Scottish Books 2018
Fiction

The Sealwoman's Gift
By Sally Magnusson
Two Roads

Sally Magnusson's accomplished first novel is an enthralling mixture of recovered history and the imagining of lost lives.

In 1627, pirates from Algiers raided the coast of Iceland and carried off 400 people, two-thirds of them from a small island. The captives included the island's Lutheran minister, Olafur, his pregnant wife Asta and their two small children. All were destined for the slave market in Algiers.

The poor, harsh Iceland they are leaving and the horrific voyage, on which Asta gives birth, are both compellingly described, and contrast with the light and beauty of Algiers.

Slave markets are no respecters of families. Their young son, a pretty boy, is quickly snapped up by the province's Ottoman governor. The coarse pirate captain persuades a Moor and member of the ruling council, Cilleby, to buy Asta and her daughter. The parson, he says, can be sent back to Denmark to persuade the king to offer a ransom for his Icelandic subjects; it's an easy way of making money, though it does take time.

In fact, it will take eight years, during which a strange relationship between Asta and Cilleby, will develop. It is based first on her self-esteem, which matches his – to his original stupefaction; then on her ability to tell stories. These are drawn from the Icelandic sagas, and they fascinate him – as does Asta, for he has never met such an independently minded woman.

Their developing relationship, never easy – for neither can quite forget that she is his property – is intelligently portrayed. Both are changed by it, and who knows how far it might have gone, had the day not at last come when a Dutch agent, acting on behalf of the King of Denmark, at last arrives with the ransom money?

But does Asta still want to return home? To leave Cilleby? Mightn't she be best to settle for what she has, like her nephew, who has converted to Islam and will himself become a corsair? Only the news that her elderly husband is still alive persuades her to come home.

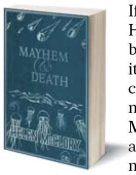
When she arrives, many months later, he is dismayed to find that she is alone and that their two sons and daughter have been left in the Muslim world.

One of the best of the many fine things in this remarkable novel is the manner in which Asta's return home is treated. It is now her own island which seems to her foreign, the conditions of life there squalid and filthy in comparison with the order and beauty she has come to know and appreciate in Algiers.

For months she and Olafur can scarcely communicate and drift even further apart; it is only when she reads his account of his own voyage home and the rejection he then received from the king, that her mood softens.

This is the best sort of historical novel. It respects the past and brings it alive. It is alert to ethical and cultural differences. It shows that people in the past often thought differently from us, while at the same time reminding us that they experienced the same emotions. **AM**

Mayhem & Death
By Helen McClory
404Ink



If there's a problem with Helen McClory's new book, *Mayhem & Death*, it's this: that the concluding 60-odd page novella, "Powdered Milk", is so utterly absorbing and searingly memorable that it casts the various short (and very short) stories that precede it into the shade. That's a shame, because there are some real gems in the book's opening section, notably "Lore", a deliciously sinister flash fiction about a haunted hunting party, "This Place Is Mine", which reads like the intriguing first few paragraphs of a post-apocalyptic sci-fi novel, and "A Silent Documentary Through A Terrible Place", in which the author draws on her considerable powers of description to produce something that's not so much a story as a single, slowly panning camera shot. Evidently McClory isn't afraid of the dark, but there are lighter moments too: "Jeff Goldblum", for example, in which the actor is variously imagined "walking shoeless into a house made of cats", "singing a lullaby to a room full of newborn babies" and "in a Santa beard, throwing bricks at a woollen mill shop", is gloriously silly.

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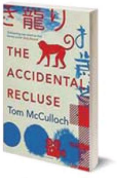
Compared with "Powdered Milk", however, these stories seem somewhat insubstantial, like *amuse-bouches* before a meal. In fact, the concluding novella harks back to the opening short story, "Souterrain", so the two should really be considered together. In "Souterrain", a mother, Frances, is dealing with the grief of losing her daughter, Madeleine; in "Powdered Milk", meanwhile, we discover what happened to Maddy and her colleagues – the crew of a deep-sea research station who suddenly and inexplicably find themselves cut off from the world above the waves.

The purpose of their expedition, which is intended as "a dry run for the space colonies", is to study "the way of human life contained, far from contact with the external population". In her role as base psychologist, Maddie holds sessions with crew members in which they talk about how they are coping, and she is proud of her role as "the one on the ground taking first-hand readings as the whole project played itself through before her". It's McClory, though, rather than Maddie, who is the real psychologist here, showing us in all too convincing detail how a group of otherwise reasonable people might start to go to pieces in a scenario in which all hope appears to be lost, and in which the only way to stay sane is to stick doggedly to mind-numbing routines, even as those around you are starting to despair.

Structurally, then, *Mayhem & Death* is a little lopsided, but given the misfortune that has dogged McClory's career recently – her last book, *Flesh Of The Peach*, disappeared last year, along with the ill-starred Freight imprint – it's impressive that she's been able to put out something else so swiftly. Apparently another novel is in the pipeline, as well as a book of poetry. Both should be eagerly anticipated. **RC**

The Accidental Recluse
By Tom McCulloch
Sandstone



This novel tells the tale of Johnny Jackson, a famous film director and financially successful founder of a global corporation, who is now an alcoholic and infirm in old age, but is brought out of secluded retirement for one final film.

The opening scenes involve his utter humiliation. After the surprise success of his autobiography, he is led to believe that he is about to take part in a serious retrospective interview on Japanese television. Instead it turns into a game show with audience members dressed up as monkeys, a real monkey on a lead, and a quiz about his life where a wrong answer ends in the contestant being covered in monkey slurry.

Jackson's most famous and successful films starred a chimp – not a monkey, he notes ruefully – and while he has spent the rest of his working life trying to produce thoughtful *auteur* movies, it seems the simian slapstick films in which he starred with his brother, Duke, are what remain in the cultural memory.

So we start the novel with a profound sympathy for Jackson, his dignified acceptance of his lot and his dark humour about his advancing age, which author Tom McCulloch takes the rest of the narrative to strip away.

In flashbacks detailing his life, the physically deformed Jackson reveals he is emotionally stunted.

He was the least favoured son of a bullying father who forced his children into a vaudeville act. His brother was a boorish alcoholic who was perceived as the handsome hero in their professional

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partnership, whereas Jackson was mostly forgotten. The only romantic relationship he ever seems to have had was not reciprocated, and was certainly misunderstood and profoundly disturbing.

This sets up the narrative to run as a sympathetic portrayal of a man thwarted at every turn, but McCulloch subverts almost every assumption.

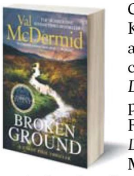
When Jackson returns as a celebrity to his home town on the west coast of Scotland, it is not a place of wholesomeness but rather heavy with a sense of Calvinist shame and a dour feeling of "you're no better than you should be".

Through Jackson's own recollections we warm to his dark humour about his advancing years, but early in the book an acquaintance jokes that he might be a psychopath and by the end the reader is left wondering if he has indeed endured a tragic life, or if he might have been the cruel architect of others' doom.

Not all his relationships are toxic, however, and in both Leonid, the chimp handler, and Akira, his Japanese driver, there is a touching affection.

The novel has brilliant portrayals of a childhood in Scotland in the 1950s and the hedonism of 1960s London, with recognisable walk-on characters such as Peter Sellers and Diana Dors; and in Jackson, McCulloch has created a multifaceted, utterly ambiguous character who leaves the reader thinking about his story long after it is over. **KM**

Broken Ground
By Val McDermid
Little, Brown



Cold case detective Karen Pirie started life as a secondary character in *The Distant Echo*. She popped up again in Fife-set *A Darker Domain*, and then Val McDermid discovered, as she has described in interviews, that Karen's voice kept talking to her, prompting more books. Now the