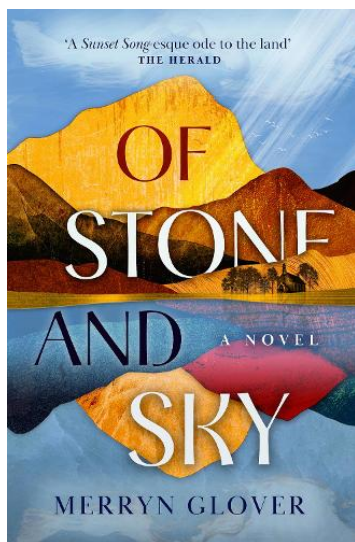


'Of Stone and Sky', by Merryn Glover

Review by Matthew Macdonald



We are gathered here today on the shore of Loch Hope in the presence of God, in the worshipful company of birds and beasts, on the hallowed ground of Earth, to give thanks for the life of Colvin Munro. We do not know that he is dead, and without certainty and without a body we cannot perform last rites or lay him to rest. But we must release him and we must lay ourselves to rest. There is a time to bind and a time to let go.

Much can be said about the importance of a novel's first line or paragraph, and it's a true indication of Glover's skill that this opening paragraph sets up the thrust of the story and the characters - Colvin, and those who are seeking repentance or knowledge - in a few lines.

What follows is a whodunnit crossed with a portrayal of a family and a community who examine and forgive in equal measure. The premise is simple: shepherd Colvin has gone missing, twelve of his possessions littering the ground in the village and leading into the Cairngorms. As Colvin's family attempt to piece together the fractious events that led to his disappearance, they come face to face with their own selves, their conceptions of the world and their idea of God.

Without giving away any spoilers, this is a tale that is as unexpected in its maneuvering as it is satisfying in its conclusion. While it may not have the forceful railroad of an 'action thriller', *Of Stone and Sky* remains a page-turning narrative that, once started, will not let you go.

Where Glover truly excels is in her presentation of characters, who leap off the page in ways I've not experienced in other novels. One of the standout characters for the book is Mo, the owner of the town bar. Mo carries an unwavering sense that she knows everyone better than they know themselves (her past as valley pastoral carer, plus her being so close to the absolute gossip farm that is a village pub, bring this to the fore). This sense of Mo's, even if incorrect, is something that propels the narrative forward - Mo can function in many ways as a keystone character, connecting others who might not otherwise appear to be linked, while keeping an eye on both past and future in a manner that maintains the reader's connection to the various elements of this historical patchwork.

Though Colvin has disappeared, he appears time and again in remembrance, flashback and gossip. While not the main character in terms of active promulgation of events, the shepherd still maintains his place as the main character of the novel, with various family and friends orienting themselves and their complex inter-relations around Colvin, or what they made him into. Interestingly, we're introduced to Sorley, Colvin's brother, outside an office building in London - about as far away from a nestled Scottish glen as is possible. As much as his own life is situated away from his family, in the distance he has actively pursued, he still introduces himself as the '... shepherd boy made banker. I am the younger son, with a hand on his brother's heel.' No matter how far he might have sent himself, he cannot escape his roots.

The novel's success lies with the multitudinous characters, in the expression of and detail in the complex interweaving of these people that make the story and keep you hooked throughout. Glover shows a masterful hand in understanding people, not just as they're perceived by those around them, but, more tellingly, on how they perceive themselves. This eye for human understanding is matched by Glover's ability to demonstrate in a myriad of ways how these two different sets of perceptions compare and contrast.

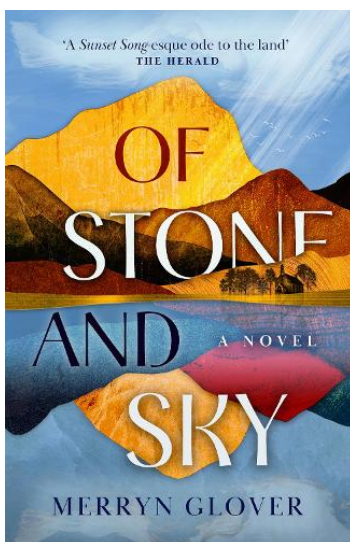
However, it is not merely in the interplay of characters that this novel soars; Glover writes the world - in particular the Scottish Highlands - with a poet's eye

for imagery. The text is never dense, but it is thick with emotive, evocative language. In one section, Glover describes in entrancing detail a snowfall experienced by Colvin's son:

Tiny motes of white drifted down, one at a time, in slow soundless trail from the clouds above to dissolve into the mud. [...] And more and more came then, a silent mass of snowflakes in their millions, falling on the land in layers of filmy gauze till it powdered over the stinking ash and soil, and softened every brute edge and burnt skin, wrapping bandages around jagged tree limbs, spreading a blanket over the wounded earth ...

Evocative, haunting, human and beautiful, *Of Stone and Sky* would be a welcome addition to any bookshelf.

Of Stone and Sky is published by Birlinn



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