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Book Review

Naming the Bones by Louise Welsh

Reviewed by Gwen Enstam

It is difficult to resist comparing Louise Welsh's *Naming the Bones* to her previous novels, *The Cutting Room* and *The Bullet Trick*, not least because all three are described as mystery novels. On a basic level this is true, but in all three novels Welsh builds significantly upon the mystery structure, inviting the reader to interpret the narrative's events and question his or her response. In *Naming the Bones*, she examines how we react to the issue of death: what we consider acceptable, what we consider unacceptable, and where the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable lies.

The events in *Naming the Bones* revolve around the university lecturer Murray Watson and his research of the Scottish poet Archie Lunan. Murray aims to produce a biography focusing on Lunan's short life, which requires some research into the manner and location of his mysterious death. But Lunan hasn't left much behind: Murray has his sole volume of published poetry, a cryptic diary, and a box of odds and ends to work with. Murray at first attempts to expand his pool of resources by interviewing Lunan's former friends and colleagues, but with limited success. Some agree but are reluctant to admit very much, and some refuse outright to discuss their relationship with the poet. As Murray persists in his investigations, he becomes increasingly aware of the ambiguity of his situation as biographer, and the propriety – and, since this is a mystery, the danger – of pressing too closely into the private life and death of another person.

What makes us uncomfortable as readers is Welsh's close scrutiny of things we don't like being interested in, and what we don't like to recognise in ourselves. This too-close-to-the-bone discomfort is evoked memorably by the sharp contrast between Murray Watson's attitude towards his work and that of Alan Garrett, a psychologist whose work focuses on artists who commit suicide. Dr Garrett's unseemly enthusiasm for his work is directly associated with the breakup of

his marriage, and it is in a conversation with Dr Garrett's ex-wife that Murray observes how things "lose their power to disturb. You get fascinated by the minutiae and the subject becomes abstract". Dr Garrett's particular interest in death has crossed the line and, as we learn later in the novel, the question of "how far is too far" plays an important role in the psychologist's own life.

Murray's research eventually takes him across the boundary between mainland and island Scotland. He leaves the modern art exhibitions and university communities of Edinburgh and Glasgow for Lismore, a wild island of faeries and feral children, thereby giving up the hard "reality" of the modern urban landscape for one that actively manifests its cultural and physical past via folk tales and archaeological digs. On Lismore, Murray finds that even the very ground is unreliable, offering a fast-track to hell with one misplaced step or one anxious backwards glance. Murray encounters, both physically and spiritually, "the beyond" Lunan mentions in his diary, the place where he died and where the secret of his death remains.

Looking into Archie Lunan's life is more of an active undertaking than Murray anticipates. This is partly because of the physical challenges Murray encounters on Lismore, but also because the act of pursuing the poet's life results in a more interpersonal exchange than he expects, both with the poet and with the culture of the island. On Lismore, he encounters the legendary sin-eater, whose ceremonial role is to take on the sins of another person after their death, thereby assuring the recently deceased of an easier time on the journey to heaven. The sin-eater is not a member of society per se, but someone who lives on the margins, called back and forth as needed. Increasingly, Murray is put in this position: the closer he comes to the place where, and the reason why Archie died, the more Murray bears the consequences of that truth-legend himself. Far from giving him academic recognition and acceptance, what Murray finds on Lismore exiles him from aspects of both his professional and personal life. The pressures of fame from the point of view of the famous – constantly pursued for the details of their lives – are often made public. *Naming the Bones* considers the price of pursuit.

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