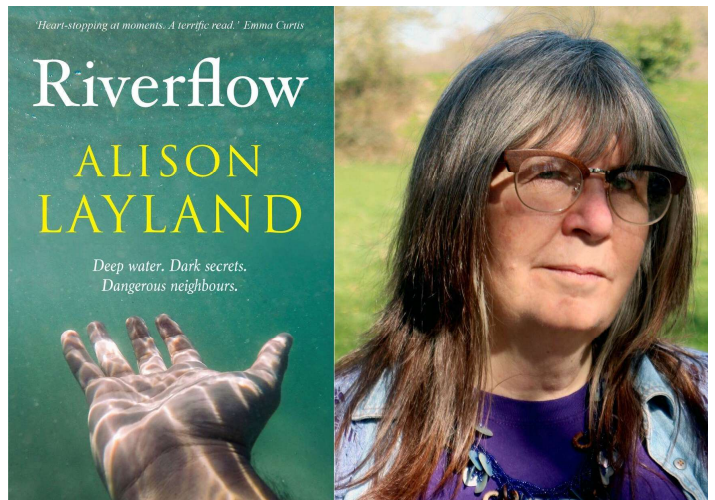


Readers' Guide

Riverflow

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Waterstones Welsh Book of the Month, August 2019

ABOUT THE BOOK

No longer the benign friend of summer, the Severn was a restless dragon slithering its way past

After a beloved family member is drowned in a devastating flood, Bede and Elin Sherwell want nothing more than to be left in peace to pursue their off-grid life. But when the very real prospect of fracking hits their village, they are drawn in to the front line of the protests. During a spring of relentless rain, a series of mysterious threats and suspicious accidents put friendships on the line, and the Sherwells' marriage under unbearable tension. Is there a connection with their uncle's death? As the river rises and pressure mounts, Bede's sense of self begins to crumble and Elin is no longer sure who to believe or what to believe in.

A novel of family secrets, community tensions and environmental protest against a background of fracking and floods on the river Severn.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Bede and Elin are living a life that, to the best of their ability, puts their ideals into practice. What would your ideal way of life be – or are you living it already?
2. "Elin and Bede considered themselves a perfect team [...] neither would function so well without the other." At the start of the novel, both of them believe in their love for one another, and the strength and security of their marriage. Is this borne out by the way they behave and their actions in the novel?
3. A central conflict between the Sherwells is whether or not to start a family. Some people, such as the BirthStrike movement, have vowed not to have children in the face of the threat posed by the climate crisis. Do you think this is an appropriate reaction?

4. Although absent, Joe is a central figure in the story. Do you think the extracts from his diary are an effective way to portray his character and relationship with Bede? Did you find it more or less satisfying than straight narrative chapters would have been?
5. Bede's sense of identity is shaken when he finds out about his family's past. To what extent do you think nature or nurture is more significant in shaping someone's character?
6. Several of the characters in the novel tell lies that vary in magnitude. Can a lie ever be justified if there is a genuine intention to spare another person's feelings?
7. "He believed that his main defence against a world whose ways he resented was to distance himself from it. Elin still dreamed of changing the world." Do you believe protest can make a difference? Do you consider it to be effective, superfluous or essential? What methods do you think work and/or are justified?
8. Have you ever been involved in direct action? If yes, for what cause? If not, is there a cause that would motivate you to?

AN ARTICLE BY THE AUTHOR ABOUT THE INSPIRATION BEHIND THE NOVEL

Originally published on the website of Crime Cymru, a collective of crime writers writing in and/or about Wales; find them at <http://crime.cymru>

The border between fiction and reality

Fiction can have a strange habit of becoming reality, whether it's due to the experience of research changing us in some way, our fiction being overtaken by the events it describes, or even strange coincidences. All three certainly happened to me when I was writing my psychological mystery, *Riverflow*.

Life-changing research

As the saying goes, it's not the things you've done that you regret, but the things you have left undone. The road protests of the 1990s are referenced in *Riverflow*, and while I fully supported them from a distance, when looking back, I have regretted not being there. So it was inevitable that my research would lead me to get more actively involved in environmental protest.

Many of the important themes in the novel are connected to the threat of fracking in my fictional Welsh borders village, and the involvement of my characters, Elin and Bede, in the protests. Part of my research involved going to support the protestors at the Preston New Road fracking site in Lancashire a couple of years ago. And it was inevitable that when Extinction Rebellion emerged in late 2018 – after I'd completed the main draft of my novel – I would get involved. In the April 2019 rebellion, our group, together with others from Wales and the borders, blocked the streets around Oxford Circus to enable the now iconic pink boat to be brought in.



I had never taken to the streets before, and as I faced the police over our banner, slept overnight on Oxford Circus to occupy the space, watched friends get arrested on Waterloo Bridge the following day, I often thought about my *Riverflow* characters' opinions and experiences with protest and the law. Which is the

greater crime, non-violent trespass and obstruction, or the ecocide and ongoing failure to address the climate and ecological crisis that drives people to take action?

Overtaken by events?



A problem with writing a topical novel is that it can get overtaken by events. I was concerned that this might be the case with *Riverflow*: part of my motivation was to use my characters' passions and preoccupations to raise awareness of environmental issues. The months leading up to publication have seen the actions of Extinction Rebellion, David Attenborough, Greta Thunberg and the young climate strikers, among others, bringing environmental issues to mainstream attention. Some details mentioned in the novel that were relatively unheard-of outside environmentalist circles are now

much more widely debated than when I was writing it. Towards the end of 2018, as the test drilling in Lancashire gave rise to ever-increasing earth tremors, it even seemed as though fracking might finally be stopped in the UK. Believe me, I would rather see this, and a concerted international effort to tackle the climate crisis, than for my novel to remain relevant. But despite the rise in awareness and the growing concerns of huge numbers of people, fracking continues to be developed.

This is not all: local, national and international climate emergency declarations are an encouraging step forward, but they still have not been backed up by actions. There is movement, but not enough, with target dates that are far too distant and a great deal of stubborn inertia. In the week prior to the novel's publication, the continuation of plans for the expansion of Heathrow airport were published at a time when we should be massively reducing air travel instead of facilitating its growth, a new drilling rig set out to prospect for North Sea oil despite the efforts of Greenpeace protesters, and the climate and ecological crisis was barely mentioned in political leadership campaigns. "Business as usual" is certainly still the order of the day, and there is still a lot of awareness that needs to be raised.

The weather plays its part

The novel begins with dramatic events during a winter flood, but the main story plays out against a backdrop of spring rains and summer flooding a year and a half later. I had in mind the spring and summer of 2007, which resulted in serious flooding of the river Severn along its length from the Welsh borders to the sea. Climate change means that extreme flooding and freak conditions will be ever more frequent. It was therefore uncanny to observe the weather a few days prior to publication in 2019, when around two months' rain fell in two days, and there was flash flooding on the Severn floodplain in the area where my fictional village is located. Since then we have seen several more floods throughout the UK, and in the local vicinity of the novel.



So although I hope that we can build on the progress we're making on tackling global heating and species extinction, and that the actions of protestors worldwide will be increasingly heeded, I'm sad to say that the issues raised in *Riverflow* are far from being overtaken.