

## AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

# Carys Davies' 'Clear' follows a reverend's journey to evict an island's lone tenant

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Scott Simon

NPR's Scott Simon speaks with Carys Davies about her new novel, "Clear." The novel is set in Scotland during the 1840s, when tenant farmers were moved off the land and to cities and the coast.

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SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

The Reverend John Ferguson has broken away from the Church of Scotland to help found a new faith in 1843, but he needs to keep body and soul together for himself and his wife, Mary Ferguson. So he agrees to take on what we'd now call a gig, to sail to a small island to tell its lone inhabitant that he's being evicted. But John Ferguson arrives and falls from a high cliff. He's found by Ivar, who's been living a solitary life alongside his animals, with no human contact in any way. As he helps bring the Reverend Ferguson, the man who was going to evict him, back to life, the two men begin to know one another and develop their own distinct language. "Clear" is the new novel from Carys Davies, the Welsh-born novelist, who is recipient of the Royal Society of Literature's V.S. Pritchett Prize and she now resides in Edinburgh. Thanks so much for being with us.

CARYS DAVIES: Thanks very much for having me.

SIMON: These two men are profoundly different, aren't they?

DAVIES: They certainly are. One of them is an educated Presbyterian minister, and Ivar, as you say, has been living alone on a remote island off the far northeast coast of Scotland. The remains of his family, his grandmother, his mother and his brother's widow, left about 20 years ago for the new world. They'd given up on life on the island, but Ivar just couldn't bring himself to go. He couldn't imagine any other kind of life.

SIMON: Tell us about this period called The Clearances in the 1840s. I must say, it was a revelation to me.

DAVIES: So the - we're in the 1840s now. So these are the last brutally - most brutally coercive years of The Clearances, which have been going on since the middle of the previous century. Scottish landowners began clearing their estates of poor, unprofitable tenants and replacing them with sheep. And this sheep frontier, if you like, has been moving gradually further and further north as the landowners seek to make more money out of their estates than they can with their poorer, smaller tenants.

SIMON: John Ferguson's wife, Mary Ferguson, has doubts about her husband's mission, doesn't she?

DAVIES: She does. The thing you should know about John Ferguson is that as a Presbyterian minister, he is politically and socially very conservative. He respects the right of landowners to do as they will with their properties. Mary has a much more, I suppose, human and compassionate view, and she's very skeptical of the economist's view that these so-called improvements to the land are good for the people.

SIMON: How did John and Ivar begin to communicate?

DAVIES: Very slowly. They begin by Ivar pointing at things, wildly gesticulating, and John writing down the names of objects, the names of animals, the names of colors. The words Ivar has in his language are so many and so specific for very slightly differentiated things like, you know, a cloud with a bit of light shining on the top is a different word from a cloud with a bit of light shining underneath. And over a period of about a month, they begin to communicate in a sort of pidgin way, but with a certain amount of depth here and there.

SIMON: I want to get you to read a section, if you could, please. It might give us some idea of what begins to sound almost like a dialogue between the two people, the two men who don't understand each other.

DAVIES: (Reading) Still heavily padded with English, the whole thing was an excited mixture of speech and gestures, in which John Ferguson told him how he'd been down to the (speaking Norn) to wash his socks, or that he stayed inside because it was (speaking Norn) out, or that he'd filled the lamp from the (speaking Norn) and cleaned out the (speaking Norn), that he'd had a quick (speaking Norn) around, swept up the flogs of (speaking Norn) and brought in the (speaking Norn), or that he'd picked some (speaking Norn) he'd found growing in the (speaking Norn), scalded the (speaking Norn) and drained them and saved the (speaking Norn) to make soup, and for a little while now had been sitting in the (speaking Norn) going through everything he'd written down so far on the pages of his glossary.

SIMON: How did you develop that language?

DAVIES: This whole novel began one winter's night about 12 years ago. I'd been working in the lovely old reading room in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh and came across a dictionary in an extinct language I'd never heard of before, Norn, which I discovered had once been spoken on the islands of Orkney and Shetland off the far north coast of Scotland. For about a decade, I kept going back to this dictionary and reading it until a picture began to emerge of an island, and a man who I realized was the last speaker of this vanishing language.

SIMON: What do you think Ivar and John begin to - well, to see in one another?

DAVIES: It's mysterious. I'm not sure I can give you logical reasons. It's a bond that they form because they're alone. I'm always drawn to putting my characters in quite remote, desolate places. And it sounds a little harsh, perhaps that I like to put them in these sorts of places. But I do think it means that the distractions of everyday life fall away in these sorts of situations. And, you know, as humans, we're very good at not looking - not confronting things that we don't want to confront.

SIMON: Carys Davies, her new novel, "Clear." Thank you so much for being with us.

DAVIES: Thank you. It was a pleasure.