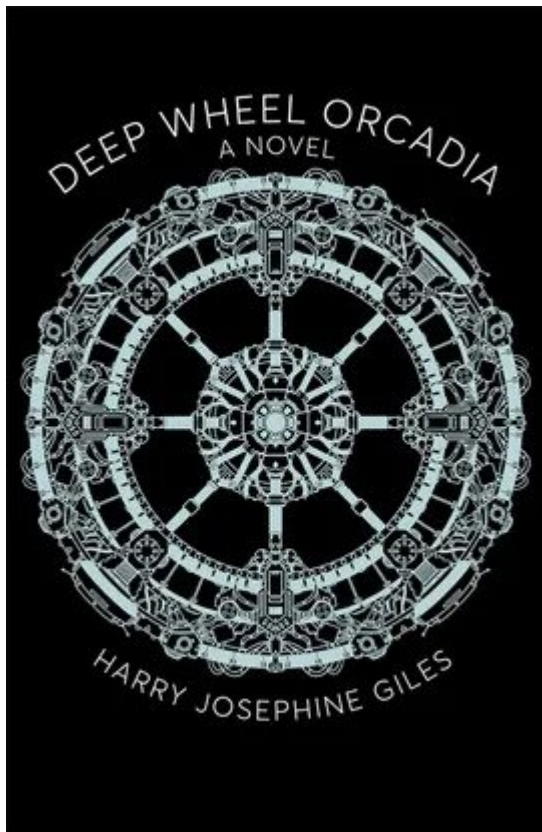


# 'Deep Wheel Orcadia', by Harry Josephine Giles

Review by Martyn Colebrook



*Deep Wheel Orcadia* is an experimental text in which the multi-lingual concept is as intimidating for this reviewer as it is a promising, pleasurable challenge. Structurally the text seems to be marketed as a science-fiction verse novel which is written in the Orkney dialect. For the easily daunted, this distinctly unusual act of linguistic bravura is accompanied by an in-text translation into a rich and evocative English which is reminiscent of Alasdair Gray and Iain M. Banks, among other luminaries. Nevertheless, for those expecting an easy ride from the translation, it's still an unorthodox and at times maddening approach which, one suspects, may just be the point. Such an approach is not unfamiliar territory for the author - Harry Josephine Giles has written and performed poetry to critical acclaim and is highly regarded for the bold and fresh approach they take. The motivation for choosing Orkney is revealed as deeply personal:

*The reason I'm writing in Scots is because my teacher was Simon Hall, who was interested in Orkney language and Orkney literature, and had done specific work in that and had taught Scots in the English classroom. When I was at school, that was only just coming in. Then, when I was a teenager, I went on a creative writing course in Moniack Mhor led by Matthew Fitt, who was one of the leading proponents of Scots in education. I had these encounters through the education system and, now I'm in my 30s, this is a book that I can write.*

The premise is disarmingly simple - Astrid is returning home to Orcadia from art school on Mars and seeking inspiration whilst Darling is a trans woman trying to escape from a life into which they could not fit and attempting to find refuge from her fathers in the process. Both parties become acquainted with each other on Deep Wheel Orcadia, a space-station cum community whose existence is overshadowed by possible obsolescence as a consequence of the rapid march of social change. The correlation between the space-station and the Orkney Islands themselves is not lost on those with an astute eye and the diminishing way of life makes this feel, at times, both elegy and eulogy.

This acquaintance turns into a romance which, appropriately, hinges on difficulties with communication and which could be a lazy analogy for the different language structures in the text. Giles conveys these characters with a zestful and vibrant linguistic lyricism in which you're plunged into numinous flights of phonetic and frenetic rhythms and cadence. The individuals have a depth and a sense of humanity but I was constantly searching for more.

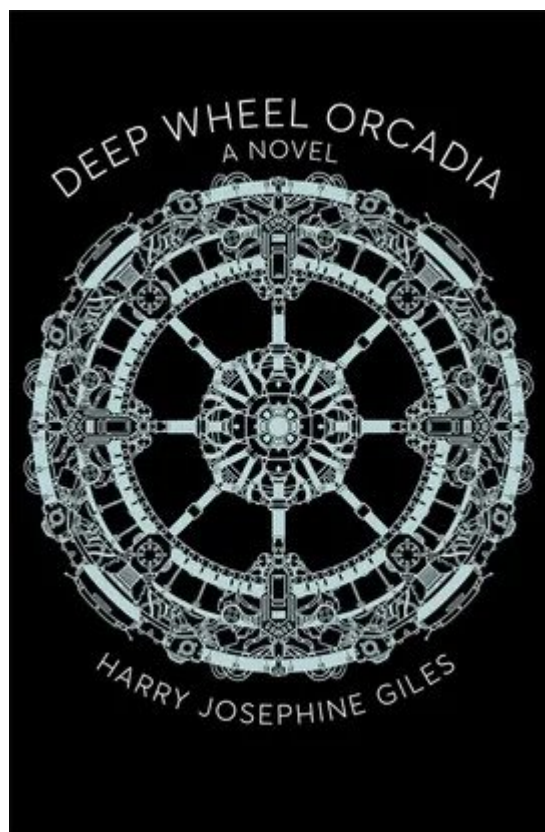
The text is also a work of speculative fiction which, when scrutinised for the quality and originality of the plot, it has to be noted that the author does not stray too far from the tried, tested and well-trodden paths of the many other practitioners. I say 'well-trodden' because Giles muses on whether there is a future possible or possible future ("in studying / impenetrable galactic mysteries / without commercial use") and continues these questions into discussions of societal breakdown, economics and gender and sexuality but these feel incidental rather than insightful, a series of convenient disquisitions which are paying lip service to the expectation of any semblance of narrative. Perhaps I am being too demanding in wishing for depth greater than just observations about the daily lives of the characters - the minutiae which affect all - but then when the option for travelling into other worlds is presented, there's a feeling of untapped

potential.

*Deep Space Orcadia* is a work (I am hesitant to try and label more specifically for the inevitability of getting it wrong) which has divided reviewers and rightly so. It is a strange, beguiling and brave effort to which Giles has brought a dazzling talent for allowing the text to flourish and the reader to be taken on a journey in which their love of language is heartily indulged. That said, as a more learned critic than I observed, not every experiment has to be a complete success for it to be acclaimed which creates an uncomfortable decision for the critic should they not wish to sit on the proverbial fence. I found the language compelling and in many respects it was this which propelled me to finish reading in one sitting and undistracted which is a credit to the novelist themselves. Whether it stands the test of time is a question for future readers but it's majestic nonetheless.

On a side note, and with no commercial or other motivations for this reviewer, I noted in writing the review that Harry Josephine Giles will be appearing at the Edinburgh Book Festival in August 2022 to perform a version of *Deep Wheel Orcadia*. It's of considerable interest to see how this adaptation will sit alongside the original and I will certainly be tuning in.

Deep Wheel Orcadia is published by Pan MacMillan



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