

Title: *The Blackthorn Branch*

Author: Elen Caldecott

LIKES

- Great to get to know some Welsh mythology. Enjoyed fantasy and folktale elements. Magic but authentic. Magic going on underneath an ordinary community.
- Welsh setting and sense of the landscape. Variation in settings – council estate, industrial, countryside. Snippets of Welsh language but left up to the reader if they wanted to research that.
- Intriguing opening
- Theme of letting go and moving on well-handled
- The language – some really nice phrasing. Some good similes (See also dislikes though!) Very visual, almost cinematic.
- Family relationships – interesting and believable. Close knit but not without tensions. Emotional depth shown in a few brushstrokes e.g the dad nursing his pint on his own.
- The strength of the girls' friendship. Cassie and Sian back each other up, teamwork, are there for each other. Bravery – they admit they are scared, but found strength to do what needed to be done.
- Blue light – drip fed throughout and created mystery
- Continuity of history, themes of migration. Connections through history.
- Pagan forgotten past
- Nain – good to see a strong grandparent figure, valued for knowledge of heritage and old stories of the area. Sense of her having had a life.
- Good build up of suspense
- Loved the ending. Build up of tension and then the release of the lovely resolution with families re-united. Moving, nicely paced and well-written.

DISLIKES

- Overuse of similes patronises the reader and a bit clunky. (See also likes though!). Slightly mannered, prosaic language. A bit too much of Cassie 'digesting' things! There are better written YA books. Frustrating when the beautifully written ending shows how well she can write!
- Discussion about whether the use of Welsh language interrupted the flow (see also likes) or added to the magic/folklore elements. Some felt that the human side was more interesting than the magical.
- Would have liked to go deeper with some of the themes, especially grief.
- Discussion about whether the death of Taid & the fathers anger could have been explained more clearly for younger readers.
- Beginning a bit slow – no big hook.
- Did we care enough about Byron? Needed to get to know him a bit more first? Some thought this was done satisfactorily through the mother's view.
- The watch was a bit obvious.
- Aging of the children a bit inconsistent. E.g. parents waiting outside school, scooter, but also allowed to be very independent.
- Discussion about the parents – unrealistically quick to let them go on an adventure in a big hole in the ground? Or nice that the trusted the girls while still showing care e.g. 'take your coat'?

PUZZLES

- Bit confused about the underworld – Welsh, Greek, Roman?
- How will Alun explain where he's been all this time? Has a living relative.
- Is the magic gone? Or has it reconnected with the living (the tree bursting through etc)
- How did Taid die? This being mysterious made it harder to connect emotionally to everyone's grief.
- Why was Byron chosen? His grief? Connection with Twm. Gwen offered him Taid back.
- Why was Byron dancing at the tunnel? What happened to the burnt out car?

PATTERNS (Within this book and links to other books and real-life experiences)***Within the novel***

- Blue light
- Returning to the Underworld – finding Byron not the climax
- Family bonds, broken and healed
- Environmental theme – junk/the Tanglement

Real life links

- What grief is like

Links to other books / film

- The Last Girl King by Cat Doyle (Arthurian fantasy)
- Wolf Light by [Yaba Badoe](#) (strong female friendship, culture, myth, magic, sense of place (Mongolia, Ghana))
- The Girl of Ink and Stars by Kiran Millwood Hargrave (legends and mythical stories)
- The Dark is Rising by Susan Cooper (classic fantasy)
- The Blue Book of Nebo (Welsh setting)

HOOKS

- Good for early Y7. Mythology fans – often know a lot about Greek or Norse mythology – a new one for them to dip into.
- Popularity of horror, fantasy, magic, mystery.
- Interview an older person – story, memory, folklore.
- Thinking about families – dissatisfaction, closeness etc.

OUTPUTS FOLLOWING READING (ORAL AND WRITTEN)

- Interview an older person – story, memory, folklore.
- Illustrate some elements e.g. the rowan tree bracelet
- A collage of the tanglement.
- What would you offer Gwen? Discussion or story writing
- Fantasy writing. Look at her description of the tree and create your own. Could prompt with photos of well-known trees in the local park.
- P37 description of the tunnel – creative writing prompt. What's in there?

OTHER

Other books recommended by the group:

- *You Better Watch Out* by Sarah Norton
- *Refugee* by Alan Grate
- *The Eternal Return of Clara Hart* by Louise Finch (KS4)
- *Little Barry* by Kelly McCann (Out in January 24)
- *Saw Bones* by Catherine Johnson
- *The Den* by Keith Gray