

Bernard MacLaverty

CAL



VINTAGE

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About the Book

For Cal, some of the choices are devastatingly simple . . .

He can work in the abattoir that nauseates him or join the dole queue; he can brood on his past or plan a future with Marcella.

Springing out of the fear and violence of Ulster, Cal is a haunting love story in a land where tenderness and innocence can only flicker briefly in the dark.

About the Author

Bernard MacLaverty lives in Glasgow. He has written five collections of stories and four novels, including *Grace Notes* which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Saltire Scottish Book of the Year Award. His most recent story collection, *Matters of Life and Death & Other Stories*, was published in 2006. He has written versions of his fiction for other media - radio plays, television plays, screenplays - and wrote and directed the short film *Bye Child* which won a BAFTA award.

Also by Bernard MacLaverty

Secrets

Lamb

A Time to Dance

Cal

The Great Profundo

Walking the Dog

Grace Notes

IN MEMORY OF MY BROTHER PETER

CAL

Bernard MacLaverty

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

One

He stood at the back gateway of the abattoir, his hands thrust into his pockets, his stomach rigid with the ache of want. Men in white coats and baseball caps whistled and shouted as they moved between the hanging carcasses. He couldn't see his father, yet he did not want to venture in. He knew the sweet warm nauseating smell of the place and he had had no breakfast. Nor had he smoked his first cigarette of the day. Smells were always so much more intense then. At intervals the crack of the humane killer echoed round the glass roof. Queuing beasts bellowed in the distance as if they knew.

He saw the Preacher standing waiting with his glass. It was the local doctor's prescription for any anaemic with a strong stomach. The Preacher was tall and thin with the Adam's apple of a vulture and skin that was made even paler, if that was possible, by the light reflected from the white tiles. He cycled the countryside on his breadcart of a bicycle with a small ladder strapped to the bar and a clutter of tools in the saddle-bag, nailing tracts made from tin lids to trees and telegraph-poles. 'The Wages of Sin is Death. Romans 8:5' was on a sycamore tree on the Magherafelt road; and further out 'I am the Resurrection and the life. John 11:25'.

Crilly came over to the gateway to sharpen his knives.

'Hiya, Cal,' he said. Cal saw him press the blade on to the carborundum stone with his fingers, heard it hiss.

'Is my Da about?'

Crilly looked up and stopped the movement. He nodded over his shoulder.

'Will you tell him I want him,' said Cal.

'In a minute.' He squinted along the worn crescent of his blade and gave it an infinitesimal touch with the ball of his thumb. He caressed the stone lightly once or twice more, as if sweeping it clean, then moved back into the building.

'Shamie,' he yelled. 'Shamie.'

The humane killer cracked again and Cal saw the killing pen tip over and tumble a beast on to the floor, its legs stiff to the ceiling. It was immediately winched up by one of the hind shanks and its throat cut. The Preacher moved forward and held out his glass to catch the spout of blood. Cal turned away.

His father appeared, holding two halves of a hanging carcass apart like a curtain. Seeing Cal, he went over to the gateway.

'What do you want?'

'You took the cigarettes with you.'

'Here,' he said, jutting out his hip. His hands were wet and slimy and he held them out as if he were to be body-searched by the Army. Cal lifted the tail of his father's white coat. It was japped all over with blood and stiff with cold fat. He put his hand in the trouser pocket and took out a packet of Embassy.

'Take a couple,' said his father. Cal took three and put the packet back. He fumbled in his own pocket for a match.

'See you,' he said, walking away. He struck the match, cupped it and lit one of the cigarettes, inhaling deeply. Almost immediately he felt the muscles of his stomach relax. Several more times while standing still he drew the smoke to the bottom of his lungs and exhaled, each time with a sigh. He began to walk, the cigarette hanging from his mouth, his hands in his anorak pockets. It was an autumn morning, the air full of clear sounds. As he passed the pens of cattle he heard their nasal bawling and, when closer, the slow slap, slap of their dung. He turned his face away and walked home to make himself a cup of tea and wait for his Giro to arrive in the post.

As he turned into his street he felt the eyes on him. He looked at the ground in front of him and walked. The eyes would be at the curtains or behind a hedge as a man paused in his digging. He could not bear to look up and see the flutter of Union Jacks, and now the red and white cross of the Ulster flag with its red hand. Of late there were more and more of these appearing in the estate. It was a dangerous sign that the Loyalists were getting angry. The flags should all have been down by now because the Twelfth of July was long past. It was sheer cussedness that they were kept up. Even looking at his feet Cal couldn't avoid the repulsion because the kerbstones had been painted alternating red, white and blue. Cal felt it was aimed at them, the Mc Cluskeys, because his father and he were the only Catholic family left in the whole estate. Fear had driven the others out but his father would not move. He was stubborn at the best of times but if he thought pressure was being applied to him he was ten times worse.

'No Loyalist bastard is going to force me out of my home. They can kill me first.'

But it wasn't a single bastard that worried Cal, it was an accumulation of them. The feeling of community that they managed to create annoyed him and the stronger their sense of community grew the more excluded and isolated the Mc Cluskeys felt. They spoke to their near neighbours affably enough but beyond that everyone else in the estate seemed threatening. The Radcliffs and the Hendersons said they would stand by the Mc Cluskeys if it ever came to an eviction.

Cal detested the condescension of some of the Protestant men he met about the town.

'You're Shamie Mc Cluskey's boy? A good man, Shamie.' And implied in everything they were saying was 'for a Catholic'. There was faint affectionate amazement on their faces that there should be a Catholic who was a good man, someone to equal them.

Cal turned in at the gate and walked up the path through his father's neat garden. He let himself in at the front door with his key. He took a mug of tea and a slice of toast up to his bedroom, turning on the light rather than pulling back the curtains. He locked the bedroom door with a small bolt he had recently bought in a hardware shop. It was much against his father's wishes but he had argued that he was nineteen years of age and had the right to some sort of privacy. He put on an LP of the Rolling Stones to drown the silence and sat on the bed with his back to the wall.

He put his head forward and sipped his tea. With his hair the length it was, he had had to develop some female gestures, like holding it back with his hand to prevent it getting in his cup. He had it parted in the middle so that it hung like curtains on each side of his face. When he was by himself playing the guitar, almost as if it was a tic he would shake his head from side to side so that the hair would end up all over his face, screening him from the world. Within the tent of his hair with eyes shut he listened to the sounds his fingernails picked from the strings as he sang in an American voice the things he'd heard on record. He could think of no good reason for this tic. It was like an attempt to rid himself of something, an overspill which resulted in spasmodic movement. He would also curse himself in pidgin French. He had learned very little French at school but he had retained enough of it to mutter to himself. '*Cochon, merde*', and twist his head. It was as if his mind had stuck. The phrase would come again and again. He even fretted as to whether or not it was grammatically correct. Not that it mattered because he even made up phrases of his own which were a mixture of French and English:

'Dirty *vache*. You big *crotte de chien*.'

In the morning he would wake with a ridiculous phrase like this in his mind and throughout the day it stayed with him like indigestion. Sometimes he wished that he knew more

languages to curse himself more thoroughly. And yet at this thought he had to smile.

He left his toast uneaten. The butter resolidified as it cooled. For the sake of the Movement he had tried to teach himself some Gaelic out of a book he had bought at a jumble sale but he never knew how to pronounce the written form of the words. How did you say *'bh'* and *'dh'*? The words remained as printed symbols locked inside his head and he gave up the notion soon after. Some day he might go to a class and hear the words spoken.

He took out his second cigarette, straightened it with touches of his fingers and lit it. There was a slit in the curtains and a beam of sunlight slanted into the room, making the smoke swirl flatly. When the record finished he moved to the window and peeped out. The back garden led to a field of barley and beyond to the smoky blue of the mountain of Slieve Gallon. Nothing moved. He opened the window to let the smoke out but left the curtains closed and when he sat down on the bed again they moved and unfurled heavily in the slight breeze. With the window open he could hear things going on. The monotonous cheeping of sparrows, a car accelerating, children squealing distantly in the playground at school. The quiet made him tense. He began to file his nails with the sandpaper edge of his matchbox. The nails of his left hand were closely trimmed, the fingertips hardened to leathery pads which retained their scar of string long after they had ceased to press it, while those of his right hand were as long as plectrums. He moved the box away from himself in the direction of the growth of the nail. To do it the other way - against the grain, as it were - gave him a sensation he did not like. His smoking fingers were faintly yellowed with nicotine. The silence made him want to play another record. Then he heard a noise downstairs and stiffened. There was someone outside. He unsnibbed his door and went quickly to his father's room at the front of the house. Keeping to the side

of the window, he looked down and saw that it was only the postman closing the gate. He went downstairs to find his Giro on the mat.

Cal stood at the back of the queue in the post office. He wondered why Mrs Doyle, who owned the place, didn't worry about security. In the next town the post office had been modernized and the wire grille replaced with bullet-proof glass. This would be an easy place to do and there was plenty of money lying around. His stomach tightened at the thought and he looked instead at a poster on the wall urging him to prevent warble-fly.

When he got his money he bought a packet of cigarettes and fumbled to find the red tab that would open the cellophane. On the street he lit up and stood at the corner, his hands in his trouser pockets. Arty Mc Glynn, smiling because he too had just got his Giro money, joined him. They had been at school together.

'Hiya, Cal.'

'Hi.' Cal took out one hand to hold his cigarette and measured a long spit into the roadway.

'What are you doing with yourself this weather?' Cal considered this.

'Fondling,' he said. He spat again and walked away up Main Street to the library. It was a converted shop with a shop-front window displaying books. Inside a couple of old men browsed through the papers and a couple more were down among the shelves. It was warm and quiet and Cal had found it a good place to pass some of the time. He had tickets which he used occasionally to borrow some cassette tapes but rarely, if ever, did he borrow books. He sat on a chair and flicked through *Time* magazine. There were pictures and an article about Northern Ireland and he felt strangely proud that the place where he lived was given so much room in such an important magazine. When he was at school it was an occasion if anything from Northern Ireland

got a mention on the news. He looked up from his magazine and noticed that there was a new woman behind the counter. She was small and dark-haired with very brown eyes. She seemed to match the wood colours of the place. She was going through the index file, pulling out the small drawers and riffling through the cards. Over the top of the cabinet she briefly raised her eyes and solemnly looked at Cal. He stared back at her but she turned away to a customer, smiling at him and stamping his books with amazing speed. She looked foreign, had that sallowness of skin which he associated with France. He tried to guess her age but couldn't. She wasn't young, perhaps somewhere in her late twenties.

The tapes were on a revolving stand near the desk and Cal went up to take a closer look at this woman. He turned the stand and watched her file the tickets in a rank of them. Another old man came up with an armful of detective stories. He set his books down and hung his walking stick on the counter, and Cal watched it swing slowly to and fro. The old man leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk-top, and the woman smiled and talked to him as if she knew him. Cal turned the rack of tapes squeakily but continued to stare at her through them, willing her to look at him again. She had a lovely mouth as well as eyes. It moved beautifully when she talked. She stamped the old man's books and took his tickets, slotting the books' cards inside them. When the transaction was complete he unhooked his walking stick and seemed embarrassed by the number of books he was borrowing.

'The best of luck anyway, Marcella,' he said.

Marcella.

'Oh Jesus,' Cal said into himself. Marcella. He put out his hand to move the rack again. It gave a faint screech as it turned and he saw his hand frozen in mid-air. At that moment she looked at him and smiled. He moved his mouth

to smile back but the muscles of his face would not respond properly. Marcella.

He left the library, stumbling on the old man's heels, and in the street he said it out loud.

'Oh Jesus.' He shook his head as if there were an insect crawling in the porch of his ear.

It took him three matches to light another cigarette. He started out for home but stopped for a moment at the post office corner. There couldn't be many Marcellas around. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the brick wall. Then he half ran, half walked to his house. He stood in the middle of the bedroom floor, not knowing what to do. It must be her. He tried to recall the woman's face but could not. He sat on the bed, stood up to look out of the window but ended pacing the floor. Yet it might not be her. He might be able to tell from her face. If it was, could he ever go back into the library? The more he thought of her, the more his fascination and curiosity grew. He felt a great need to recall her face. He could only summon up a bland set of features he knew were not hers. If he were ever to go back it would have to be now. He rooted in his drawer, rattling among useless lighters and Birus that no longer worked, and produced two buff tickets. He walked quickly back to the library.

Once inside, he heard his loud breathing in the silence. The Marcella woman was having a cup of coffee. He studied her face, trying to read into it whether or not she was *the* Marcella. He could not take his eyes off her, not because of what she was but because of what he might have done to her. Her gestures, the way she raised and rested the rim of the cup on her lip before sipping, every movement of her face hypnotized him. He chose a Blues tape of Muddy Waters and went up to the counter and waited. She took a quick sip, set the cup down and came to him.

'Yes?'

He stared at her, moving his eyes over what he could see of her above the counter. He had come to a library to borrow time. He indicated the cassette and the ticket. Her nails were white and unpainted and she wore a gold ring on her wedding finger. She saw what she was looking for and moved lightly to it.

'Thank you, Mr Mc Cluskey,' she said and Cal looked up, startled. Then he remembered that his name was on the ticket. She set the cassette box on the counter and Cal watched the warm prints of her fingers evaporate from the Perspex. *Merde. Crotte de chien. Merderer.*

When Cal's father came home for his tea he smelt of the abattoir. Cal tried not to breathe through his nose as they both moved about the small kitchen. His father washed his huge hands and as far up as his elbows with carbolic soap. Then he washed his face, making loud spluttering noises, stooped over the sink.

'Towel,' he said, his eyes clenched tightly.

Cal gave it to him. The son was making a fry - eggs, bacon, black puddings and some fried bread. When Shamie had dried his face it looked shiny and red - as if he had sandpapered it rather than washed it. He said,

'There's some yahoos outside.'

Cal left the pan to look between the slats of the venetian blind in the front room. Four youths in denim were lounging against the garden wall at the far side of the street. One of them, wearing a red, white and blue scarf knotted at his neck, was looking over at the Mc Cluskeys' house. He saw the slats move and pointed. The others turned to look. The big one with clown-like black boots and scarlet braces swung up his hand, giving Cal's eyes the two fingers.

'Let them be,' shouted his father. 'These eggs are getting black lace edges.'

Cal rushed back to the pan and with a fish slice served the eggs on to plates. He put all the black puddings on his

father's plate. He loathed them, made from blood, like cross-sections of large warts bound in black Sellotape.

They sat at the table and watched the news on television. The Army had shot a deaf mute, saying that he had been seen carrying a weapon, but by the time they had reached the dead man an accomplice had removed the gun. A Catholic father of three had been stabbed to death in a Belfast entry. The police said that there was no known motive for the killing. Gerry Fitt had had a steel door put on his house.

'Any jobs in the paper today?' asked his father.

Cal shook his head, his mouth full. When he had swallowed he said,

'A couple in Belfast.'

'You're safer away from the city.'

When they had finished, Cal cleared the table and washed the dishes while his father sat reading the paper. Cal spoke from the kitchen.

'There's a new woman in the library.'

'Hm-hm?'

'Called Marcella something.'

'That'll be Marcella Morton. I heard some of the lads saying that she'd taken a job to get away from the house.'

Cal closed his eyes. It *was* her. In the hot dishwater his nails had become soft and he trailed them across the metal bottom of the basin to find the last spoon. Oh Jesus. He dried it and put it in the drawer. In some way, he didn't know how, he would have to make it up to her. He cleared the tapes of the black puddings from the hole in the sink. They were limp and slimy and he shuddered as he threw them in the bucket. The water was like grey soup with tiny yellow grease circles. He poured it with a rush down the sink. A last teaspoon rattled out.

'There's always a sneaky bastard.'

He dried his hands and took three cigarettes from his packet and rolled them on to the mantelpiece for his father.