

{firsttimers}

In this issue we review the debut works of three MMU alumni

The earth hums in B flat

Mari Strachan

Perseus Books

When a Mr Evans dies suddenly, apparently drowned in the local reservoir, the most unlikely detective steps up to the job of finding out how. Despite warnings from the police and most of all her concerned mother, young Gwenni Morgan embarks on a mission to find out the truth, not only about who killed Evans but also about the truth concerning her own family history and the secrets which have been locked away for years.

In a cruel world of saddening revelations and difficult circumstances, Gwenni persists and finally unearths the truth.

Strachan's novel is well crafted with multiple storylines often intertwining to add depth and intrigue to the story. However the novel starts slowly although this is in part deliberate as the relevance of the early events only become apparent later on. However Morgan does teeter on the edge of falling between two stools and not sustaining our interest sufficiently to make us want to reach the end.

That said she establishes the characters very well. They are all very human and easy to identify with, and are well developed. The small Welsh village in which the novel is set is also packed full of gossipers and vivid characters, which adds to the hype and confusion over the death.

The themes and messages of the book are clear, and there is nothing deep or mind-boggling about Strachan's story. It is a tale about human nature, truth and lies, and knowing who you are and where you come from. Despite a slightly far-fetched storyline the result is ultimately an engaging and well constructed novel considering this is her first book.



Single mother on the verge

Maria Roberts

Penguin

This debut from Roberts is hard to categorise.

In parts it is classic chick-lit territory as she takes us through a young mother's tangled love life while trying to bring up her young son. However such a categorisation certainly doesn't apply to the opening pages in which our young mother is confronted by an ex-partner.

For an essentially comic novel to return intermittently, as it does, to a more sinister undercurrent may be a little hard to digest for some. Indeed one is tempted to

ask why Roberts chose not to write a more serious novel given the subject matter.

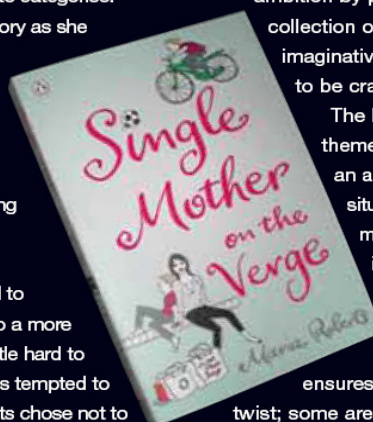
The juxtaposition of these concurrent themes isn't helped by Roberts' very deliberate yet disjointed writing style which flits between events and random thoughts.

Given that the novel is inspired by the blog of the same name, perhaps it should come as little surprise that the reader is confronted by such a style.

But is there a wider message here for would-be writers who fancy developing their blog into something more?

Namely, does it automatically follow that a successful blog will translate into a successful book? While the jury remains out on that one, we still look forward to future work by Roberts who clearly has a very natural writing flair.

Her next novel is based around the travails of a pig farmer, and that certainly will give us something completely different.



In All Probability

Steve Morris

Pneuma Springs

MMU alumnus Steve Morris realises his lifelong ambition by presenting his first published collection of short stories. His succinct, imaginative style allows for 30 stories to be crammed into just 137 pages.

The book revolves around the theme of chance. Morris creates an array of often elaborate situations, ranging from the mundane inability to remember in the story *My Tune* to the sci-fi inspired *Winston Churchill*, each left to the mercy of fate. His wry style

ensures the tales end with a neat twist; some are amusing, while others are designed to shock. This trademark finish, of flipping the story on its head within the last paragraph, is one of Morris' key strengths and adeptly demonstrates his dry sense of humour.

In All Probability's characters are deliberately non-heroic, instead real people who find themselves in abnormal situations. An assassin with a unique technique, an almost-was football player and a bitter long-forgotten one-hit-wonder pop star are just a few of the random figures who turn up within the book. And while this may sound fanciful, the majority are easily identifiable segments of society with recognisable character traits.

Although the very nature of a short story can thwart a reader's ability to invest any significant intellectual or emotional commitment into it,

In All Probability serves as a diverse collection of tales, perfect for a quick read on a coffee break or during the daily commute.

Morris' varied thematic style means there is something to entertain even the most ardent of critics.

