the novel. (In fact, the interrogation scenes, especially those with Hess, carry such a load of philosophical and historical material so suggestive and challenging of thought and feeling that they bear a good deal of thought and discussion in and of themselves.) Thus does Davies masterfully mold macrocosmic chaos into a comprehensible artistic whole.

We sometimes see the same events through different eyes. Sometimes we see one part of a story sequence through one pov, then the next part through another. One character leaves the book for over two hundred pages. I was anxious about where he was, relieved to see him return. Thus, not only is the action itself suspenseful, but the very structure of the book creates its own suspense in somewhat the same way a mountain creates its own weather.

Davies spends a great deal of time in the minds of his characters, but every moment moves the story. One of the complaints I have about novelists such as Ian McEwen and Richard Ford, is that they sometimes get self-indulgent about their characters' pondering and wander around through their thoughts, feelings, and recollections to the extent that the books lose dramatic tension. Not so with *The Welsh Girl*. There's always something that's happening, has just happened, is about to happen, or seems about to happen, which is sometimes just as good.

My only general quibble, aside from a couple of specifics that I can't discuss without spoiling the first-time reader's experience, is that Davies' characters too often have attacks of delayed intelligence. They go through a scene, then later in their thoughts attach meaning to the events or to their response to the events so that the author can rather too obviously insert his comments on the situation. It's minor, but a little annoying,

rather like Cormac McCarthy's habit of introducing his similes with "like some [atavistic mammal, e.g.]." I set aside a few passages to quote for examples, but they all give up too much plot for the initiate, so I hope I've been clear enough about what I mean. If not, well, again, you'll have to read it yourself.

The Welsh Girl is on one level a solid wartime romance. Nothing experimental or groundbreaking about its structure or language. However, its historical, mythical, and personal layers are so closely woven, so lend meaning one to the other just as different-colored threads add dimension to a fabric, that it had me looking for symbols that weren't there. I kept wanting Esther to somehow echo the tale of the biblical queen, a secret Jew, who saves her people. However, the parallel simply isn't there. I'm satisfied, though, with the more mundane idea of a connection with the movie/swimming star Esther Williams, who represents that wide, romantic world that Esther aspires to. There's still plenty of resonance in the Shakespearean allusions (and other literary and historical references I doubtless missed) to lend the novel a glow of meaning far beyond the excellent surface tale.

This is my second WWII POW novel in as many months. Maybe the debut of Ken Burns' latest is having a sub rosa impact on my reading life. I understand The Welsh Girl was on the long short list for this year's Booker prize, but didn't make the short-short list. I'll be interested to see what beats it. I certainly consider it better than anything I've read by the noted Booker celebrity Ishiguro. Maybe I should get on that committee.

At any rate, I'm thankful to Davies for writing the book and to my friend for putting me on to Davies. One of this--or any--year's top reads.

Lana Del Slay says

[She falls in love with a prisoner of war named Karsten.

But that's not so awful. Um. World War II? And the POW is German?

...right. I can see where that'd be a conflict. Good.

Tracy says

I loved this book. It was a little slow going at first and the first 20-30 pages I had to half-push myself into. Then I got caught up in the story. The language used is beautiful, some sentences so perfect they hurt, but at the same time it doesn't distract at *all* from the story being told. This is a book I read at first primarily for the story and now I want to reread again for the subtle nuances I missed. But it makes me think and it makes me happy and I love the characters - not just how they are drawn and developed but who they are.

Just beautiful.

Lady Drinkwell says

There were a lot of things I really liked about this book. There were beautiful lyrical descriptions of life in Wales during the war, with particularly interesting comments on national loyalties. The Welsh girl at the

centre of the story was a very interesting character, and everyone in the story was very believable. However I kept waiting for the connection with the story about Hess to become clear and when it did it was really a very slight connection. There were some wonderful little scenes with Hess, one I particularly liked when they went for a drive and met a bull. I think because I kept waiting for the two stories to be intertwined I had the feeling throughout the book that I was reading an introduction to the story and it had not yet got going.

Superstition Review says

The Welsh Girl by Peter Ho Davies is set in a Welsh village near the end of WWII. Davies splendidly sets his story against the backdrop of WWII without weighing it down with too much action or too many war terms. It is also set against a pastoral countryside so there are very lyrical and elegant passages. There's also a love story between the Welsh girl and the German POW, but it goes beyond that.

What's most intriguing about this story is that it is driven by the characters' actions and development during the war. The story is told in third person subjective so that we get an intimate perspective and alternates between Esther, Rotheram, and Karsten.

Esther is a seventeen-year-old Welsh girl who works at a pub serving the Welsh as well as the English soldiers. She's curious about the POW camp. Rotheram is a German Jew that left to England on his mother's insistence and became an interrogator. He is sent to the Welsh village to interrogate a supposed Nazi feigning amnesia. Karsten is a German soldier who surrenders and gets sent to a POW camp at a Welsh village. All three of them change and gain something by the end of the novel despite the many tragedies.

For instance, Esther gains a new definition of patriotism: "Why fatherland and not motherland? She'd wondered. But now she thinks: Why should the love of fathers or mothers be equated to love of country? Couldn't you love your country by loving your children? Weren't they your nation, at the last?"

Karsten gains a sense of serenity, "He had felt such peace, he was sure it [the war] must be over, that they'd separate and rise to the bright news of armistice. An end to the war that was neither victory nor defeat, just peace."

Rotheram comes to terms with his identity— "It had never occurred to Rotheram that he could be unashamed of fleeing, of escaping, of living. Of being Jewish—if that was what he was. And suddenly it felt not only possible but right to not be German or British, to escape all those debts and duties, the shackles of nationalism... The Jews, he knew, had no homeland, yearned for one, and yet as much as he understood it to be a source of their victimization, it seemed at once such a pure freedom to be without a country."

By Claudia Estrada

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

In a small village in North Wales in 1944, seventeen-year-old Esther works behind the bar at the Quarryman's Arms with her boss, Jack. Her father, a sheep farmer, spends his evenings in the pub's Welsh-speaking public bar, while the "lounge" side of the pub is full of Englishmen - sappers mostly, soldiers who were sent to this out-of-the-way place to build something secretive. Esther has been seeing one of these sappers, a young man called Colin - it is the closest she can get to her dreams of seeing the world. The war is both distant and ever-present; while few of their young men have signed up - Rhys, a clumsy, slow-witted young man who worked on her father's farm and who had asked to marry her is one of them - there is rationing, the drone of planes overhead, and the presence of soldiers. They listen to Churchill on the wireless in the evenings, but not even the war against Nazi Germany can dull the clash between the Welsh locals and the English interlopers.

Karsten is German, an only child whose father is long gone, a tall, strongly-built young man who happily signed up for Hitler's army. He even became a corporal and could have gone far if he hadn't been posted to one of the beaches that were targeted by the Allied forces on D-Day. Overwhelmed, he surrenders and is sent over the Channel with the other prisoners-of-war to England, and then Wales, where he is kept in the brand-new POW camp outside Esther's village. The camp is just over the hills of her family's farm, and the boy, Jim - an evictee from England who lives with them - joins a group of older boys who taunt and heckle the prisoners.

From London comes Captain Rotheram, a half-Jewish German whose mother was Canadian. He fled Europe several years before and has been working with Colonel Hawkins, first as a document translator (his German is superior), and later helping Hawkins interrogate the prisoners. He is sent to Wales where the high-up Nazi leader Rudolf Hess is being stored, ostensibly to ascertain whether he's faking his amnesia in order to have him stand trial for war crimes later in Nuremberg. From there he is sent north to a small village with an unpronounceable name, where one of the POWs has escaped.

As these three connect, they come to question their loyalties and their place in the world, as well as their notions of right and wrong.

After a fascinating, lengthy prologue from several months ahead in time (September 1944), where Rotheram goes to see Hess, the story steps backwards to June and takes up Esther's story. From there it is mostly quite slow - or I should say, Esther's side of the story is quite slow, and I didn't find that Davies wrote this female character as strongly and capably as he did Rotheram and Karstan. It was hard to get close to her, even when she let us see inside her mind and soul. She was a sympathetic character - the lonely motherless girl who yearns for travel and adventure, with a taciturn father who'd rather work at the quarry, if it were open (it's being used to store treasures from the National Gallery instead), than farm sheep. Her thoughts towards others are often quite harsh in the way of teenagers, and yet with her responsibilities of running the house and working at the pub, and being a pseudo-mother to young, difficult Jim, she's no teenager, not really. For as strongly as she comes across, as a character, I could never get close to her. I never had a moment of bonding, woman-to-woman.

In contrast, Karstan was the character I wanted more of. It's not often you get English-language historical fiction that explores the German side (Hans Fallada comes to mind), and it's even rarer to find a largely sympathetic portrayal of a Nazi soldier. But it is the Nazi side that I am often most curious about, precisely

because it's less explored. And Karstan was a surprisingly heroic character - not surprising because he was a Nazi, just surprising in the context of the story. He has charisma, he's physically attractive, and he shows that right and wrong are in the eyes of the beholder, so to speak. He didn't believe Hitler was wrong - though his loyalty isn't as staunch as the other POWs - but as to what he really did/does think, Davies ducks that bullet. It was a bit of a let-down, that Davies doesn't tackle the psychology of the Nazi side. He subtly nudged it a bit, but mainly avoided going down that road. This left Karstan disappointingly flat as a character, by the end.

And then there's Rotheram, who really only makes an appearance at the beginning and at the very end. He has several confronting conversations with Hess - Hess provides the most enlightenment of the Nazi psychology, even if he claims to have no memory of ever being Hitler's right-hand-man - and Hess makes him face his own racism towards the Jews. Rotheram's mother was an ethnic German whose family migrated to Canada years before, his father a German Jew, but he refuses to acknowledge this side of his heritage and denies that he is Jewish at all (he doesn't appear to be Jewish in the religious sense of the word, but it wasn't religion that the Nazis were upset about but *being* Jewish). It is Hess who makes him realise that his denial speaks loudly to his anti-Jewish sentiment, which makes him no different from Hess. It was the most interesting psychological part of the whole novel.

Esther finds herself "compromised" by Colin - she won't call it rape because, as she understands it, women who are raped are also murdered - and this alters everything. But it is her relationship with the POW that gives the story its main plot and thrust, propelling the story forward. Otherwise, it's not a plot-driven story so much as it is an exploration of culture clash, between the British and the Germans and between the Welsh and the English. As a look inside Welsh culture - in the 40s at least - it's very enlightening. It explores the concept of Welsh nationality, often using sheep as an analogy, and what it means to be Welsh (and the meaning behind the derogatory slang term, "to welsh" or "welch", which I'd never stopped to think about before).

By the end of the novel the main theme that came across is a fundamental basic principle: people are people, no matter what ethnicity you are or country you come from - or what side of a war you are on. At the end of the day, there's very little separating people from each other, and much of what's there needs to be constantly kept alive by fanning the flames of hate and fear and contempt. In that regard, it was a successful, well-written story. I just wish Davies had written his characters as strongly as he did his themes.

Jim says

Peter Ho Davies' debut novel, *The Welsh Girl*, is an historical fiction set in the latter half of World War II in a remote village in Wales. The construction of a secret camp causes much excitement in the village, particularly for Esther, a young barmaid who has fallen for one of the English soldiers tasked with building the camp. The dalliance is particularly volatile because Esther's father is a staunch Nationalist who views the English as nothing more than Anglo oppressors. Esther's solider, Collin, promptly takes advantage of Esther and ravishes her, spilling both the secret of the German prisoner-of-war camp as well as his seed. Soon after, Esther has a secret of her own.

Auf Weidersehen Collin, enter Karsten, a dashing young blond German Navy infantryman who is as clever with his hands as he is with his tongue. Despite his fluency in English, Karsten has a rough go of it in the POW camp because he is marked with the secret shame of the capitulator—survivor's guilt's hateful cousin. Poor Karsten is afflicted with self-loathing not seen since Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* took a swan dive off the

fantail of the *Patna*, leaving hundreds of passengers to drown.

As the chapters alternate between Esther and Karsten, the two characters are inexorably drawn together until the barbed wire that separates the prisoner inside the camp and the woman inside her tyrannical father's home becomes metaphor thin. It seems a foregone conclusion that Esther and Karsten will get busy in the haymow, which they do, but after a few days hiding out in Esther's father's barn eating food that she prepares for him, Karsten decides to give himself up—again—and is returned to camp.

A curious wrinkle in Davies's village narrative concerns a German-Jew named Rotheram, an officer in the English Army who is sent to Wales to interrogate Rudolf Hess, the member of Hitler's inner circle who famously flew the coop in a Messerschmitt Bf 110 and touched down in Scotland in an ill-conceived attempt to negotiate peace with England—without Hitler's knowledge or approval. The Führer dismissed Hess as a lunatic. Hess professed amnesia and Churchill had the aviator locked up for the duration of the war in a series of safe houses in Wales.

Because so little is known about Hess's motives, he is an excellent subject for a work of historical fiction. Pairing him with an interrogator who is conflicted about his identity and is in extreme denial about his Jewish ancestry was a masterstroke. But does the story belong in a novel about a shepherd's daughter?

Davies has a knack for evoking the telling detail but at times he falls prey to the quick and easy characterization: the English soldier who is “glossily handsome, like the lobby card of a film star,” (25) or the bartender wounded in the Great War who walks with a limp but has “never spilled a drop.” (28) Indeed, when we first meet Esther she compares her emotions to the settling of a pint of Guinness, a sentiment that errs on the treacly side of sweet.

Nevertheless, Davies's characters are marvelously nuanced. Each of the three major characters suffers from a severe conflict of identity. Esther must shield the identity of her baby's father from her father and invents a relationship with the village's only casualty to protect her child. Karsten, the son of a fallen war hero, struggles in vain to fill his father's shoes and win his mother's approval. Rotheram, the German-Jew, tells everyone who will listen to him that's he's not Jewish until the denials transcend falsehood and become farcical. Each one of these characters could carry the novel, but the hero-by-committee approach falls short.

While the organization is a bit of a muddle, by the end of the epilogue all questions have been resolved and the novel's earlier missteps are redeemed. We even follow Hess to his cell in Spandau where he committed suicide at the age of ninety-three, a cipher

Elvan says

I enjoyed reading *The Welsh Girl*. This is one of those books which covers the three E's for this reader. It educates, enlightens and entertains. I admit to knowing very little about the isle of Wales before I read this book. I love it when I come away from a read with a better sense of place and a small understanding of a culture to which I was unaware. When a book broadens my horizons I am a happy reader.

The theme of being captive runs deep through this novel. The obvious, the German soldier Karsten is a captive in a strange land. Esther is a prisoner of her heritage and her body, a Welsh girl wishing to be somewhere else but forced by tradition and circumstance to remain in her homeland. More than individuals, Wales is a captive of English rule, the locals forced to suppress their native tongue and speak only English in

their classrooms.

This novel is an English majors fantasy read. In addition to the concept of captivity, The Welsh Girl ponders surrender in its many forms. Much food for thought and a highly recommended read. My only negative would be the sections with Rotheram and Hess. I'm sure there was all kinds of symbolic meaning to the German Jew Rotheram interrogating Hess, but I failed to understand the deeper meaning behind this subplot. I found myself glossing over these chapters to get back to the lives of Esther and Karsten.

A pleasure to read.

Sammy says

Interesting. Unique. Holds it's own in such a full library of World War II historical fiction. It really is different from a lot of other WWII stories out there, which I really appreciated and kept me reading. It was also his writing that kept me truly engaged. I can't even put my finger on it, but something sucked me into this book and kept me there until suddenly I turned the last page, looked up and wondered where the time had gone.

A couple of times I think Davies lost control of his novel. A few too many story lines that didn't really add to the big picture, that of Esther and Karsten's relationship, or even they're separate stories. Take out the extra characters that apparently had backgrounds we needed to address, Davies could have focused on Esther and Karsten more and given their individual and combined tales richer layers that the reader could further fall into.

I did enjoy the few running themes that occurred. That of Esther, Karsten and Rotherham all being of single-parent households and being bilingual. Both of which caused them to struggle with their identities and places in the world.

The main thing that I just keep thinking about with the book is Davies's writing. It's descriptive enough to allow you to picture everything the way you want to picture it and set you in the story, but not overly so that you're continuously taken out of the story itself. It's a delicate balance not a lot of authors can pull off, but Davies's does it superbly.

In the end, if you love WWII historical fiction, this is definitely a new one to add to your library. It'll give you a breath of fresh, Welsh air. And I promise you, with the way Davies writes you will smell that air, and feel the cool crispness fill your lungs.

Kalen says

** 1/2

This just didn't wow me and as obsessed as I am with all things Welsh right now, that is disappointing. First, the description of the book here and elsewhere feels like it was written by someone who didn't read the book. Secondly, I found Esther to be mildly irritating and only interested in men. Maybe that would have been handled differently by a female author? Maybe I'm being too critical? And finally, the most compelling part

of the story to me actually had little to nothing to do with the main storyline--the two lone chapters about Rotherman and Rudolph Hess. A novel about **that** would have been far more interesting but I'm not entirely sure why two chapters were inserted into this book.

I suspect others will like this one more and I do think this will be a good selection for book groups, especially given the discussion guide at the back. I'll read more from Davies (later) but wanted this book to be something it wasn't.
