

MORGAN, ELENA PUW (1900 - 1973), novelist, author of fiction and short stories for children

Name: Elena Puw Morgan
Date of birth: 1900
Date of death: 1973
Spouse: John Morgan
Child: Catrin Puw Davies (née Morgan)
Parent: Lewis Davies
Parent: Kate Davies (née Ellis)
Gender: Female
Occupation: novelist, author of fiction and short stories for children
Area of activity: Literature and Writing
Author: Katie Gramich

Elena Puw Morgan was born on 19 April 1900 in Corwen, Meirionethshire, the daughter of the Revd Lewis Davies (1859-1934), a Congregationalist minister, and his wife Kate (née Ellis, 1868-1942). She was a bookish child, reading widely in English authors including Shakespeare, Shelley and Tennyson, as well as in Welsh literature. She was educated at Bala Girls' Grammar School, but poor health prevented her from going on to university, a fact she regretted and which may have contributed to her relative lack of confidence in her own literary abilities.

In 1931 she married John Morgan, a local tailor and outfitter, who also had strong literary and political interests. They had a daughter, Catrin, born in 1933. Their household in Annedd Wen, Corwen, was a centre of cultural activity and they had many literary friends, including the English novelist **John Cowper Powys**, who had settled nearby, and the Welsh writers **Iorwerth C. Peate**, **Moelona, E. Tegla Davies** and **Kate Roberts**.

Morgan's fiction was produced for magazines and for competitions in the National Eisteddfod, and was written during a brief ten-year period in her life (c.1930-1940) when she had the time to write. In later life, sadly, she stopped writing owing to familial caring responsibilities.

Angel y Llongau Hedd (The Angel of the Peace Ships), published in 1931, was her first book. This is a moral tale for children about the life and exploits of the missionary, John Williams, which was written at the behest of the British Missionary Society. She wrote two other short novels for children, both of which won prizes in the National Eisteddfod, *Tan y Castell* (Under the Castle, 1930) and *Bwthyn Bach Llwyd y Wig* (The Little Grey Woodland Cottage, 1936). She also published 16 juvenile short stories in periodicals such as *Cymru'r Plant*, *Y Cymro*, and *Y Faner*.

Morgan published three novels for adults, each of them winning prestigious prizes in the National Eisteddfod. The first was *Nansi Lovell*, published in 1933; this was the first work to show the true extent of her literary talent. *Y Wisg Sidan* (The Satin Dress) appeared in 1939 and *Y Graith* (The Scar) in 1943, the latter having won the Prose Medal at the 1938 Eisteddfod.

Her first novel for adults, *Nansi Lovell*, takes the form of a fictional autobiographical letter written by an old Welsh gypsy to her granddaughter, the heiress of the local great house. *Nansi Lovell* reveals Morgan's strong sympathies with outsiders and downtrodden female figures, and is also notable for its sympathetic and knowledgeable representation of Romany culture.

Y Wisg Sidan is a historical novel set in rural Wales in the late nineteenth century, recounting the experiences of Mali Meredur, the central female character. She inherits a beautiful, red satin dress from her mother, and this object of desire is her only comfort in a life of dire poverty, exploitation, and deprivation. In terms of plot, structure and style, this novel is complex and sophisticated; told largely from Mali's point of view, there are extended passages of free indirect discourse. Ultimately, the plot of the novel traces a trajectory of empowerment and vindication for Mali. The final scene depicts Mali burning the red dress, which could indicate the end of Mali's 'curse' of bad luck, always associated with the dress.

Morgan's last novel, *Y Graith*, spans a period from the last decade of the nineteenth century up until the 1930s, giving scope to show the social and political changes happening in Wales during that period. The opening chapters show Dori Llwyd as a bright eleven-year-old, eager to keep her place at the top of the primary-school class. She and her classmates struggle because the language of instruction is English, a foreign tongue to them, yet Dori's lively intelligence brings her success. Her life at home is very different: she has to labour constantly under the critical eye of her mother and suffer verbal and physical punishment. Dori is beaten so badly that she has a permanent scar above her eye where the belt buckle wielded by her mother almost put her eye out. This scar is both a physical mark of her mother's brutality and an emblem of Dori's psychological scarring. She is packed off as a maidservant to a middle-class family in Liverpool where she suffers constant humiliation and abuse from her English fellow-workers. The second half of the novel chronicles Dori's adult life, when she is married, has children of her own, and begins to develop the self-confidence that her mother had earlier beaten out of her. The closing stages of the novel are more hopeful, for one of Dori's grown sons campaigns for the new 'Nationalist Party' and her daughter insists that she will go to college, like her brothers.

Morgan was an accomplished writer but, perhaps on account of the relative paucity of her published work, she has been neglected and under-rated. Her fiction is notable for its powerful focus on girls and women living in conditions of poverty and deprivation. As her granddaughters, Angharad and Mererid Puw Davies, have pointed out, her work 'dealt with complex and challenging themes, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse ... Her novels were daring and ground-breaking at the time of their appearance.'

Elena Puw Morgan died in Oswestry on 17 August 1973.

Author

Katie Gramich

Sources

Angharad Puw Davies and Mererid Puw Davies, 'The Silk Gown and The Scar: The Life and Works of Elena Puw Morgan (1900-1973)', *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, New Series, vol. 27 (2021), 11-28

Marian Elis, 'Elena Puw Morgan', *Taliesin* 53 (1985), 61-8

Marian Tomos, 'Bywyd a Gwaith Elena Puw Morgan 1900-1973', unpublished MA dissertation, University College of North Wales, Bangor, 1980

Katie Gramich, *Twentieth-century women's writing in Wales: land, gender, belonging* (Cardiff 2007)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Elena Puw Morgan](#)

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