THE LAND IN WINTER by Andrew Miller Published 2024

Set during the Big Freeze of 1962-3, this story of two marriages brilliantly evokes the legacy of the second world war. The *Land in Winter*, is about the difficulty of loving in an unlovely world.

The book opens with a tragedy: a young man's suicide at night, in the basement of an asylum, his body discovered by an older man who is woken by his absence from the ward. Both are inpatients, and neither – it turns out – is a protagonist in the novel at hand. We will return to them, but only in so far as their fates cross over with the primary characters we are about to meet. Their actions in this first chapter, however – their presence in the hospital and their deep unease with all that lies beyond – underpin everything to come.

What unfolds from here is ostensibly a story of two couples over the course of one very cold English winter. It's December 1962 and Eric Parry is a young West Country GP; Birmingham-born, he moved in boyhood "from the rough centre to its smarter suburbs", and he's still unsure where he belongs, conducting his rounds as a country doctor at one remove. His wife, Irene, is all at sea in their rural cottage, far from her old life in literary London, with little to do but plan a Christmas drinks party and wonder at her still new husband's detachment.

Their nearest neighbour, Bill Simmons, is a farmer, but only since last year when he bought his few acres and an awkward bull, spending "certainly more than he could sensibly afford". He's a dreamer, a drifter in search of solid ground, or maybe "a rich man's son playing at farming for reasons of his own". His wife, Rita, is even more of a conundrum. A year ago, she worked as a dancer in a Bristol nightclub; now she's a farm wife, much to her own bemusement, eating spaghetti with her fingers from the pan, reading paperbacks on the floor by the Rayburn, delighted, surprised and frightened by her own life.

Laying out the four of them like this may indicate some of the dynamics at work: the vicissitudes of class and gender; the nervous currents beneath the surface of lives that appear to be running smoothly. But it doesn't do the characters – or the writer – justice. Each figure Miller conjures is far more than the sum of its parts. When Eric's lover tells him he's a good doctor and a good man, we feel she could be right; but when he replies "In fact, I'm not sure I'm either," we fear he might be too. Rita is especially well drawn: appealing in her seeming ease, lazy and warm in her husband's socks and pyjamas. Her capacity to disappear into her inner life is beguiling – a welcome buffer against the chill of the outer world – but it's also this that makes her vulnerable.

It is Rita and Irene who form a connection: a friendship as unlikely to both as it is spontaneous and warm. At the Parrys' ill-fated Christmas party, Rita is a hit with Irene's London pals – a fact that amuses them both. After the blizzards come at new year, the women build a snowman on the rise between their two cottages, working "with their heads almost touching, their breath in clouds, their shadows blue and restless over the broken snow".

Both are at an impasse and know it; both are also pregnant, so their lives and marriages will be changed soon, for good or for ill – this is the novel's main driver. The winter is the remaining gear in its unsparing machinery: not just the cold that refuses to break, but also this particular winter, at this particular juncture in English history. Rationing is over, but life is still lived by bar fires, under counterpanes, smoking Woodbines. Eric is just old enough to have undergone RAF training, and relieved that the war "had the good grace to end" before he was called up; Rita's dad, though, served in the British army and saw far worse than he bargained for in a German forest between the Weser and the Elbe. Gabby Miklos, Eric's GP partner, is an émigré from Mitteleuropa; Bill's father is also an arrival from that darkness. Now a Rachmanite landlord, he is "the stowaway, the spy, the survivor" –

even his son is unsure of his history, and would rather keep it that way if he can help it. The war and the Holocaust are both still so recent. It is a mark of Miller's skill that he makes spare mention of either, and yet they loom large.

Love does too, though. For all its wintry setting and cold echoes of the past, and for all that it opens with a death in an asylum, this is not a bleak book. The people in it yearn and reach; they make mistakes, too – some of them terrible. But all the while, somehow, you feel – you hope – they might find a way through.

Can there be art after Auschwitz? Can there be peace of mind? In The Land in Winter, Miller's characters have looked into the abyss. It makes the ordinary business of living at once very difficult and very necessary.

THE TENDERNESS OF WOLVES by Stef Penney Published 2007 (in UK)

The story begins with the discovery of the murdered body of Laurent Jammet, a trapper living near the remote settlement of Caulfield; his throat has been cut and he has been scalped. His body is discovered by a Mrs Ross, a woman of proud bearing and antagonism-inducing intelligence; but her adopted son, a moody and withdrawn adolescent, has also gone missing. With the help of an Indian tracker, who himself is a murder suspect, she heads off into the wilderness to find him - and possibly also to trace the source of the mysterious second set of tracks which her son has probably been following. And if Caulfield is at first portrayed as a one-horse dump, it comes to seem like a thriving metropolis when compared to the pathless wastes that stretch out in front of her.

There are few things like an endless vista to make a novel seem really gratifyingly contained. The novel itself comes to seem like a fragile bubble of consciousness beyond whose limits is a threatening void. (And that's what novels, in one essential manner, are.) And living in the rudimentary civilisation of mid 19th-century Canada must have been like living in a novel: there is nothing to concentrate on except the flawed characters of your fellow human beings, and the spoor left by their movements. And that, in a way, is all The Tenderness of Wolves is about.

But Penney has cleverly wrapped up this look at human motive, resourcefulness and failing in what is both a western (you should really call it a northern, but "western" conjures up that raw pioneer spirit) and a murder mystery. The law, as impersonated, in both senses of the word, by the representatives of the Hudson Bay Company - in other words, an arm of grasping enterprise culture, rather than an impartial adjunct to it - is contingent and flawed; what there is instead is the intelligence of a couple of determined people. Yet the conventions of the murder mystery are not, in the end, adhered to, for all that there is a shoot-out at the end; for someone you do not want to die, dies. This is a literary book that it's very easy to be gratefully sucked into.

LA LACUNA by Barbara Kingsolver Published 2009

This novel ventures into copiously charted territory. It moves from the muralists and surrealists of the 1930s in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution to the McCarthyite witch-hunt of artists in the late 40s and 50s. Yet in crossing and recrossing the US-Mexican border, as novelists such as Carlos Fuentes have done before her, this novel reveals a singular ambition. It probes, with only partial success, the source of the vexed historical relationship between art and politics in the United States, as well as the gap between a life lived and a life reported.

The life in question is that of Harrison William Shepherd, variously dubbed Will, Harry and Insólito. Born in Virginia of an American "bean counter" and a Mexican flapper, he is raised in both countries, eventually becoming the celebrated author of American potboilers about the Aztecs. Shepherd's story

opens engagingly with his boyhood in Isla Pixol, an island south of Veracruz, in a Mexico scented with "jasmine, dog piss, cilantro, lime". But the story comes to us in the elusive form of diaries and memoirs, letters and press cuttings. Locked for 50 years in a bank vault until all parties are dead, these fragments were saved by the novelist's stenographer, Violet Brown, from his despairing wish that they be burned.

Kingsolver meticulously inserts the fictional Shepherd into pivotal moments of recorded history, using both fictional and actual newspaper reports. As a youth in Mexico City, he sees a tiny woman of regal bearing, her hair "braided in a heavy crown", buying parrots in the street, and becomes a plaster-mixer and cook to her husband, Diego Rivera. Present as Frida Kahlo despairs of Rivera's infidelities and as Lev Trotsky seeks refuge with the revolutionary artist from Stalin's assassins, Shepherd becomes Kahlo's sometime spy and Trotsky's cook and secretary. As a naive and humble typist he plays a bit part in the rift between Trotsky and Rivera, and in Trotsky's murder. Back in the US, as the cold war hots up, these associations draw the scrutiny of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Shepherd's fate seems sealed by the view of a character in one of his novels that "Our leader is an empty sack . . ." – words that the novelist cannot truthfully deny are his own.

According to Violet, Shepherd was "averse to making himself known. Even when greatly misunderstood". The novel is at its best in the oblique revelation of this man, with his lacunae of privacy and passion. The young writer is an acute observer whose watchfulness derives partly from his itinerant upbringing – as a "double person made of two different boxes" – and his discreet sexuality. Guilt-ridden for failing to avert his boss's death, and disqualified from US military service for "sexual indifference to the female of the species" ("blue slip"), he spends the second world war couriering paintings to safety for the US state department.

In a spiky satire on press presumption, the novel points up the disparity between this man and the persona later ascribed to him as a treacherous "art smuggler, womaniser". A research trip to Mérida with his stenographer, an older woman, is written up in the papers as a "January-May romance". Even his sometime lover, Tom Cuddy, deserts him for his reported lack of patriotism. Yet while "lies are infinite in number and the truth so small and singular", the novel also witnesses the advent of celebrities who control and manipulate their own image. Kahlo, garbed as Mexican peasant or Aztec queen, says: "If I don't choose, they choose for me . . . The newspapers would wrap me in gauze and make me a martyred angel, or else a boring jealous wife."

Shepherd's interest as a novelist is in "how civilisations fall, and what leads up to that. How we're connected to everything in the past". His lawyer, Arthur Gold, sees anti-communist persecution, not least of artists, as putting poison on the lawn. "It kills your crabgrass all right, and then you have a lot of dead stuff out there for a very long time. Maybe for ever." Kingsolver, who has spoken in a recent US interview of a post-9/11 backlash "against my identity as a political artist", offers a timely re-reminder – for those who need it – of an era when surrealist art could be condemned as "un-American", and foreigners deported for "working for Negro rights". Nor might an undead red spectre from the 50s be lost on an Obama administration mooting healthcare reform: "If Truman calls for any change, education improvements, or Social Security, a chorus shouts him down – welfare state, collectivism, conspiracy."

Yet the novel's later sections are marred by overstated irony, the dialogue too often staged between characters who agree, making for an authorial soapbox. More satisfying is an unexpectedly touching coda, in which the quietly besotted Violet keeps faith with the condemned man ("they'll go to the ends of the earth to haul back people they've declared unfit to be Americans," she notes), and a surprise lacuna holds out hope of escape.

Reproduced from reviews published in Guardian Newspaper