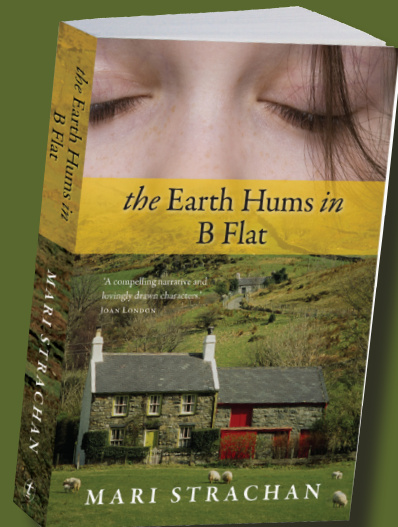


The Earth Hums in B Flat

Mari Strachan

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Praise for *The Earth Hums in B Flat*

'A compelling narrative and lovingly drawn characters.'
Jack London

'A richly evocative, warm but unsentimental tale...I loved this novel.'
Catherine O'Flynn

About Mari Strachan

Mari Strachan has worked as a librarian, book reviewer, researcher, translator, copy writer and web editor. She lives with her husband in the hills of Ceredigion, Wales. *The Earth Hums in B Flat* is her first book.

A reader's introduction to *The Earth Hums in B Flat*.

'...I rise up, up, up into the sky where the air is as soft to rest upon as Mrs Williams Penrhiw's powdery bosom. Up here, far away from everybody, the night is peaceful; there's no sound except the hum of the Earth. At school, when I sang the note to Mr Hughes Music he said it was B flat but he laughed when I said it was the note the Earth hummed. He said: You'll be hearing the music of the spheres next, Gwenni. But he doesn't know how the Earth's deep, never-ending note clothes me in rainbow colours, fills my head with all the books ever written...I could stay up here for ever without the need for anything else in the whole world.'

Twelve-year-old Gwenni lives in a small Welsh village. It is the 1950s. She shares a room with her sister but at night she escapes. She flies in her dreams. As a child she could fly when she was awake, too. Rising up, Gwenni hears the Earth singing. Her mam doesn't like her imaginative ways; people will think that she's odd.

But when Ifan Evans disappears, Gwenni uses her imagination and knowledge of mysteries to take on the role of detective. She searches for him despite her mam's warnings.

Like Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, Gwenni falls into a strange world. Her search leads to unexpected places. She learns that her family, like the Evans', has dark secrets. She learns about anger and depression, loyalty and sacrifice.

Gwenni is ancient and childlike as a narrator. Through her eyes the reader sees the sadness of the Earth: the generational impact of war, domestic violence and mental illness. Mari Strachan shows the reader beauty, too: the salt of the ocean on lips, the sweetness of vanilla biscuits on tongues.

The Earth Hums in B Flat explores with insight the flying, dream-like innocence of childhood and the confusion of growing up. It explores the importance of creativity as a way of combating the Earth's melancholy humming.

Questions for Discussion

1. In chapters one and two Gwenni falls into a frightening new world. Discuss how Mari Strachan foreshadows Gwenni's loss of innocence. How does she weave violence into the domestic?
2. Discuss the parallels between Gwenni and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. It's interesting to look at themes, characters and motifs. Alice's adventure takes place in a dream; in many ways Gwenni's journey has a dream-like quality. Both texts use heavy symbolism. Discuss other characters in Mari Strachan's text that are paralleled with characters from *Wonderland*.
3. In many ways Gwenni and Alyce learn similar things. What does Gwenni learn? What is the significance of the map she makes with Tada at the end of the novel?
4. The novel is set in the 1950s but the themes are still relevant. Murders aside, the book is a painfully accurate exploration of puberty.

5. The death of Ifan drives the plot forwards but the novel is about more than a physical death. Discuss the other endings that the author explores.
6. Discuss the significance of the year and setting of the novel. In what ways do they support the themes of Gwenni's loss of innocence and her search for a place in the world?
7. The fox reappears as a symbol throughout the novel. Ifan enjoys killing foxes. Gwenni wants to save the soul of Mrs Llywelyn Pugh's fox fur. Magda throws the fur into the fire. What is the significance of the fox? Does it mean different things or are the meanings connected?
8. Mari Strachan's characters are compelling because they're not one-dimensional. Discuss the character of Tada. In what ways (if any) is he similar to Mrs Evans? Discuss their flaws and your level of sympathy for these two characters.
9. Magda is a complicated character. Discuss her motives. Is it too simplistic to dismiss her behaviour as the result of mental illness? Given what we know now about treatments in the 1950s, what level of sympathy do you have for Magda at the end of the novel?
10. There's something of the Cheshire Cat about Alwenna; the reader warms to her. Do you agree? Similarly we warm to Aunty Lol; how does the writer engage us with this character considering that she is always off page?
11. Discuss how *The Earth Hums in B Flat* explores the impact of war beyond the moment of battle. Do you agree with Sian's comment on page 302, 'That there was no fault anywhere?' Does a difficult past absolve the individual of responsibility for their present actions? Guto is presented as being completely childlike and innocent. What is his significance in the novel?
12. Discuss the attitudes towards mental illness in the novel. What are the consequences of hiding depression under a euphemism like 'the black dog'?
13. The real mystery at the centre of childhood is our parents. They are at the heart of our place in the world. In what ways does the text support this view?
14. Discuss the significance of the religious discussions the children have at Sunday school with Mr Ellis and the Voice of God.
15. The Earth hums in B flat, but through Gwenni's eyes we see that it hums in other keys. In what ways does the novel explore the beauty of the world and relationships?