

At Looking Glass Books, Anne Donovan discusses *Gone are the Leaves*



'I love the sounds of words, and you don't always need to know what they mean to enjoy them.'

Writers find their inspiration in all sorts of places, but not many would be able to imagine a whole novel from one little word. **Anne Donovan** is the exception; browsing through the Scots Thesaurus, she came across 'Feilamort' – 'the colour of dead leaves'. Dead leaves, she thought, are more than one colour, but then the picture of 'a wee fearty looking boy getting out of a carriage on a dreich Scottish day' came into her head. She set aside her current work and let the image lead her. The boy became Feilamort, and the book is '**Gone Are The Leaves.**'

On Thursday at Looking Glass Books Anne was in conversation with fellow novelist **Angela Jackson**. She began the evening with a reading from the book, which is written in the Scots language – a language that Anne loves because it so often has one word for things that in English require so many, and the sound of that word almost always evokes its meaning. We know from the beginning of *Gone Are The Leaves* that we are in Scotland, but a very different Scotland from today; the writing has a mediaeval feel, Feilamort has come to the castle as a page to 'my lady' – Anne originally thought the book would be set in a specific place and period, but she soon found it becoming 'other worldly.' The Thesaurus, to which she returned many times during the course of her research, is set out in themes; the words in these themes led her to find

the mindset of characters from the past.

The book's main narrator is Deirdre, a young servant girl with a pure and innocent love of nature. She likes to pause in her work to observe raindrops in the sun, she sees colours in a thunderstorm as 'the green of a sick plant, violet-edged', and describes the branches of the leafless, storm battered tree as 'reaching out like empty arms.' Deirdre yearns to embroider something as beautiful as nature,, but feels that this is impossible. She laments the cutting down of the forests for men to make boats and furniture. Her mother, however, is so scandalised by Deirdre's 'paganism' that she sends her to the priest, who tells her that to see God in nature is a deep sin.

Feilamort has a special talent; a voice that is so beautiful that 'the sound of angels rang through the great hall...he seemed transparent, he and the voice as one.' Deirdre and Feilamort share a love of the outdoors and become friends. My Lady decides to have Feilamort trained as a singer; a Senor from an unspecified hot country arrives to teach him. The new arrival finds the weather, the countryside and the people (apart from My Lady) dull and depressing, but he recognises that Feilamort's voice can 'transform a space..into heaven on earth.' Anne pointed out that much can be learned from the Scots language about a nation's climate and character; there are numerous words for cold, wet, damp and very few for sun.

The existence of so many words for specific weather conditions shows how close earlier generations of Scots speakers were to the land. Words for grumpy and miserable apparently vastly outnumber those for happy and cheerful!

The story is told from several different points of view; Anne explained that this was necessary as Deirdre is often too innocent to understand what is going on. The singing teacher is able to observe how the courtiers, considered the intellectual elite of their time, 'peck at' a work of art (in this case Feilamort's voice) without appreciating it as a whole. Anne brings their behaviour into sharp contrast with

Deirdre's pure and instinctive feeling for beauty; Deridre feels that the only true response to such a wonderful singing voice is silence. Many people in the court, however, want Fielamort for other things; they manipulate the situation for their own gain.

Anne's usual writing style is to get a first draft down on the page as soon as possible, advice that she still gives to new writers. *Gone Are the Leaves*, however, was written much more slowly; for Anne, research involves music, pictures and even visiting the possible settings of the book as she tries to absorb the feel of the story. She intermingled writing with more research, and found that the Thesaurus let her find the characters and the details of their lives.



In her previous work Anne has always tried to write in a readable Glasgow voice, but she wanted this book to sound mediaeval. She has given much consideration to whether she should write in Scots (she says that some Glaswegian acquaintances are amazed that anyone outside the city can understand her books), but has concluded that whatever language a story is written in, the reader still has to 'get into the way of it', to enter the world of the characters – this is as true whether the author uses Standard English or Scots. Anne always tries to make her books accessible, and reads her completed novels out loud three or four times over to see if and how they work.

Asked if she had always intended to write in Scots, Anne explained that when she first started writing, she had tried to use Standard English for her short stories and to write in the third person, but she could somehow never finish any of her works. She decided to make an effort to complete a story, and wanted to write about dyslexia. To speak in another person's voice – especially someone with dyslexia – would, she felt, just add to their pain. In 'Hieroglyphics' she thought

about words on a page looking like spiders running about in all directions; she felt liberated by the fact that in Scots there is no one way to write something down. Something clicked, and her writing started to work; she had found her voice.

Angela asked Anne if it had taken bravery to write something so different from her highly successful novel, Buddha Da.

Anne said that the book she had been writing before she came across Feilamort's name was in a similar vein to her previous work, but once she had him in her mind, she could not ignore him. It took her four to five years to write *Gone Are The Leaves* whereas her other books have taken only two, but Anne needed those extra years to understand the very different world that these characters inhabit. Buddha Da was also a different world, but one not so very different from the the world she lives in.

Anne concluded the evening with another short reading, and also mentioned one of her very favourite Scots words, 'mortfundyit', which means 'as cold as death.' One member of the audience commented that an added bonus of reading the book was finding words that her Granny had used and that she had not heard for years. Angela said that Deirdre's affinity with nature reminded her of Jessie Kesson's *The White Bird Passes*; Kesson, Grassic Gibbon, Nan Shepherd and Nancy Brysson Morrison are some of Anne's favourite authors.

A story that began with one word, a word that brought life to a young boy with the voice of an angel, has evolved into what Angela Jackson described as 'a poetic and beautiful book, a story brought to life by the Scots language.'

Gone Are The Leaves is published by Canongate and available from [Looking Glass Books](#).

