

Book Review – Salvage by Mark Baillie

Nash Lacklow is dying.

A lifetime of poor housing, dirty jobs and smoking has caught up with him, and now his emphysema's at stage four. And as he tells his nephew Spence and great-niece Emma,

'There's no stage five.'

Given news like this, some people want to travel, go sky-diving, meet their idols. Nash only wants one thing, and that's to find out what happened to his little sister Jenny, whom he hasn't seen since she was five years old.

But Nash's family were Gypsy Travellers. In 1920s Scotland, their lives were undocumented. Stories were kept alive in the oral tradition, but some stories were simply never known. Now Emma wants to help Nash find Jenny; as the first person in her family to go to university, she believes her new-found research skills will lead them to the truth. But she soon begins to realise that if you are a Traveller, things are likely to be a lot more complicated.

In *Salvage*, his outstanding first novel, **Mark Baillie** tells a shocking and tragic story. Emma and Nash may be looking for just one person, but it's not only Jenny who's disappeared without trace. For decades, local councils had free rein to remove Traveller children from their parents, often on the flimsiest of pretexts; they would concoct stories of neglect, accuse parents of not sending their children to school, and denigrate the living conditions in Traveller camps. Their real motives, however, were much more likely to be based on their wish to get Travellers off their land, to frighten families

into moving on before more children were taken.

'It made families scared to settle anywhere for too long. And that was the idea.'

Councils were not even required to keep records of their actions. Very young children were sometimes adopted, and later told nothing about their heritage, but those over the age of five were far more likely to end up in children's homes (often run by religious orders) and institutions, where they were frequently abused. From there they were sent into the cities, to feed industry's insatiable need for cheap labour.

When Nash's father died young, his mother struggled to care for the family. He and his brothers were soon out hawking (selling door to door.) He remembers vividly the night officials and police officers came for Jenny,

'My mother fought them like...I don't know what. I never thought that a person could make noises like that, like an animal. Screaming and kicking. Fists, teeth, nails...the police held her down until the officials got my sister into the car. And that was it. She was gone.'

So Emma sets out on the trail. She asks the advice of one of her professors, who sends her to the National Records Office. It's there that she discovers that the office's title is no guarantee of success. She takes Nash to the site of the old camp in Tranent, only to find it's been turned into a supermarket. At another camp an Elder tells Emma,

'You'll need a miracle, not brains.'

Undeterred, Emma tries the local council offices, where she's patronised and belittled, and meets a brick wall of ignorance and indifference. She makes some progress at the National Library but still Jenny's fate eludes her. And it's only after

numerous fruitless trips and searches that a sudden flash of inspiration leads to something that none of her painstaking research has uncovered.

Salvage, however, is not just about Jenny. Mark Baillie shows us many aspects of Gypsy Traveller life, and by focusing on just a few well-nuanced character he has been able to bring each one of them to life. Nash, glad to be settled in a council bungalow, still has fierce pride in his heritage. He may be terminally ill, but no doctor's going to tell him what to do, and he's most definitely not giving up the cigarettes. But in his spare bedroom he keeps the doll that Jenny dropped in the mud as she was dragged away from her family,

'Afterwards, Nash noticed Jenny's doll face down in a puddle. He picked it up and wiped it on his trousers, thinking he could give it to her next time he saw her but he never did.'

Meanwhile, Spence, Emma's father, is a complex character. Emma's mother was *gaj* – a non Gypsy girl – who liked the romantic idea of the Traveller community, but found it wasn't for her. Fran has left Spence and Emma to pursue other utopian dreams. Spence is caught between the traditions he grew up with and the new life that Emma is determined to lead. He's always on his financial uppers – still hawking carpets, and still hoping that his next call will be The One to improve his fortunes.

Spence struggles with the idea of Emma going to university instead of settling down with a nice Traveller boy – yet at the same time, he's extremely protective of her, and dreads her meeting someone who'll 'get her into trouble.' He can't see the point of her radical politics – he's resigned to the fact that nothing will ever change, and that people like him will always be at the bottom of the pile. Spence thinks the search for Jenny is at best pointless, and at worst dangerous; he sees any unnecessary contact with the authorities as

madness, and he doesn't want Emma to raise Nash's hopes. The past is the past as far as he's concerned.

Then there's Emma, who's relishing all the new social and political ideals that a university education offers,

'He (a council official) squinted at the protest badges on her lapel. They were all there. CND, the Anti-Nazi League, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and others for causes he hadn't even heard about.'

"You're a student?" '

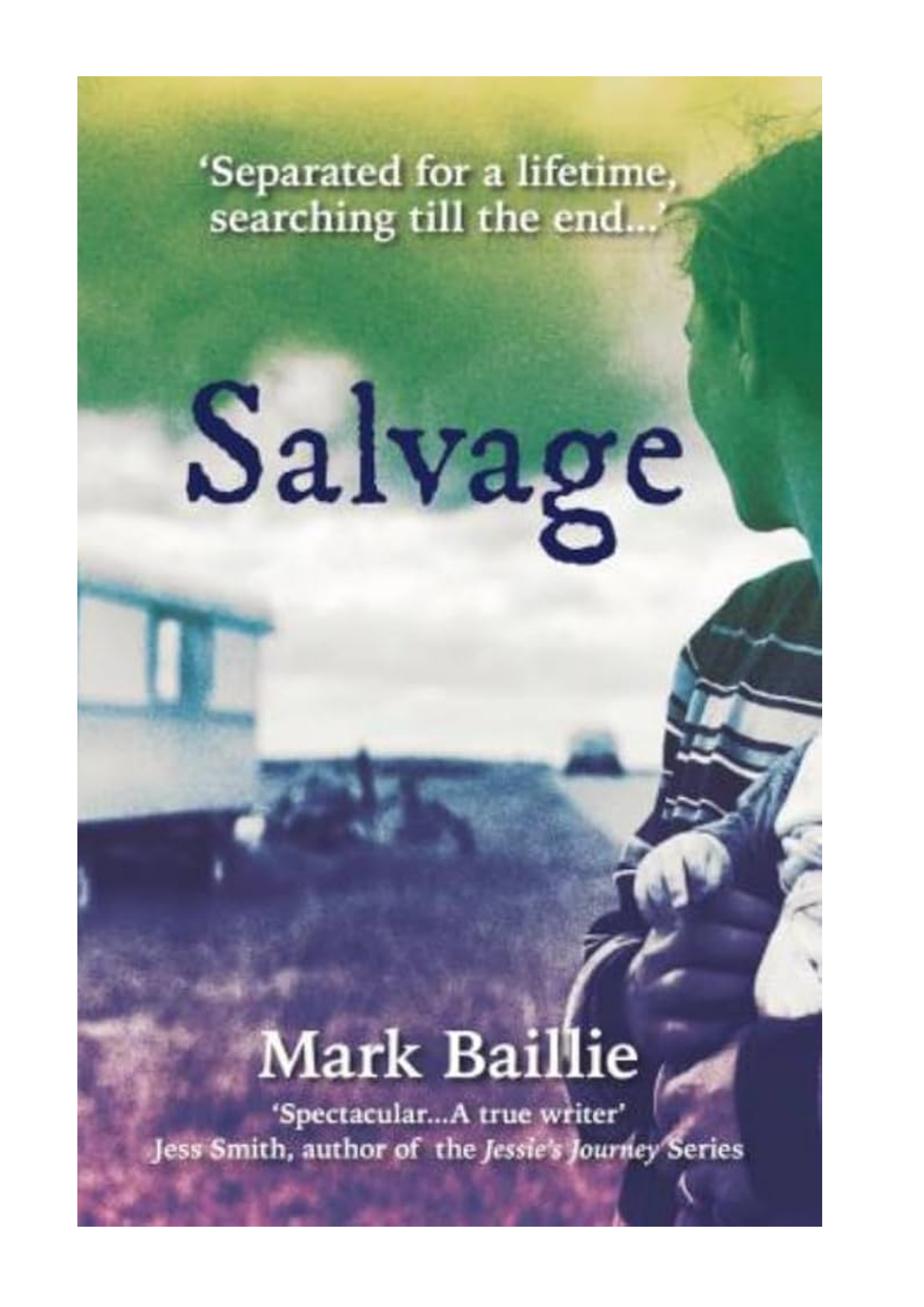
But Emma has more in common with her father than she might care to admit. She loves her studies, but knows she's not like the other privileged students on her course. The mansions opposite Nash's housing scheme infuriate her,

"This is all inherited" said Emma..."Privilege. That's all I'm seeing here. Generation after generation of privilege. Those houses should be requisitioned by the government and turned into flats. You could fit five families into one of these." '

Emma doesn't have money to splash on a party lifestyle, she works to pay her way, lives with Nash in a small council house, and above all still feels, and understands, the importance of family loyalty, of her own Traveller identity, and of the bonds that tie her to her community.

Salvage could easily have become a dry history lesson – still revelatory and horrifying, but impersonal and distant. Instead, Mark Baillie has turned this story into a truly gripping page-turner. I was desperate to find out if Emma would find Jenny. I felt that I knew all three main characters, and I was rooting for them all the way.

It is quite extraordinary to note that *Salvage* is Baillie's first novel; it's written with such skill and assurance, and, just as importantly, without the waffle that so often plagues books by new writers. The outrageous treatment of Traveller families needs to be discussed and addressed outwith the world of academic papers and conferences. Mark Baillie (who himself has Traveller heritage) has raised awareness of his community's story whilst writing a stunning novel.



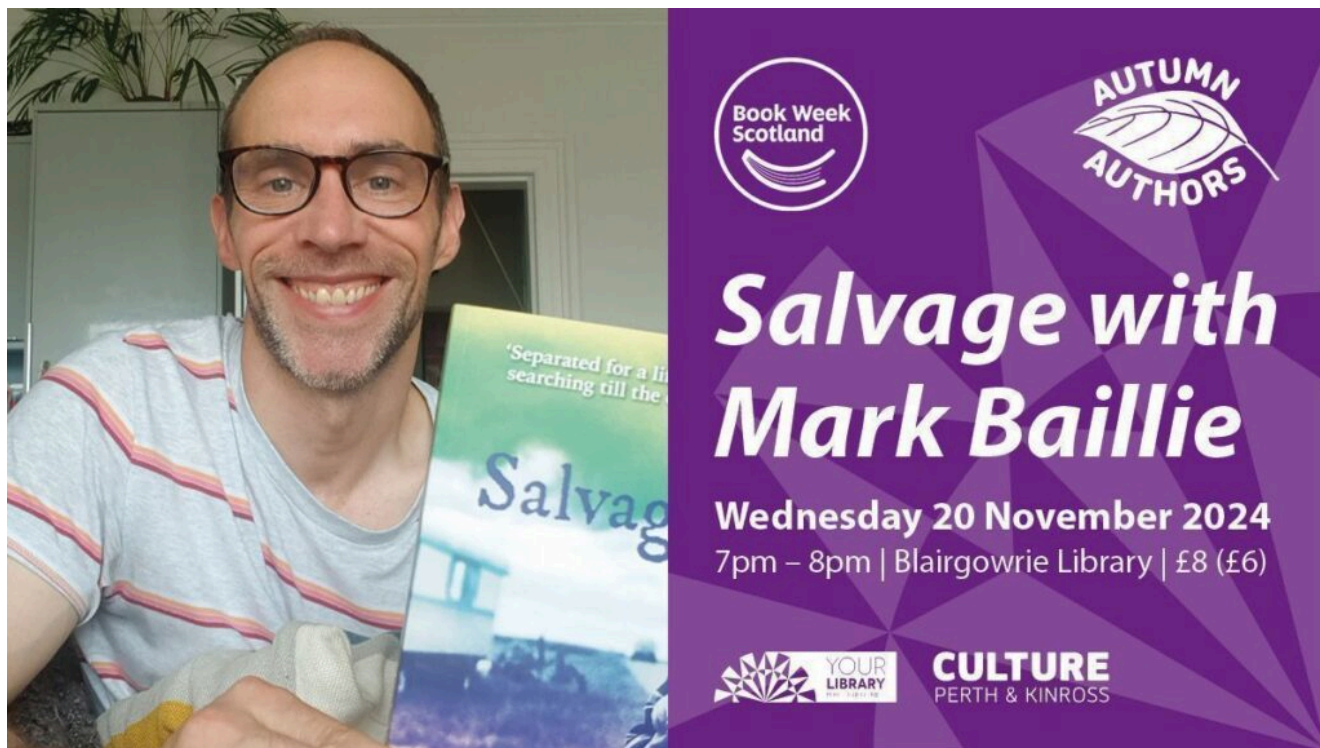
'Separated for a lifetime,
searching till the end...'

Salvage

Mark Baillie

'Spectacular...A true writer'
Jess Smith, author of the *Jessie's Journey* Series

Salvage by Mark Baillie is published by [Tippermuir Books Ltd](#), an independent publishing company based in Perth. It is available from bookshops, or can be ordered from the publishers.



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