

Novelist Ed is making a character

Until recently the British novel had become largely indifferent to nature either as a theme or even just as a physical setting. Melissa Harrison and Sarah Hall are two brilliant contemporary exceptions but scour the works of Ian McEwan, for instance, and you will find precious little green stuff.

I once spotted a chiffchaff singing in the opening scenes of *Atonement*. Chesil Beach in his novella of the same name serves as a metaphor for a life that has become a stony dead-end, but McEwan's stock location is invariably urban, if not carpeted and centrally heated.

Not so Edward Parnell's excellent first outing as a fiction writer, *The Listeners*, which was recently published by the Norfolk-based Rethink Press.

It won the company's 'New Novels Award' in 2014 (first prize was the cost of

MARK COCKER salutes a new Norfolk writer who is combining nature with fiction.



printing) and one can readily understand why Parnell's gothic tale is memorable for its sustained handling of atmosphere and mood.

Throughout the story there is a discomfiting sense of something undisclosed shaping and distorting the lives of a Norfolk family afflicted by domestic strife as well as global conflagration.

The book is set at the beginning of the Second World War in a fictional Norfolk village, although the author revealed to me that he took inspiration from his own childhood forays in East Walton, the rural parish on the edge of Breckland.

That the book is also full of minutely accurate observations of trees, flowers, birds and other animals draws on the author's own career as an environmentalist.

Before he wrote the book Parnell worked for both BirdLife International and the Norfolk Wildlife Trust.

Essentially *The Listeners* tells the story of the Abreharts, a mother and three children – Rachel, Kate and William – and the varying ways that each of these young people comes to

terms with the mysterious death of their father.

This centrally absent figure, John Abrehart, is evoked piecemeal by his offspring as a crudely vigorous musclemann, who is at once a war hero and a sensitive country labourer steeped in rural mythology and the elemental life of the fields, but he is also morally flawed.

His own wandering eye and the lingering troubles from earlier generations of Abrehart supply the ghosts bedevilling the wartime family.

Many of the critical scenes take place in a derelict property where John Abrehart used to live and to which he feels compelled to return to do his mischief.

The title of the novel *The Listeners* is a playful reference to

a hugely popular poem of the same name by Walter de la Mare, in which an unknown rider stops mysteriously at a lonely house.

At the end, the poem's ghosts refuse to reveal themselves to the caller, but the lyric trails away in an air of haunted melancholy with the lines:

"Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,

And the sound of iron on stone,
And how silence surged softly backward,

When the plunging hoofs were gone."

Parnell's novel is itself memorable, not for what is openly declared but for what is withheld. I don't want to reveal much more of the cleverly layered plot, except to say that the story is unfolded elliptically

study of nature

and has a dramatic if cathartic finale as the young generation free themselves in large measure from the sins of their elders.

What is powerfully telling in *The Listeners* is Parnell's exploration of Norfolk landscape. In fact the wild surroundings help tell the tale.

This is particularly true of William Abrehart, the book's primary narrator and the young son who has become an elective mute since his father's death.

William's observations of wildlife both link him to his lost parent but also provide him with consolation as he grieves.

In *The Listeners* nature becomes a vital additional

character, omnipresent and revealing of all the inner lives of its human players. Here is William Abrehart on the woodland bluebells.

"The flowers are so vivid – even in the deepest shadows they seem to give off their colour – yet they fade to nearly-silver where the sun sneaks through the green gaps above.

They are like an army; sometimes they all point one direction, but next time you look they face the opposite way.

He [John Abrehart] used to reckon if you crept up on them you could catch them ringing in the breeze.

I crouch at the edge of the indigo expanse, but they are silent; the flowers know full

well I am here so are staying quiet, teasing their heads before me in the breeze."

The vocabulary is authentically that of a wartime schoolboy, but it is also adjusted for an individual attuned to non-human life by his father's intimate teachings. *The Listeners* is a very fine debut novel and the story of the Norfolk landscape has just found an exciting new voice.

■ **Ed Parnell will be talking about his novel on Sunday May 31 (5pm) on Future Radio (107.8 FM), when he is interviewed by Mark-Bond Webster for the weekly arts programme Platform.**

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