



Silma Hill

Iain Maloney

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From the author of the *Guardian* Not The Booker Prize short-listed *First Time Solo* comes a fast-paced historical thriller.

Reverend Burnett, the unpopular minister at Abdale, lives with his sixteen year old daughter Fiona who he treats no better than a servant. Behind the manse lies Silma Hill, crowned with a circle of ancient standing stones.

Old Sangster unearths a pagan icon in the peat beneath Silma Hill and hands it over to Burnett, who plans to write a paper on it for the Historical Antiquities Society. Hours after finding the relic, Sangster is found dead. Fiona is drawn into accusations of witchcraft, fuelled by hatred of her father.

As hysteria in the village builds, will Fiona's father be able to put aside his pride to save his daughter? Or will she be consumed by the fire of anger, fear and superstition that has enveloped Abdale?

‘An atmospheric evocation of an earlier age we might suppose lost if it didn’t feel so lived-in. The true terror of the tale lies in what it tells us of ourselves today – as morally equivocal as ever.’ Ronald Frame, author of *Havisham* and *The Lantern Bearers*.

‘Silma Hill should be required reading.’

Scotland on Sunday

‘An enthralling and thought-provoking tale.’

Blue Book Balloon

‘Maloney weaves a tight plot and is economical in his writing.’

The Skinny

‘Engagingly disturbing … and leaves the reader asking questions about the nature of society and the role of religion and belief. The story is in many respects timeless.’

Undiscovered Scotland

‘It is clear Mr Maloney has thoroughly researched the subject and therefore it is an interesting work … an enjoyable read and good story.’

Press and Journal

Silma Hill Details

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Author : Iain Maloney

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From Reader Review Silma Hill for online ebook

Bonnie says

This is an exciting, fast-paced story that grips the reader right from the start. A seemingly innocent event, the finding of an ancient relic in a peat bog, initiates a series of tragic events that spiral out of control towards an excruciating and entirely unexpected end! Maloney manages to emulate the Gothic intensity of classic Scottish writers such as James Hogg and RL Stevenson as he explores the correlation and conflict between good and evil. The story becomes a battle of beliefs; the ancient superstitions versus enlightened rationality, and yet, this Eighteenth century society still finds itself bound by archaic witchcraft laws. The Reverend Burnett for all his scientific aspirations, is forced to conduct a horrific trial that includes his own daughter, Fiona who is branded a witch and Maloney does not flinch from describing the horrific realism of such events. Deft use of language, poetical descriptions of landscape and complex character development make this a book of great entertainment and depth.

Laura McAllister says

Is it scary? No.

this tale is basically a more modern representation of the witch trials. a demonstration of how stories and fear of the unknown can lead to chaos and destruction. a quick read... but leaves one yearning for more....

David Harris says

If you pressed me to sum this book up in a few words, I'd say "modern gothic". Or perhaps, to make it absolutely clear, modern Gothick. There is an air about it of one of those tales where monstrous, freak events abound, people are buffeted and baffled and heroes tested.

The story is set in mid 18th century Scotland, somewhere on the west coast. Abdale is a remote village on the banks of a sea loch, set under Silma Hill with its circle of ancient standing stones.

The leading light of the village - or so he would like to think it Burnett, minister of the village. Mr Burnett is the minister of the village. Widowed, he lives with his sixteen year old daughter Fiona, whom he treats like a servant.

Though living in a backwater, Burnett has dreams of scientific glory, wishing to join the "Society" in the "capital" and contribute learned papers. (It's one of the marks of this book that while in one sense the setting is clear, in another, Abdale appears a bit placeless, or timeless, only loosely anchored in history: it's definitely an unusual place in religious terms with a - presumably ancient - cross at the centre of the village, and prayers for the departed). His opportunity comes when old Sangster, digging for peat on Silma Hill, finds an ancient wooded statue: Burnett determines to study this - even after Sangster drops dead and villagers begin to mutter about idolatry.

For me one of the best aspects of the book was the slow burn, the way that events - and accusations - then slowly take hold, gossip spreads, old rivalries and grudges are engaged. Maloney doesn't make it completely

clear what is really at the bottom of it all - like that giant armoured head in The Castle of Otranto, the reality may be too big to grasp. Rather it's the reaction that he focusses on, or, I might say the overreaction - while some pretty strange events do take place, I'm not sure there's anything that is actually threatening or harmful. I was also absorbed by the character and contradictions of Burnett - preaching a loving God but beating his daughter; supposedly the voice of religion in his tiny parish while yearning for the scientific world of the "Society", rationalism and the enlightenment; forced by his office to lead the investigation of "witchcraft" which neither he (nor, apparently, any of the others involved) actually believes in.

While Burnett is not an admirable person his self-justifications are understandable and recognisably human, as are the no less ignoble reactions of the villagers at large. So we get denunciations, panic and a spiral of hatred. That part of the story seems more modern than anything (while this book is described as "historical", Maloney doesn't make it read as ye olde tyme speech, he's happy enough to throw in an "okay" or talk about "tuning in" to a conversation - making the whole thing more immediate, even if it might offend purists).

Overall, an enthralling and thought-provoking tale, especially once the story really gets moving. There were a couple of strands that I thought could have been given more detail - for example, the bad blood between Burnett and the local Sheriff, Dawkins, which isn't really explained although it is an important factor in what happens, and the shift in old Mrs Sangster from an almost bardic teller of ancient pagan tales to an accusing denouncer of witchcraft. However these are fairly minor points in the story overall.

Recommended.

Melanie says

Two stars feels low, but Goodreads says that means I thought "It was okay", which seems about right, so... I enjoyed the setting in 18th century Scotland, especially since I've just returned from a trip there (to Scotland, not to the 18th century), there is a compelling and believable cast of characters, there is tense drama and tragedy, good buildup to a crisis point, but something still felt lacking. Perhaps the resolution comes too quickly after all of the buildup, perhaps there's something to be desired in the hero's feelings about those he cannot save in the end, I'm not sure.

I do know that the writing style itself feels very disjointed and uneven, which was distracting. In some places it's very journalistic and matter of fact, in other places very poetic (not just in the lush descriptions, but also in the way sentence length and repetition are employed for rhythmic and emotional affect), without any apparent reason for the change in style. In other sections, the writing felt hurried, as if the author wasn't quite sure how to get to the next scene in the story, but was resisting the urge to just jump scene.

I was surprised that this book was shortlisted for an award, as it read a bit like many of the self-published books I've read, where there is a good story to be told, but the book hasn't had enough editing, or the author doesn't quite have the skills yet to give the story the presentation it deserves.

Leanne says

It took me a while to read this book but I blame that completely on the serious notes of the novel and the darker elements weaved throughout. While the book is fantastically written and incredibly engaging I had to take breaks, pretty long ones, between readings given the emotional response it raised in me.

WARNING: Some mild spoilers on plot progression below

I would recommend this book but it comes with two very important warnings:

Number one - do not read if you are looking for a light-hearted read or a happy ending, you shall not find it here

Number two - for those of you who are not good with torture or gore I suggest seriously thinking before reading this book. While not incredibly graphic a few of the scenes did leave me incredibly queasy feeling and reminded me of the real cruelty humanity has the capability for.

In the end, I'd say this book is fantastic for the way it portrays the way witch trials and accusations take place and also for how quickly a hasty and hate-filled attack on a person can lead to your own destruction. Definitely worth all five stars I have given it.

David Kenvyn says

This is one of the scariest books that I have read in a long while. Not because it is set in a small village in a remote part of the west coast of Scotland, along a sea loch. Not because of the brooding hill that looms over that village. Not because of the stone circle on the summit of that hill. Not because it is set in the eighteenth century. Not because of the strange object found in the peat bog.

All of these, of course, can be used to create an atmosphere that is scary, and many a writer has done that over the years. Iain Maloney, however, knows that what is truly scary is the very human, and although he uses atmospherics to underline his effects, it is the impact of events on the villagers themselves that is frightening, truly frightening.

The tale begins with an old man discovering an artefact as he digs for peat in the bog near Silma Hill. He knows that the local minister in the village of Abdale has an interest in such things, so he takes it to the manse, and gives it to the Rev. Burnett for him to study. Then the old man returns to the bog to continue cutting the peat, and there he dies.

That evening the old man's grand-daughter sees a pair of golden eyes staring at her, and others report strange goings-on in the village. This being eighteenth century Scotland, people look for explanations in the supernatural. For instance, there is no mention of the word "wildcat" anywhere in the book, although, to me, that seems a perfectly sensible explanation of the sighting of these eyes. Hysteria sets in. Old stories are told of the Vikings and their gods. The stone circle on Silma Hill casts a pall over the village.

To the modern reader, it is obvious that a stone age circle on the top of a hill has nothing to do with Viking Gods, at least not in Scotland, but that kind of knowledge was not available to villagers in eighteenth century Scotland. Then someone says the word "witchcraft", and sets off a train of events that proceed with an inevitable logic. All I am going to tell you is that the Witchcraft Act of the early 1560s was still in force in Scotland, and that required the Kirk to use torture to extract confessions.

To tell you what happens to Fiona and Murdoch, the young couple at the centre of the story, and to Murdoch's sister, Eilidh, would ruin the story for you, so I will not do that. It is sufficient for you to know that Iain Maloney will scare you witless, not with tales of "things that go bump in the night" but with the certainty of the knowledge of what people, when scared and panicking, are capable of doing to each other. And he adds into that mix, local rivalries and class divisions to produce a tale that is truly terrifying.

This is a story worthy of comparison with "The Turn of the Screw". But there are no ghosts, only people. And in "Silma Hill" it is people that should scare you.

Jim says

Silma Hill describes the self-destruction of a community through the gradual development of a witch-hunt in a secluded village in the west of Scotland. Strange happenings result in fingers being pointed, people taking sides and the subsequent escalation of terror. The civil authorities and the church seem only able to encourage the madness.

The novel felt as if it had been written decades ago and not first published in 2015. For this day and age, it's a relatively understated (though gripping) historical thriller. It retains the power to jolt and disturb the reader without having to resort to much in the way of graphic detail. The story progresses at a fair speed, and it's definitely one to look out for.

Meredith says

3.5

Dana says

The book starts out strong, with well-drawn characters and well-paced plot, but ultimately it doesn't answer the questions it sets up. I was a bit disappointed with the ending.

Sarah-Jayne Briggs says

(I received this book for free as part of Goodreads First Reads giveaways).

(This review may contain spoilers).

The time of the witch trials is definitely one of the darkest moments in history. I wouldn't say this book was an easy read... but I felt the author did a good job of showing the effects of the mass hysteria.

I found it easy to connect emotionally with Fiona, but less so with the other characters, who I felt ranged from being ignorant to outright cruel. I also had a really strong dislike for Burnett... and I'm not sure he was supposed to be ignorant or if there was incomplete information in researching. (The story of Jonah was wrong, as an example).

I did find it hard to differentiate between many of the minor characters. Eilidh's grandmother was one of the ones I did find it easy to understand, though... and most of the other members of the village as a whole seemed unwilling or unable to stand up for the right thing to do... but that is something that does happen

nowadays. (You'd think people would have learned...)

There were some quite dark moments in this book and I did feel quite hopeless while reading it. I wasn't entirely sure why Dawkins wasn't living in the village... but I disliked him as a character as much as I did Burnett. And the others in authority who had the power to refute the accusations of witchcraft but didn't.

This book did draw me in and made me feel angry and sad at turns. I wasn't sure exactly what was causing the goings-on in the village, but I think that lack of knowledge does make the book that much more powerful to read.

I would have liked to see more of Trent and Samuel. While their actions towards the end of the book were good, I was a bit confused about why they in particular were acting... though I suppose it could have been because they were outsiders.

The book did do a good job of showing that a cycle of this kind snowballs... and although I'd hope people would learn from the horrors of the past, the horror of the present-day makes it quite clear that people haven't learned.

Pat Elvidge says

A very gripping read.i tend to read well into the night and I finished this in just a few nights
At times I found the story disturbing especially parts where the reverend punishes his daughter so I feel this is not a book for the faint hearted
This is an extremely well written and atmospheric book and I would recommend to others
I rated this book 4 stars
Thank you to the publisher and to goodreads

Vanessa says

3.5 stars.

I enjoyed *Silma Hill* a lot more than I thought I would, considering I wasn't particularly in the mood for historical fiction at the time of picking this up. However, whenever there's witches involved in a book, I can't help but feel intrigued, and Maloney's novel was a pleasant surprise.

It follows Reverend Burnett and his daughter Fiona, who is suddenly accused of witchcraft after the discovery of an ancient Pagan relic leaves one man dead and the rest of the village experiencing supernatural horrors. Don't think this is in any way a horror though - this is more so a historical drama with a touch of the supernatural, that is never fully explained and leaves the reader guessing.

I thought Maloney's writing at first to be a little stodgy, but once I got a few chapters in I was captured by the surprisingly fast-paced flow of the book (despite the fact that not a great deal happens throughout the novel). I enjoyed that the chapters got progressively shorter and shorter as the action increased, and I truly felt for Fiona's character and her subjection to the cruel and panicked accusations of her former friends.

I would recommend this to people who aren't a fan of horror, but enjoy a book with some supernatural elements. Anything that follows the idea of witch trials fascinates me, and although I doubt this book is based on anything historically accurate, I still felt captured by another place and time.

Ann Louise says

Powerful and scarily accurate

Twenty years ago I read up on the Lancashire witch trials; although Silma Hill is fictional, the events are eerily accurate to those trials.

I cared about the characters in this book and I was willing everything to turn out right for them. Definitely worth a read.
