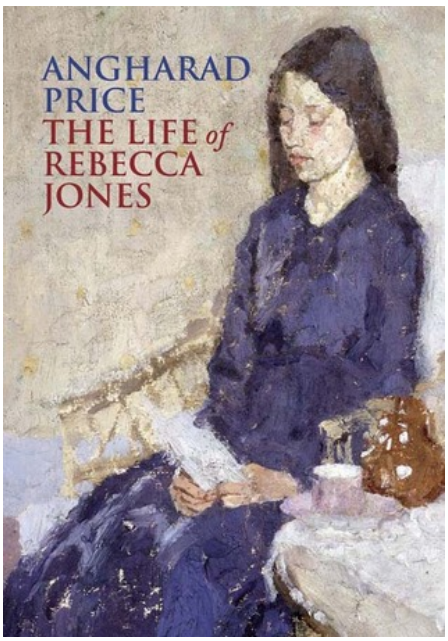


# The Life of Rebecca Jones

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A poetic work of fiction on the one hand, an autobiography on the other, The Life of Rebecca Jones is a powerful, meditative work on one family's passage through the twentieth century. In the early years of the last century, Rebecca is born into a rural community in the Maesglasau valley in Wales; her family have been working the land for a thousand years, but the changes brought about by modernity threaten the survival of her language, and her family's way of life. Three of her siblings are afflicted with a genetic blindness, and it is they who have the opportunity to be educated elsewhere and to find work, while Rebecca and her remaining brother maintain the family farm amidst a gradual influx of new technologies, from the waterpipe to the tractor and telephone, and ultimately to television. Rebecca's reflections on the century are delivered with haunting dignity and a simple intimacy, while her evocation of the changing seasons and a life that is so in tune with its surroundings is rich and poignant. The Life of Rebecca Jones has all the makings of a classic, fixing on a vanishing period of rural history, and the novel's final, unexpected revelation remains unforgettable and utterly moving.

## The Life of Rebecca Jones Details

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| Author | : | Angharad Price , Lloyd Jones (Translator) |
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# From Reader Review The Life of Rebecca Jones for online ebook

## Roger Brunyate says

### A Month of Women Writers

[*My actual review of this slim novel-memoir follows below after the divider. But I want first to say a few words about the project that it brings to a close.*]

May was my month of reading only literature by women. I missed the first week, so have gone a week into June; both months have women's names, so same difference. I started the streak by accident, but continued because, for whatever reason, my proportion of female authors this year had sunk below 30%, and I prefer to keep a better balance than that. Besides, I thought it would be interesting to see how it would be to immerse myself in the feminine sensibility for an entire month. (My longest stretch of male authors, by contrast, has been around 2½ weeks).

The 17 books I read over this 30-day period are as follows: Maggie O'Farrell: *This Must Be the Place* ; Kate Chopin: *The Awakening* ; Valeria Luiselli: *Faces in the Crowd* ; Virginia Woolf: *The Voyage Out* ; Iris Murdoch: *A Severed Head* ; B. A. Paris: *Behind Closed Doors* ; Helen Maryles Shankman: *In the Land of Armadillos: Stories* (stories); Elena Ferrante: *The Lost Daughter* ; Maylis de Kerangal: *Naissance d'un pont* ("Birth of a Bridge"); Mélanie Francès: *Anatomy of a Love Affair* (poetry); Maylis de Kerangal: *The Heart* ; Elizabeth Church: *The Atomic Weight of Love* ; Danielle McLaughlin: *Dinosaurs On Other Planets* (stories); Han Kang: *The Vegetarian* ; Lauren Belfer: *And After the Fire* ; Amity Konar: *Mischling* ; and finally this one by Angharad Price: *The Life of Rebecca Jones* .

It is interesting to see that there has been some variety within this all-female group. English and American writers have dominated, but there have been two books by a French author, and one each by French-Canadian, Irish, Italian, Korean, Mexican, and Welsh women. There is one book of poetry, three collections of stories, something that might almost be a memoir, and one mystery. The three Holocaust novels are an anomaly, although this is a subject that interests me in terms of the technical challenge it poses authors. While most of the books have been new this year, the others stretch back over 100 years. [Sometime soon, I must try a stretch of reading only older books—though this would mean giving up free ARCs for a while.]

There is no significant difference in quality between this and an equivalent group of men; why should there be? My average ratings are pretty much identical. Though this group contains both my best new book of the year (*The Heart*) and what I trust will be the worst (*Behind Closed Doors*). Add to that two other quite remarkable new books (*The Vegetarian* and *In the Land of Armadillos*), another (*Mischling*) which greatly impressed others but not so much me, and three slightly off-center classics (*The Awakening*, *The Voyage Out*, and *A Severed Head*) and it has been a pretty remarkable month.

When I started this project, I hoped that the immersion would enable me to pen some sage words about the Feminine Sensibility, but now I mock myself for even thinking it! True, there are almost no books here written from the perspective of a solitary male protagonist: *A Severed Head* is the obvious exception, though Iris Murdoch uses the male character largely with satirical intent, to skewer the moral fecklessness of men. Equally true, almost all the others either have female leading characters or are studies of relationships, and the quasi-memoir form of *The Life of Rebecca Jones* and *Voices in the Crowd*—not to mention the "I" voice of the poet in *Anatomy of a Love Affair*—of course looks at its female subject from the inside out. There are no books here relying much on action, skulduggery, or force, but that tends to be my preference anyhow. On

the other hand, the Holocaust stories in *In the Land of Armadillos* make no concessions to some supposed feminine softening, and the brilliant *Naissance d'un pont*—describing the construction of a vast bridge, for heaven's sake—is about the most "masculine" book I have read all year. Go figure.

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**Continuance**

> *Continuance is painful. It is the cross onto which we are tied: its beams pulling us this way and that. A longing for continuance lies at the heart of our nature, and we lie at the center of those forces which pull us this way and that like some torturer. Our basic urge is toward continuance. Yet, we are born to die. And we spend our lives coming to terms with that paradox.*

"What makes a novel a classic?" opens the introduction by Jane Aaron. Although first published in Welsh as recently as 2002, *O! Tyn y Gorchudd* ("O! Pull Aside the Veil!") won numerous prizes, was sponsored by the EU and the BBC, and has been adopted as a set text by various Eisteddfods or Welsh arts festivals. Hence this translation by Lloyd Jones. But *does* it translate? The book's fascination is that it captures a century of life on a small farm in a Welsh mountain valley, Cwm Maesglasau, perhaps the last century in which such a life would be possible. And it captures it in the names and music of the Welsh language. This is both the joy and the impossibility of the book, that it breathes the sounds and spirit of an ancient place, where merely to name the surrounding mountains is an invocation to gods far older than the Calvinist Christ of the village Chapel:

> *The thrill of those heights never lost its magic. As we ascended, different shades of green gave way to the peat bog's somber tones and the darkness of ancient oak woods. The marshland extended in one direction as far as Dyfi Forest and the heights of Aberangell and Mallwyd; in the other it stretched to Gribin Fawr and Gribin Fach, the onwards to the vale of Llyn Mwyngil. Here was lowly moorland unevenly spread, like a huge rumpled blanket, decorated with bell heather and bilberry, cotton grass sticking out like duck down.*
>
> *At last, having reached Craig Rhiw Erch, I could pause to get my breath, facing the mountain peaks: Waun Oer, Foel y Ffridd, Foel Bendin, Glasgwm, Mynydd Ceiswyn, Mynydd Gwengraig and Cadair Idris. But I never ventured to the summit of the Cadair. It was said you'd come down mad—or a poet.*

As it happens, I *have* climbed Cadair Idris. I trust I am not mad. But much of the poetry is lost to me for while I know that there is liquid music in those names, it is not music I can make myself. Even a rudimentary appendix on Welsh pronunciation, or better still a phonetic glossary, would have been helpful.

Rebecca Jones was born in a sheep farm without electricity or plumbing. She worked from home as a seamstress, while observing the men's work in the farm around her, changing with the passing of the seasons. She had many siblings, although several died in infancy or childhood, and—presumably because of some genetic cause that is never explained—three of her brothers were born blind. Because they were sent away to special schools, all three of them traveled more and had a richer education than she enjoyed. Rebecca herself never left the valley except, in later years, to borrow books from the library in Dolgellau, the nearest town. Her life of over 90 years encompassed distant ripples of both World Wars, and saw the eventual arrival of electricity, television, and computers. When the BBC makes a short film about the three brothers in 1964, and she goes into the town to see it, it is the first inkling she gets about her brothers' lives in England. Towards the end of her life, they send the family an archive videotape, which by now they can play in the

farmhouse itself. But it is a bittersweet memory:

> *The greatest pain was the lie perpetrated by the film. It seemed to say that nothing changed, yet showed clearly that nothing lasted. It "immortalized" the visible world. Yet, I—who had been invisible in the film—was the only one who still lived. And more than anything, I resented the way my own multi-colored memories had been obscured by searing images in black and white.*

Only a written memoir could ensure the continuance of such apparently unimportant, but fully colored, memories as these. And indeed a memoir is what this book appears to be; there are even a grainy photographs of the farm and its people. Yet Rebecca's story is indeed a novel. What makes it so are the last three lines of the book, wondrously sad and terribly beautiful at the same time.

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p.s. This makes a wonderful comparison with Robert Seethaler's recent *A Whole Life*, which I read and reviewed few weeks later. Also the birth-to-death story of mountain-dweller, only in that case a man, and from the Austrian Alps.

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### Diane Barnes says

A fictional autobiography with a twist. Such beautiful writing that these 176 pages feel like a 500 page family saga. Rebecca Jones narrates the story of her family, including her 3 blind brothers, and their 1000 year old farm in Wales. Being poor and suffering hardships was never an excuse not to see the beauty in the world, even if that world is just a few square miles in size.

"I have felt the rough fist of misfortune and the soft palm of joy. I learned that the price of having is losing".

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### Ingrid says

A moving story about a Welsh family in the first half of the 20th century. I spent many a year with Welsh friends in that area, so it felt like coming home. It's a worthy tribute to the little Rebecca Jones.

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### Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books

The rating, any status updates, and those bookshelves, indicate my feelings for this book. (hide spoiler)]

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### Margitte says

I will only water the content of this novel down by trying to write 'an activity' for it. It is one of those books that doesn't require any words of explanation.

BACKGROUND
- A farm in the remote valley of Maesglasau, east of Dolgellau in Merioneth, Wales;
- A family who occupied it for a thousand years when this book is finally written; - the continuance of the family through the cycles of history - the last hundred years in particular.
- the genetic surprise - three blind brothers and a family who adapted and suffered financially in the process to give them a chance in life;
- a sister who loved them like a mother, who never got married, and experienced love only once in her life.
- the loneliness of being the only survivor of the family, with all the memories and nobody to share it with, and the need to finally tell their tranquil story on their behalf (Angharad Price, the welsh author, did a great job, capturing the ambiance of an eroding culture & language perfectly in English).
- the sadness of an era which was fast disappearing into our clinical, cold modern world.

I couldn't figure out at first what it was: a memoir, a biography, or an autobiography of Rebecca Jones, as told by her great-niece, Angharad Price, but in the end it turned out to be a beautifully translated novel. The family did exist. But the first person narrator did not write the book. That's what it boils down to.

No matter how it is approach, the story ended up being a *what if* recollection of a 92 year old woman who lived her entire life on the farm, serving family and history in her own way. The author managed to fuse nature with poetry and render a perfect sympathy for the soul.

The book made me sad, melancholic even, for various personal reasons. One reason is that we're all getting there where nobody really wants to hear our stories, and loneliness will be our final friend in old age. However, it also gripped my attention, reminding me of the innocence and romance of a tough life for gentle people, which became so totally unknown to us all. How time and history ripped our minds and hearts out. How devoid of goodness we have all become.

I normally don't read reviews before I commit my 'activity'. But my eye caught Roger Brunyate's review and I immediately sensed that I don't have to write one myself. :-) He is one of my favorite reviewers to boot.
**READ HIS REVIEW**

This is not a group-think experience, but the book is going places and it is attracting mega followers. You might want to discover the reason for yourself.

All I can add is that it is a **MUST-READ!**

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## Andrew says

One of the wonders of the precious library service is that a reader can browse the shelves and find entirely randomly a wonderful little book which I had never heard of and was beautifully written and in its 150 pages captures a so concisely the life of a farming family in a Welsh valley yet covers so much more about the meaning of life itself. The heroine Rebecca Jones was a real person who in the late nineteenth century is born to the newly wed Evan Jones and his bride rebecca, they move as family tradition dicates into the family farmhouse at Trynbraich in the Maesglasau valley which has according to the family bible been occupied by the family since 1012. The family has Rebecca and Bob two healthy children and then three children born with a genetic illness causing blindness. In the 1960's a short documentary is made about the three blind boys born on the farm and what has happened to them. The book is both a factual picture of the authors family

over a century on the farm as changes to life occur from the use of shire horses to the tractor, candles to electricity, and many more, yet has a fictional element to it that makes the story more poignant. I know it is book tht will require a rereading to appreciate the prose and its subtleties as the language and descriptions of life in the mountains and streams is poetic and the description of the people extremely moving with very simple scenes that carry incredible emotional power. The translator describes the book as one that having been written in Welsh was viewed as untranslatable and consequently I am envious of that ability to gain more from this book if that is possible. I don't think it is a spoiler to quote the last few lines which were evocative of the warmth of the book as a whole "I walk through that downpour towards Llidart y Dwr, and rejoice as I approach my kin at Tynybraich. And the rain flows down my cheeks as though the stream itself were flowing over me, baptising me into another life". It is a book that deserves to be read more widely and better known.

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### nettebuecherkiste says

Rebeccas Mutter hieß ebenfalls Rebecca und kam einst als junge Braut in das entlegene Tal Maesglasau. 7 Kinder sollte sie haben, von denen jedoch nicht alle überleben würden. Rebecca wird 1905 geboren und ihr Leben wird das gesamt 20. Jahrhundert umspannen.

Angharad Price erzählt uns die Geschichte einer Bauernfamilie, wie sie als typisch für das ländliche Wales angesehen werden kann. Ihre Sprache ist wunderbar poetisch, anrührend, verzaubernd. Man wünscht sich, das Original lesen zu können, denn das Walisische hat eine reiche poetische Tradition, die auch in Rebeccas Familie eine große Rolle spielt. Der Übersetzer merkt im Nachwort beispielsweise an, dass Rebeccas Sprache uns möglicherweise zu “gebildet” vorkommen könnte, dies aber im Walisischen nicht ungewöhnlich ist. Die wunderbare Sprache weckt die Sehnsucht nach dem märchenhaften Wales und führt uns seine Schönheit vor Augen.

Es ist ein einfaches, einsames Leben, von dem Rebecca berichtet, ein hartes Leben, die Familie ist viel mit Krankheiten und Behinderungen konfrontiert, und doch erreichen einige von Rebeccas Geschwistern einen akademischen Beruf. Ganz unberührt von den Kriegen bleibt die Familie natürlich auch nicht, in Rebeccas Fall sorgt er für eine kurze und unglückliche Liebesgeschichte.

Auch wenn man es in einem solchen Buch nicht vermutet, es gibt einen Twist, der das Buch noch einmal aus anderer Perspektive erscheinen lässt und es für mich umso wertvoller gemacht hat.

Dieser kurze Roman ist ein literarisches Kleinod für Wales und, sofern man dies anhand der Übersetzung beurteilen kann, die walisische Sprache.

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### Eibi82 says

*¿Qué es la familia? Un ancla que nos mantiene en el sitio. Nos contiene seguros en la tormenta. Nos retiene en la bonanza. Es una bendición y un lastre, en particular para los jóvenes y para quienes procuran libertad. Uno de los momentos más pasmosos de la vida es cuando comprendemos que de pronto hemos pasado a ser ese ancla. Este cambio repentino es tan apabullante como instantáneo. Es el relevo generacional. Nos lanzan al aire sin previo aviso, para luego hundirnos en las profundidades del mar salado. El ancla agarra entonces. Todo se asienta.*

Termino esta lectura con la sensación de haber vivido un viaje épico. Es sin duda una de mis mejores lecturas del año y ni siquiera sé cómo hablar ella haciéndole justicia.
La vida de Rebecca Jones es original y única. Una lectura emocionante tanto por la historia familiar como por su manera de contarla. Belleza narrativa en estado puro que traspasa las páginas, que evoca y emociona de una manera tan nítida y clara que hace imposible no sentirse parte de ese valle galés y de la familia Jones. Un dulzura poética que, como dice Marta Sanz en el epílogo, *expresa cosas muy poco correctas desde el punto de vista político*. Y tanto que sí.
Rebecca teje con recuerdos la historia de su familia y la del propio valle de Maesglasau de manera brillante. Es la vida con todos sus claroscuros, un homenaje precioso que me acompañará durante bastante tiempo. Su voz es de las que no se olvidan. O! Tyn y Gorchudd.

*No he hablado de los embalses. Es donde se concentran las emociones. Me acerco a ellos con paso vacilante. Me quedo mirando sus aguas calmas, temiendo la atracción que ejercen sobre mis recuerdos. Aterrada, contemplo mi propia historia en sus profundidades insondables. Nadando contracorriente, me aventuro hasta la primera represa. La que cambió el curso de la vida de toda la familia de Tynybraich.*

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### Sra. Bibliotecaria says

Una historia costumbrista maravillosa con la que viajaremos por Gales durante más de un siglo. Si te apetece una lectura que te traiga paz este es tu libro. En español y catalán lo edita Rata Books. Impresionante la edición y cómo el libro llega a Yolanda Batallé que siempre anda a la búsqueda de lecturas conscientes que invitan a valorar cualquier cultura.

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### Fionnuala says

That Angharad Price’s family have lived in the same Welsh valley for nearly a thousand years should be enough to ensure that this beautiful description of a century in the life of the valley is valued highly. Where else would we get such a loving and intimate record of a place that has known little change for generations upon generations. Price skilfully blends the history of her family, and in particular, of her great aunt, Rebecca Jones, into a hymn of praise to the valley itself so that we can see it, hear it and smell it, so that, in the end, the landscape merges perfectly with the main character and the main character becomes the landscape. Another beautiful book celebrating ‘place’ to add to my collection.

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### Kalen says

This came recommended to me by a bookseller in Wales and I'm glad I took her suggestion. (I was looking for a Welsh author/publisher that I wouldn't most likely be able to get in the States.) This book is a classic of Welsh literature and was only recently translated into English. Set not too far from where we stayed and explored, it really enhanced my trip--the descriptions of place are beautiful and real. It may seem strange but I recommend this to anyone who loves Little House on the Prairie or any stories about homesteading/ye olden days. The Life of Rebecca Jones is about a time long gone, when life was more difficult but also more simple.

## Kirsty says

I spotted Angharad Price's *The Life of Rebecca Jones* when browsing the library. It is an entry upon my 2017 reading list, and when easing it out from the shelves where it was sandwiched between two rather enormous tomes, I was surprised to see how slim it was. Its 'powerful meditation on one family's passage through the 20th century', and the modern world which serves to threaten their traditional rural life in Wales, sounded absolutely lovely. I adore quiet novels which take me to a different time and place, and *The Life of Rebecca Jones* certainly ticks all of those boxes.

*The Life of Rebecca Jones* has been translated from its original Welsh by Lloyd Jones. In its native Wales, the book was heralded a 'modern classic' upon its publication, and it has been highly regarded in literary avenues since it was transcribed into English. Jan Morris describes it as 'the most fascinating and wonderful book', and Kate Saunders in *The Times* writes: 'The ending will make you want to turn right back to the beginning.'

From the outset, there is a definite brooding power to the narrative, and an ever-present thoughtfulness embedded into every single sentence: 'This was a reversal of creation. The perfection of an absence. / Tranquility can belong to one place, yet it ranges the world. It is tied to every passing hour, yet everlasting. It encompasses the exceptional and the commonplace. It connects interior with exterior.'

An ageing Rebecca narrates the whole; her voice is measured and incredibly human: 'I too have sought peace throughout my life. I've encountered it, many times on a more lasting silence; and I will find it before I die. My eyesight dwindles and my hearing fails. What else should I expect, at my age? But neither blindness nor deafness can perfect the quietness which is about to fall on this valley.' There is a ruminative quality to her voice, and the use of retrospective positioning only adds to this effect.

Rebecca has lived within Cwm Maesglasau for all of her life; she adores it, but the sadness which she feels at the changes within her community and landscape are prevalent. Of her home, she writes: 'Cwm Maesglasau is my world. Its boundaries are my boundaries. To leave it will be unbearably painful.' The landscape is as important a character within the novel as Rebecca herself; this is obvious from the very beginning. Price shows just how deeply person and place are connected, and the affects and effects of the two. She describes the scenes which Rebecca and her ancestors saw so vividly, bringing them to life for the reader: 'There is a crimson tunnel of foxgloves and a sparkling dome of elderflower: the same intricate design, Evan notes, of the lace on his wife's bodice. Sunshine streaming through the canopy spangles her hair with stars'.

Despite *The Life of Rebecca Jones* identifying as a work of fiction, photographs have been used throughout, giving it the quality of autofiction. Its words and their accompanying images are filled with traditions. It adds to the reading experience that some of the original Welsh vocabulary has been included, sometimes alongside their English translations, and otherwise understandable within their context.

Rebecca Jones is the name of the narrator, as well as of her mother and grandmother. In this manner, Price effectively tells three stories, which are similar but have discernible differences in their way. The novel is an incredibly contemplative one; it almost makes one yearn for times gone by. The structure which Price makes use of is one of fragmented memories; the only links between them are often that they have been lived by the narrator, or by members of her immediate family. The reading experience which has been created is a sensual one; in interruptions to Rebecca's voice, a stream has been personified, and its journey shown with

beautiful, lyrical prose. *The Life of Rebecca Jones* is quietly beautiful; it demonstrates a life filled with sadnesses, but one which is still cherished nonetheless.

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### Jenny Lloyd says

Well. That was a fast read! But then this is nearer to the length of a novella than a novel.

This was another find in the Hay Festival bookshop. From the moment I began reading it, I began to question. Is this a novella or a biography? It reads like a biography, it even has photographs of real-life places portrayed in Rebecca's story. Yet, the narrator is Rebecca Jones. So is it an autobiography? No, because we know the author is Angharad Price, not Rebecca Jones. These niggling doubts about whether it was a work of fiction or not remained with me to the end when all was made clear. Take my word for it, this is a work of fiction however much it comes across as something else, and all the more poignant for that.

On the surface, this is a story of a family struggling to come to terms with inherited blindness. Two of Rebecca's brothers are born blind, while a third is forever grateful that he was able to see the colour of bluebells before he too goes blind. The whole family suffers differing hardships as a result. These three brothers are sent away for special education, at great expense, meaning the whole family suffers financial hardship. The oldest son, Robert, who is not blind, has to give up his own ambitions and work on the farm because there is not enough money to educate him, too. Likewise, Rebecca gives up her ambition of training to be a nurse.

The real beauty of this story, for me, lay in its quiet evocations of times gone by and ways of living which are gone forever but are fondly remembered by those of us just old enough to remember some of them. The author, Angharad Price has a deep understanding of how it feels to witness the unstoppable erosion of a country's culture and entire ways of living. And yet, while those old ways are gone forever, the beauty, majesty, and haunting tranquillity of the wild mountains and their valleys have an eternal quality that never changes. Throughout Rebecca's story, this recognition that some things truly are eternal, along with the sense of being rooted to a place through connections that go back centuries, are keenly felt.

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### Paul says

This is a remarkable piece of work. Sometimes when you read a book it feels so familiar that you think you must have read it before. I felt this about Carr’s Month in the Country and about this book. The beginning of the Guardian review sets the scene:
“In 1964, BBC Wales made a short film about three brothers, blind from birth or infancy, raised on a farm in the lovely and remote valley of Maesglasau, east of Dolgellau in Merioneth. Their genetic fate both closed and opened doors. Special education away from home meant that Gruff went to Oxford and became an Anglican clergyman. William – who returned to the farm – worked as a polyglot Braille editor. Lewis, the Benjamin of the family, would programme computers and, in retirement, become a prize-winning blind artist.”
Rebecca Jones was their aunt and it is her life that is told here: part novel, part history, part portrayal of rural life. Her family have lived in and farmed the valley for over a thousand years and can trace their roots in the

valley to 1012. Rebecca Jones was born in 1905. Angharad Price is the great-niece of the siblings, making her Rebecca Jones's great great-niece. She is telling her own family story. The original is in Welsh. The landscape of the valley and its moods and climate are almost another character. Over the course of the book we are taken through the changes in the twentieth century. Jones is portrayed with great dignity and perception and with a good deal of warmth. If you are tempted to read this don't read any introductions and don't turn to the last page!
This work is also profound and reflective. Rebecca reflects as she ages;
"Continuance is painful. It is the cross onto which we are tied: its beams pulling us this way and that. A longing for continuance lies at the heart of our nature, and we lie at the center of those forces which pull us this way and that like some torturer. Our basic urge is toward continuance. Yet, we are born to die. And we spend our lives coming to terms with that paradox."
The language is poetic, even in translation:
'This was a reversal of creation. The perfection of an absence. / Tranquility can belong to one place, yet it ranges the world. It is tied to every passing hour, yet everlasting. It encompasses the exceptional and the commonplace. It connects interior with exterior.'
There is a good deal of prose by Hugh Jones, a hymnodist but it is family and location that matter most:
"Memories of my childhood reach me in a continuous flow: smells and tastes and sights converging in a surging current. And just like the stream at Maesglasau, these recollections are a product of the landscape in our part of rural mid-Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its familiar bubbling comforts me.
It was not really like that, of course. The flow was halted frequently. Indeed a stream is not the best metaphor for life's irregular flow between one dam and the next.
I have not mentioned the reservoirs. In these the emotions congregate. I approach them with hesitation. I stare into the still waters, fearing their hold on my memories. In terror I see my own history in the bottomless depths."
This novel/history is simple and yet written with great profundity, set within a very specific and limited landscape and seeming to contain the whole world. The history of the family has its sadness's with the loss of several children over the generations, two world wars, the coming of mechanisation and electricity.
I would recommend this book to anyone who reads; it is quite brilliant.

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### Anna says

After what may have been an excess of non-fiction, I found the 90 minutes spent reading this novella pleasantly soothing. It is a simple tale of a woman born in rural Wales a the start of the 20th century. Positive as the experience was, however, I did not find it particularly exceptional, despite the blurb proclaiming it 'an instant classic when first published'. This made me consider what makes a novel 'classic' and what virtues a classic novel is usually expected to embody. 'The Life of Rebecca Jones' is a very simple tale of an impoverished family, briefly told in unadorned language. It reminded me very much of A Whole Life, another short novel of just the same structure, also feted as a classic. In both cases, although I found the tragic moments of family life in the narrative moving, the whole did not have much impact on me. This is clearly a matter of taste and not a problem, nor should it put anyone off either novella. Use of the term 'classic' to describe them interests me, though. Both make a virtue of simplicity in style and content, to the point of extreme spareness. I wonder to what extent their 'classic' status represents a yearning for prelapsarian rural idylls, for a time when poverty could apparently be considered noble and when an individual in the West could plausibly be totally isolated from technology and the wider world. In a sense, both works are so brutally realist as to circle back into the fantastical. Or am I being unduly cynical?

An alternate theory: neither novella was originally written in English, so I may have missed some elusive quality by reading them in translation. The introduction to ‘The Life of Rebecca Jones’ (which I read last and spoils the ending, as always) does comment on the difficulty of doing justice to the original Welsh. Perhaps the beauty of Wales can only be properly conveyed in its mother tongue? For fiction so seemingly grounded in its environment, I found it frustratingly functional and unwilling to embroider details of the hills, valleys, and waterfalls mentioned. On the other hand, I liked the inclusion of black and white photos very much. Perhaps novellas don't give me though time to quiet the more analytical part of my brain, allowing immersion in the narrative world? It's unlikely to be a coincidence that the novels I've found most involving and compelling have all been more than 500 pages long.

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