

## Time-travelling the Inner Psyche

*The Minstrel Boy*. Sharon Stewart. Napoleon Publishing, 1997. 165 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-929141-54-7.

Stewart does many things well in this, her first novel for the young adult audience. Her plot revolves around a deeply interesting idea: because of the bending of the space-time continuum, time-travel might occur due to sideways slippage between past, present and future. What could one learn, for example, in Wales of A.D. 500? Quite a lot. Especially if you are seventeen years old, and have both guilt and resentment for your deceased mother, as well as fury at your father who, you assume, abandoned you after a divorce. In the twentieth century David is a gifted, guitar-playing rock-musician who has difficulty with close relationships; in fifth century Wales he learns how to love, and what the personal responsibility and cultural weight of the bardic tradition is all about. And somehow he brings it all back with him, even the authentic harp technique.

The big difficulty in creating a new world in either science-fiction writing or in an historical novel is how to set it up quickly, so that the unknown civilisation becomes a living creation rather than an artificial stage-set with costumes, props, and caricatures of people. Stewart's story is full of promise and she gives us a fine sketch of life in a Welsh village after the Romans have left, but it feels preliminary, as though it were written to suit the demands of formula fiction, or even that of a much younger audience. Under such constraints, only the main character has space to develop emotionally, which suggests that a larger, richer story has been compressed to fit within a very narrow length requirement such as the series market demands.

I could feel resolutions a-popping everywhere, even before the story was complicated enough to really demand them. Yet some important issues are by-passed. For example, stealing a motor bike should have resulted in direct social or moral consequences for David; instead, it produces an inversion of values in which David takes no responsibility for himself. His father pays for repairs, and school peers who had formerly ignored him now show admiration in almost the anti-hero tradition.

The ending both delighted and irritated me: delighted, because the tie-in with King Arthur and his contemporaries was unexpected and fresh; irritated, because it came from a *deus ex machina* character, the professor uncle of David's nurse, who is created for the express purpose of delivering the information. David's own father is a teacher and capable of understanding, and a scene which explored emotional growth between absent father and troubled son would have lifted the characters to a more significant level of insight.

Enjoyable as the tale is, a problem novel with a time-travel plot should equal imagination to the limits. Somehow this story is imagination with the lid on.

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