books **The Harrow of Time**

review by Robert DiNapoli

The Buried Giant, by Kazuo Ishiguro (Faber & Faber, 2015)

Arthurian legend has fostered a malleable legacy of story in different media and genres. From Malory's fifteenth-century *Le Morte D'Arthur* to the Broadway musical *Camelot* and John Boorman's film *Excalibur*, from the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to Wagner's *Parsifal* to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and works by any number of twentieth-century novelists and poets—the work of English poets Charles Williams and David Jones springs at once to mind, as well as novels by John Steinbeck, T. H. White, Marion Zimmer-Bradley and John Berger (to name only a few)—Arthur and his knights have bravely assumed new guise after new guise, each incarnation a reflection of the ideals and anxieties of its time.

In his latest novel, *The Buried Giant*, Kazuo Ishiguro evokes the centuries-old Arthurian *mythos* in what emerges, by its conclusion, as a thoroughly contemporary make-over. The result is an intriguing mash-up of modern fantasy, political allegory, temporally unsettled dystopia, and fairy tale. Malory meets *Gulliver's Travels* meets the Brothers Grimm and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. And if *that* doesn't sound an unlikely enough gallimaufry, the entire confection comes bundled with a suite of Ishiguro's trademark mannerisms, traceable back to his earliest critical successes, *The Remains of the Day* and *The Artist of the Floating World*. Scenes are sketched with a few vividly realised particulars, set against a soft-focus backdrop, whether of landscape or of domestic interiors; dialogue is ruthlessly muted—nearly all Ishiguro's characters speak with unfailing politeness, and even when they shout, the reader hears them as if from a great distance; and even violently dramatic action unfolds at a contemplative pace:

> Wistan suddenly moved forward. He did not run, but walked briskly, stepping over the dragon's body without breaking stride, and hurried on as though anxious to reach the other side of the pit. But his sword had described a swift, low arc in passing, and Axl saw the dragon's head spin into the air and roll a little way before coming to rest on the stony ground. (p. 321)

'Oh, were *you* there?' I half-expected Wistan to say to his adversary's severed head. Can any other dragon have been slain with such off-hand and *quiet* aplomb? Note how the fatal stroke falls while the narration is not looking, and thus gets reported only after the fact, in a short-range flashback. This is a small instance of one of Ishiguro's most characteristic kinds of narrative parsimony: key events take place un-noted in the present narration, to be revealed only later by way of a longer or shorter circling back through flashback or expounded memory. Such a technique at its most effective can achieve the kind of free-floating, haunting atmospheres that suffuse Ishiguro's best work. You're never quite sure of where the story, as you've read it so far, has actually taken you, and waiting for the bearings to emerge that will finally orient you within the larger picture, like the resolution of a dissonant chord, affords one of the great pleasures of reading Ishiguro. In his longer novels, most notably *The Unconsoled*, this can prove at times a distracting mannerism. In *The Buried Giant*, this mazy, fractal narrative technique achieves both hits and misses.

Arthur and his milieu of mingled history and myth are natural stalking grounds for Ishiguro, for whom wispy suggestion, conflicting counter-realities and cognitive uncertainty are second nature. The actual story of *The Buried Giant* involves a series of interlocking quest narratives, set in a historical never-never some time after the collapse of Roman Britannia. Arthur, if he ever existed, is thought to have orchestrated a temporarily successful Romano-British resistance to the Saxon incursions that followed the withdrawal of Rome's legions. Despite all the industry of modern scholarship, though, the period remains scantily documented, and the much-sought 'Arthur of history' remains as elusive a bandersnatch as the historical Jesus and Noah's ark. The later medieval Arthur of chivalric jousts and courtly love is as much a fiction as his many subsequent avatars.

In the novel's primary narrative, an elderly Hansel and Gretel, named Axl and Beatrice, set off on a back-to-front fairy-tale search for their son, who now lives, vaguely, in 'another village'. Their quest is complicated by a chronically fitful amnesia they share with their fellow Britons and, as it turns out, the odd Saxon who pops up in the landscape they must negotiate. This they call 'the mist', and, like Alzheimer's sufferers, they are aware that the condition has robbed them of crucial memories. At intervals they are reminded of critical turns in both their personal lives and their social circumstances that they cannot fully recall. Ishiguro has imagined a transitional historical theatre for this drama of painfully recovered memory, in which Briton and Saxon villagers live in uneasy proximity, aware of all that divides them: Celtic indigene versus Saxon invader, Christian versus pagan, pastoralists versus warrior-aristocrats. Yet somehow, in an enigma that is only much later revealed as the central issue of the entire story, they appear to live with their differences in an eerily stable peace. (In this Ishiguro parts most flagrantly (and pointedly) from Arthurian tradition, in which the Saxon invaders inevitably play the role of a pagan biker-gang from hell come to trash the joint.)

The quest of Axl and Beatrice becomes entangled with that of Wistan, a Saxon warrior dispatched on an at-first-unspecified errand by his king from the Anglian fens, and, later, the equally mysterious pursuits of an elderly Sir Gawain, the late Arthur's nephew and a key player in nearly all Arthurian legend. Both Wistan and Gawain seek the enigmatically named dragon Querig. She, it emerges, is responsible for the mist that has robbed Briton and Saxon alike of their short- and medium-term memories. As in any quest narrative, this unlikely fellowship confronts an

Robert DiNapoli is a freelance medievalist and the founder and principal lecturer of The Melbourne Literature Seminars <www.themelbourneliteratureseminars.com.au>.

episodic sequence of dangers and checks. Nothing is as it first seems. A boatman offers passage to what may be the other side of a river or, perhaps, an island of the dead. A monastery proves both a refuge and a trap. The questers' encounters with monsters and other dangerous marvels unfold in a cool documentary style that distinguishes Ishiguro's prose from the excesses of so much commercial fantasy writing. The supernatural and the natural enjoy a wholly unfussed coexistence that, at first glance, appears to reflect an off-the-shelf postmodern scepticism. Typically, Ishiguro leaves us hovering between antithetical realities. We cross from the one to the other and back with scarcely a comment, till, in good hazy Ishiguro style, both are subsumed in a larger picture that begins slowly to emerge, a larger picture with surprisingly contemporary resonances. Querig's mist, it turns out, is actually a benign magic instigated by Merlin. The collective forgetting is a disguised blessing that allows the bitter antagonists to forget their recent history's bouts of murder and massacre, and, most critically, the endless cycles of reciprocal revenge a remembrance of that history would set once more into motion.

The landscape through which the questers move is fraught with reminders of this suppressed past:

> Only then did it occur to him [Axl] that under his feet were more broken skeletons, and that the strange floor extended for the entirety of both chambers.
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> ...[Gawain speaks] 'I dare say, sir, our whole country is this way. A fine green valley. A pleasant copse in the springtime. Dig its soil, and not far beneath the daisies and buttercups come the dead...Beneath our soil lie the remains of old slaughter'. (pp. 185–6)

A keynote sounded by all of Ishiguro's work is this Hardyesque haunting of the present by a past of conflict and disaster, nowhere directly visible yet everywhere palpable. This is perhaps *The Buried Giant*'s most obvious update of the whole Arthurian milieu. The Britain of Ishiguro's novel is one great Srebrenica, a landscape beneath whose pleasant surface a history of bloody horror lies recently (and barely) concealed. The exhumation of that horror promises to restart its ineluctable logic of revenge and murder. Thus does Ishiguro quietly invert modern imperatives of historical consciousness: in *The Buried Giant* it is those who *remember* the past who are doomed to repeat it. That tension, between the need to remember and the equally urgent need to forget, hangs unresolved by the novel's end. Forgetting fosters peace and pre-empts further horror, but at the cost of burying the past's grotesque and murderous injustices. Which to choose?

Axl and Beatrice approach the end of their unresolvable quest in a state whose only steady note is their affection and regard for each other. That note is the one wildcard amidst all the uncertainty and historical accident they've stumbled through along the way. What lies beneath the skin of history cannot be answered or amended, but the love that can so join two human souls beggars all question. In a novel fraught with so many kinds of radical uncertainty, the quietly courteous and constant love of Axl and Beatrice sounds a bracingly affirmative note, at once courtly and old-fashioned and, in the sweet relief it offers from iron historical necessity, thoroughly modern. a