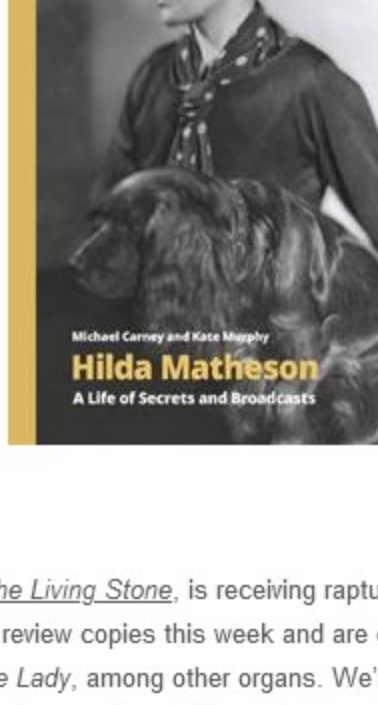


The Handheld Newsletter

October 2023

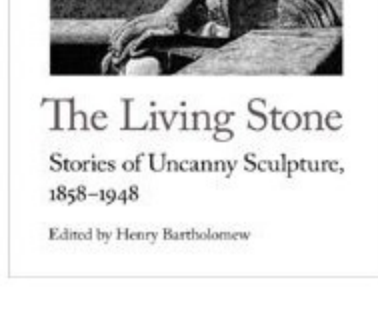
Hilda digested!

Our latest book, *Hilda Matheson*, a biography of the first lady of the BBC, was published on 19th September and had a 3000-word 'digest' of its juicier parts published in the *Daily Mail* a week later. We have no idea how this affected sales, but they are chipper. Possibly even buoyant. And Hilda herself was being talked about by Kate and co-author Kate Murphy for the Guildhall Library, which definitely drove some sales our way. (See also a talk in November, below.)



The Living Stone

Meanwhile our October title, *The Living Stone*, is receiving rapturous squeals of excitement on social media. We sent out the review copies this week and are expecting a nice crop of reviews, including one from *The Lady*, among other organs. We're a bit nonplussed about *The Lady*'s books editor commissioning a review of this collection of classic supernatural fiction about gargoyles, menhirs, stones and rocks, but we've seen the review, and if anything can turn the attention of its readers away from choosing nannies, it will.



Free books for BristolCon

Handheld is sponsoring the annual BristolCon gathering on 21st October with a large donation of free books to be given away to attendees, one to each person registered. We've been selling books at BristolCon for some years now, and we're rather fond of it. Its attendees like our books. It's only a day, but it packs a lot in, and Kate usually ends up attending several panels, if not speaking at them, with Kat in charge back at the stall. We meet colleagues and friends there. We hear a lot about SFF writing and publishing in the south-west of the UK, and it's just a pleasant place to be for a day. This year Kate will also be doing readings from our 2020 titles, *British Weird* and *Women's Weird 2*, because BristolCon has decided that all those three-year old titles that missed out on a launch or other exposure at the Con in 2020 due to lockdown will have their five minutes of fame this year.



Autumn talks

Have you checked whether you have a space in your diaries to sign up for our online autumn talks?

Tuesday 31st October, 2-3pm: Kate will be in conversation at the Guildhall Library, London with Henry Bartholomew, editor of *The Living Stone*, on its publication day. You can [register for this free talk here](#).

Tuesday 28th November (7-8pm): Neglected Books Publisher Spotlight on *Hilda Matheson*. Kate will be in conversation with Brad Bigelow of the eminent and extraordinarily knowledgeable website [Neglected Books](#), and also of Boilerhouse Press, to discuss our *Hilda Matheson*. You can register for [this free online talk here](#).

Kate is also preparing a new set of talks for December-March for Westminster Libraries so we'll bring you news of those in November.

The Gulls Fly Inland, by Sylvia Thompson

We are very happy to announce the opening of our pre-order page for our fabulous rediscovered author and novel for July 2024, *The Gulls Fly Inland* by Sylvia Thompson. This is a swooningly romantic novel about a Franco-American love affair amid the growing storm clouds that preceded the Second World War. In October 1939 Blanche Lancret is a French exile in England, looking after her friend Annabelle's baby. She is waiting for news of Annabelle's brother Vernon, who is fighting the enemy in France, and of her surrogate mother Tante Julie, a rich *démi-mondaine* who refuses to leave Paris.

To maintain her *sang-froid* Blanche writes her journal, reflecting on the story of her love for Vernon while she lived with Tante Julie in Paris. His American wealth does not make him correct enough for Tante Julie's servants, who ensured that Blanche and Vernon could not meet. Now Vernon is caught in marriage to the impervious Bostonian Leonora and Blanche realises how they have been kept apart. As the years wind forward Blanche and Vernon are caught tight in other people's machinations, and only the war might set him free.

The English author, Sylvia Thompson, has been completely forgotten by literary history, yet in her day she was a very popular and successful novelist, of the same Oxford generation as Dorothy L Sayers and Vera Brittain. She married an American artist, Theodore 'Peter' Luling, and developed a career as a lecturer in the USA, but we don't actually know what she lectured on. Art, possibly, or France? She was deeply knowledgeable about both.

Kate discovered Sylvia in a 1940s anthology by US *Vogue*, a kind of wartime Bedside Book of short fiction, reportage, cartoons and snippets from the magazine's contributors. Sylvia's contribution was non-fiction, but the quality of her writing and the strength of her personality leapt from the pages of that otherwise not very inspiring book, eclipsing the others. Kate started to look for her books, and then began to wonder if she had found the wrong Sylvia, because her earlier novels were simply nothing like as good as that single page from the 1940s. Kate worked her way through Sylvia's novels of the 1930s with increasing pessimism. Where was that outstanding novelist of the 1940s?

The clue was in the date. In the 1920s and 1930s Sylvia was writing a different kind of novel, possibly even still learning how to write. But in the 1940s, like many other writers, she found that wartime gave her something to write against, and she found her quality. *The Gulls Fly Inland* is simply superb, so Kate determined that we would publish it.

But how to find Sylvia's estate or her family? It took a lot of hunting, but finally Sylvia's sole surviving daughter was identified, and her great-grandson supplied an email address, to which Kate wrote. Some months later his mother, Sylvia's grand-daughter, got in touch to explain that her mother didn't really get on with email and could she help instead? The family were delighted that we wanted to publish one of great-grandmamma's novels, but we needed some certainty about their title to her estate: was there a will? It turned out that Sylvia seems to have been one of those aggravating authors who failed to make a will, assuming that everything would go to her husband, which it did, but not her literary estate, not in writing. In the end, we found a solution that satisfies all parties.

The cover image is from an advert for Wolsey Clothing from 1943, nicely contemporaneous with the novel. There was just one last problem. The heroine of the novel has brown hair, whereas the model in the fashion illustration is blonde. Luci Gosling from the Mary Evans Picture Library, who licensed the image to us, gave us permission to give the blonde a dye job.

The Gulls Fly Inland includes an introduction by Faye Hammill, who wrote the introduction for our edition of Margaret Kennedy's *Where Stands A Winged Sentry*. The book will be published on 9th July 2024, and you can pre-order it now!



A personal thing: The Shetland Witch

You may have noticed that we're not very forthcoming in this newsletter about our own lives (except in gardening), because you're reading this to find out about our books, not about us. However, hundreds of you have been reading this newsletter for absolutely years, so we think of you as interested friends, even if we have never met. Kate would now like to tell you about something she's been doing, because it's a novel.

After some of her short stories were published in 2019 Kate began writing a story that turned into a novel. She was fortunate enough to be signed by an agent in October 2021 and the agent has managed to sell the novel to absolutely no-one. The publishing world changed massively during the pandemic, and editors are now not interested in novels that don't tick pre-tested marketing boxes. So Kate, whose middle name should be Impatience, is [self-publishing The Shetland Witch on Substack](#).

Here's what some editors have said about it (even though they didn't actually want to buy it):

'Kate's writing is vivid and evocative - of both character and setting ... the quality of the writing and the ambition of the book is so out of the ordinary.'

'It makes for such beautiful reading, and Kate's writing and the Shetland setting are both so atmospheric and compelling.'

The Shetland Witch is not so much a fantasy novel as a novel of modern Shetland where the Shetland witches - an archaeologist, a retired professor of botany, a wildlife warden and a painter - have to deal with a mythic creature from the past who needs food, shelter and help in finding a particularly dangerous something that was left there a very long time ago. Someone else, who saw it arriving, is now on the alert.

If you haven't heard of Substack, you don't really need to: it's a website that sends an email to you once a week with the latest issue of the newsletter or novel or journalistic rants that you have subscribed to. *The Shetland Witch* is free, so ignore boxes on the screen inviting you to pledge or pay a subscription. If the description above interests you, [just subscribe](#), and every Tuesday morning a new episode of about 1000 words will arrive in your inbox.

And, of course, if any publisher or editor is reading this who wants to have a chat about *The Shetland Witch*, you know where we are. Kate does want it published, but she also wants it read, and this seemed the best way forward. She is working on her second, unconnected, novel now.



What we've been reading this month

Kate has been wading through Alexandra Harris's *Weatherland*, which pulls English literature through a filter of 'weather' and finds many extraordinary things. Did you know that the literary spring was a medieval invention? That Shelley wanted to be a cloud while Ruskin wanted to bottle one?

David has lost hours this month abandoning science fiction novels that were recommended but he couldn't finish. Minds uploaded into computers seem to be hard to write about without inflicting boredom on the reader. Finally, he found one that was worth finishing, Paul McAuley's *Evening's Empires*, which has engaging characters and a subtler approach to family, ideas and future history.

Garden News

It was time to lift the dahlia in the big pot in the front garden which has been absolutely massacred by slugs and snails. The dahlias at the back seem to have grown faster than the snails could eat them so we still have fiery orange and purple flowers there, even if their leaves look like lace. Kate has carefully dug up the front dahlia, washed the earth off its corms and then them upside down to dry. Then she has to replant them in compost for the winter. What a high-maintenance plant, but how lovely the flowers are. The architectural perfection of a dahlia is almost as gorgeous as the structure of a rose.

David has planted bulbs and winter bedding in his new raised bed, so it all looks quite smart. There has been a sea-change in how we think about the garden now. It's no longer something we want to continue with, rather it's something we want to show how lovely and appealing it can be, without spending a fortune, so it and the house will sell quite quickly in the spring. Yes, we have returned to scrutinising the house-hunting websites.

Kate was away for a week in late September and missed seeing the shrew. It crept into the house while David was gardening and he spotted it skittering across the slippery wooden floors. And then it stayed very quiet, we suppose because it is a shy creature. David put out the humane mousetrap to try to catch it so he could release it back into the garden. He had visitors to stay. Kate came home, and then we all went off for the weekend. When we came back three days later Kate found the dead shrew in the mousetrap. We didn't mean to kill it, but it must have starved to death on its own while we were away, which is just very sad. We will be more careful with the mousetrap in future.

David has been out collecting seed in the garden. We planted a single packet of National Trust wildflower seed in a large pot after Easter, which turned into our miniature meadow for the summer; the lilac anemones are still tall and healthy. David twice carefully shook out the seed heads into a paper bag, so we have them to plant next spring. And he's also been out in the woods, collecting local tree seeds and nuts for the local tree nursery. Apparently acorns are rare in our part of the Bath hills, so we keep an eye on the three baby oaks in our garden, though they're too young to grow acorns yet.

Hoping for proper October weather soon

Kate & David

Handheld Press