



A Song for Will - The Lost Gardeners of Heligan

Books Reviewed:

[A Song for Will - The Lost Gardeners of Heligan](#) [1]

Issue:

[224](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Jill Bennett](#) [3]

~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This gorgeous book moved me to tears. It tells how, when World War One broke out, the majority of the staff of Heligan Gardens left their employment and went off to fight, and how tragically, many did not come back. It takes the form of correspondence between the narrator Alfie, too young to join up, and Fred, the Garden's stonemason who enlisted.

Through their letters we are provided with completely contrasting viewpoints: errand boy Alfie's letters tell of the day-to-day maintenance of the Gardens and the lives of those left behind; how they were impacted by the war, trying to stay upbeat while missing loved ones and workmates away at war, dreading bad news and struggling with rationing, and sometimes, grief.

The letters Fred sends Alfie tell vividly of life on the front line, the on-going difficulties he has to cope with, the constant risks from illness on account of terrible conditions - the wet, the bitter cold, 'rats the size of cats?'; how he misses his family.

There is news too in their correspondence of his close friend, gardener Will Guy who joined up at the same time as Fred although the two went separate ways: Will to the Western Front; Fred to Greece. Alfie tells Fred that, after returning home briefly in 1916, 'I noticed that Will's hand was shaking - he must have been excited to be back?'. He talks later of how on another visit home in 1917, Will's brother reports, 'Will's hand was shaking so much in chapel?'. Then just over a year after, he writes of the arrival of a telegram for Will's mother who learns that her son was killed in action in 1918. Shock and grief take over for a while as kind, gentle Will is mourned, not only by the humans who loved him, but also seemingly, by his animal friends.

The correspondence is reproduced in Martin Impey's illustrations, almost in facsimile, tea stains and all, though illuminated and embellished with visual images drawn from Hilary Robinson's poetic writing. Together they have a heart wrenching profundity and at the same time make the human story all the more harrowingly real for readers. We see 1915 scenes of Christmas at Heligan; and in snowy Salonika where Fred's fears of malaria, jostle with those of the honeybees back home. Each in its own intimate way is full of passion and beauty. Indeed intimacy is a word that describes the sensation one is left with after closing this book: you really get the feeling that you know each and every one of its characters, and are involved in their experiences throughout; and afterwards.

Pitch perfect for sharing with children and for leading them into talking about life as a WW1 soldier and the life of those who carried on supporting their loved ones while going about their toil at home. Equally though it's a very special book to read and cherish at home.

Source URL (retrieved on Nov '19): <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/224/childrens-books/reviews/a-song-for-will-the-lost-gardeners-of-heligan>

Links:

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/a-song-for-will-the-lost-gardeners-of-heligan>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/224>

[3] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/jill-bennett>