

The Observer Fiction

Lanny by Max Porter review - genuine raw emotional edge

The author's compelling follow-up to *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers* is a missing-boy story that taps into the strangeness of English folklore

5 Tim Adams

Tue 5 Mar 2019

10 In *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers*, his affecting and sharply distinctive debut, Max Porter established a voice that was all about presence and absence. His narrator, recently widowed, rooted his loss in concrete poetic description of the things that had so perversely gone on existing after his wife and the mother of his young sons had not. Porter's startling chunks of prose let the reader understand the ways grief was about haunting. The touchstones in that book, both for author and narrator, were Ted Hughes's Crow poems, which flap and clatter around its margins, and occasionally strut to centre stage to scare off timid spirits.

20 Hughes's malevolent natural harbinger, conjured after the death of Sylvia Plath, returns in different guise to shadow the events of this equally compelling second novel. It takes on the form of "Dead Papa Toothwort", a mulchy, toadstooly, decaying presence that has, for centuries, been blamed for bad things happening in an English village in commuting distance of London. Toothwort is a local embodiment of spring-heeled Jack; he is half-seen in thickets and behind septic tanks, slipping over fences like ivy, drawn to pestilence, "a veteran witness of the bovine burcs, the flus, the wonderful rinderpest, rain rot and sheep scab, the cycles of mange, mastitis and pox, he's seen things die a thousand ways..." Sometimes, inevitably, "he takes the form of an English poet with a waterproof map and a breathable turquoise jacket", looking into the black corvid eye of mortality.

30 Porter's writing taps into the rooted English strangeness of an Alan Garner, or even Thomas Hardy

35 Toothwort's return to the village has been conjured by the arrival of Lanny, a boy from the city, along with his parents, Jolie and Robert. Lanny is a Pan-like child, at home in the woods. His voice stands out from the other voices of the village that are heard on the breeze of Porter's novel, which cleverly establishes a structure that can tune in to different frequencies of gossip and conversation; you are, like Toothwort, invited to eavesdrop. Lanny, a collector of bones, fossils, shells and rocks, is a child who is all imagination; he sees spirits, with "the head of a dolphin and the wings of a peregrine", "storm warning beasts, watching the weather while we sleep". Lanny bemuses his father who works in the city. He worries his mother, who writes crime thrillers. He inspires "Mad Pete", a local artist, who lets him hang out in his studio. And he excites Toothwort, who knows such "clear and true" innocence can never come to any good.

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50 It's not easy to establish the once-upon-a-time, wild-wood atmosphere of this book and make it credible. Porter's writing taps into some of the rooted English strangeness of an Alan Garner, or even Thomas Hardy, and gives it a pared-down

energy. He is unafraid of risking self-parody; at times some of the typographic tricks he employed in the first book feel like an indulgence here, lines curling and jumping and disappearing into tiny point sizes as Lanny climbs a tree, but mostly you are more than happy to go along with it just for the crackle of the imagery and Porter's ear for dialogue.

There is too, as in the first novel, a genuine raw emotional edge. It's the oldest of all page-turning devices to introduce the most trusting of boys and shadow him with unseen peril, but Porter does it with eyes wide open, satirising in his glancing way every single detective-story cliché and true-crime platitude. It's not giving too much away to reveal that Lanny, who has become a creative partner-in-crime of the artist Pete, goes missing - you expect it from the moment Toothwort's sinuous internal monologue singles him out as "his favourite".

The second half of the book unfolds as a chorus of voices from the search parties and forensic teams and pub vigilantes and garden-fence gossips and bitchy newspaper columnists talk about the tragic turn of events, and has some quiet fun with "the things people say": "No missing kid is annoying or boring are they? We won't really miss his plain face or his bog-standard schoolwork..." or "Specialist teams, I'm sure they are, but they have trashed the lawn and there is a broken biro in the birdbath", or "I wouldn't say this to her myself, but someone should, that it might not harm her cause if she put some makeup on..."

Porter has these fragments compete with tortured imaginings of the three principle protagonists, as he - and they - search for an ending that will do justice to the darker forces his prose has set in motion. After a certain amount of scrambling in the dark, he just about convinces you he has located one.

Lanny by Max Porter review - a joyously stirred cauldron of words

In the follow-up to *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers*, myth and modern life combine in the poetic tale of an imaginative everychild

Alexandra Harris
Fri 8 Mar 2019

Lanny is a gloriously idiosyncratic little boy, busy building dens, talking to trees, enchanting and baffling his parents; getting on with the endlessly interesting stuff of life in an "ordinary home-county place", a rural village in commuting distance of London. We see him, and we miss him, through the eyes of his rapturously devoted mother, a father who can't feel the same closeness, an ageing artist who cherishes Lanny's buoyant creativity, and a whole company of local people whose voices rise and fall in an "English symphony". We also watch Lanny from the perspective of Dead Papa Toothwort, an ancient spirit who stirs in the ground and has seen all life in this place.

Max Porter's second novel is a fable, a collage, a dramatic chorus, a joyously stirred cauldron of words. It follows his startlingly original debut, *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers*, the dark, comic, wild, beautiful prose-poem-novel that was

a runaway success in 2015 and won the Dylan Thomas prize. Lanny is similarly remarkable for its simultaneous spareness and extravagance, and again it is a book full of love. It plays pretty close to the edge over which lie the fey and the kooky; anyone allergic to green men may need to take a deep breath. But Porter has no truck with cynicism and gets on, bravely, exuberantly, with rejuvenating our myths.

Dead Papa Toothwort is a genius loci with style and personality: chatting, snoozing, hungrily feeding on the life of the village while doing all the usual things like changing shape, appearing now flea-sized, now acre-wide. When Alexander Pope advised gardeners to “consult the genius of the place in all”, he wasn’t reckoning on inelegantly motley spirits like this, but Toothwort belongs to a big, branching family of England’s Pucks and wood sprites and river gods.

He is named after one of the oddest species of native wildflowers. The common toothwort is parasitic, growing on tree roots, feasting on other plants because it has no chlorophyll of its own. It is the kind of organism that makes us ask where one thing ends and another begins: might a whole ecosystem be counted as one life?

This small flower grows into a magical fusion of all the village’s plants and creatures and histories. With Toothwort as guide, we can “ride the smells” of dinnertime (“Jenny’s lasagne”, “Derek’s hotpot-for-one”) and listen to snatches of talk that curl in italics across the pages: about garden waste, dog walks, cancer scares, minibreaks. Toothwort savours these odds and ends of people’s lives as if they were the finest champagne.

Masterful things have been done with rural communities in a succession of recent novels, so that readers may find the air humming with memories of Melissa Harrison’s *At Hawthorn Time*, or Barney Norris’s demotic song of *Salisbury Plain in Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*, or - especially - the thick, floating, incantatory music of Jon McGregor’s *Reservoir 13*. If the material of modern country life in *Lanny* feels rather familiar, with its mix of enchantment and ordinariness, emotions flashing out from the creases of routine, Porter’s rendering of it is beguilingly singular, with a freedom and fabular confidence of its own.

What kind of rural Britain do we meet here? Predictably, when under pressure, the village shows its darker colours of intolerance and suspicion. Possessive old-timers close ranks against the “frightful, entitled young people” who come with their smart commuter cars: “you cannot simply buy a sense of belonging on your mobile phone”. Spiteful busybodies and self-satisfied arbiters rush to judgment of incomers they don’t like. Pete, the artist, the most generous and inventive of residents, has dared to live a little differently and is brutally chosen as a scapegoat. The novel flirts with the kinds of eeriness that might at a stroke plunge us into crime fiction territory.

There’s an excellent scene in which Pete scores a Biro grid across a postcard of an Eric Ravilious watercolour, obliterating the “lovely chuff-chuff train”, feeling his “whole hateful guilty life queued up ready to land on this poor image”. But his affection for the picture, and his understanding of it, remain strong even as he

erases it. The novel won't settle for any reflex iconoclasm. Voices of kindness and common feeling sound strongly in the polyphony. There's old Peggy still standing at her gate, having seen the village filling "again and again like a rock pool". Lanny and Toothwort are affirmative figures: fertile, resourceful, sometimes
155 endangered but winning through.

It's not as political commentary or state-of-the-nation study that Lanny speaks most forcefully. It's the formal inventiveness that will stay in the mind, the shapes and pairings, the sudden eruptions of imagery. It's the idea of Lanny's DNA
160 as a magic trail shimmering through back gardens and playrooms, or his mother's dream of herself as a Renaissance painted madonna. Porter's writing is poetically concentrated while also deploying a wonderfully common-or-garden kind of language, loved and used, rolling off the tongue.

165 He is a superb writer of children. The young boys in *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers* were acutely real in their energy and sadness, dive-bombing from the sofa, splattering the bathroom mirror, mocking their father as a way of showing their love. Lanny is different. Bemusing all who know him, he is given to sudden feats of disappearance that border on magic. A sappy bud to Toothwort's ancient
170 root system, a mythic child of nature, he is a junior St Francis more likely to turn up with a flock of birds than a football. Yet he's also any child, an everychild, and the novel celebrates all children: their oddity, their outbursts of gnomish wisdom, their independent imaginative lives.

175 Porter is telling stories that link the immediate crises of individual lives with ancient, ageless currents of feeling

There are sections of Lanny that turn too wacky for me. I faltered at the seriously weird village hall performance that features Toothwort as a nightmare gameshow
180 host who has found the keys to the props cupboard. But Porter is a writer who takes risks, and this is the way new things are made. One couldn't ask him to rein in a strangeness that is so often triumphant. In a sequence of great power and compression, for example, a voice of human need rises from a deep hole and Toothwort becomes a sprouting orchard answering that need from above, growing
185 fruits in his open hands and offering a "miracle harvest" into the dark.

Admirers of *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers* will recognise in the figure of Toothwort some of what was most gripping about the first book's presiding force, Crow, the bird who visits grieving humans. Both have a chatty, pottering, intimate
190 presence while also being giant and ungraspable. Both combine omniscient oversight and on-the-ground involvement, toughness and tenderness. With these strongly characterised spirits, Porter is telling stories that link the immediate crises of individual lives with ancient, ageless currents of feeling and experience. Lanny's epigraph comes from Lynette Roberts's poem "Green Madrigal (I)":

195
Peace, my stranger is a tree
Growing naturally through all its
Discomforts, trials and emergencies

200 The novel, though short, is optimistically intent on evoking forms of growth that might capaciously accommodate all manner of personal trials and English emergencies, cumulatively making a kind of peace.

• Alexandra Harris's *Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies* is published by Thames & Hudson. *Lanny* is published by Faber (£12.99).

[“Lanny” Is a Dark, Wonderfully Tactile Reimagining of the Folktale](#)

By [Maya Phillips](#) July 18, 2019 New Yorker

210 One of the particular pleasures of a folktale is discovering the story's entryway to magic. In Max Porter's beautiful, imaginative novella "[Grief Is the Thing with Feathers](#)," it is mourning. In his whimsical follow-up, "[Lanny](#)," which came out in May, it's the natural world and a child's unique sense of wonder. *Lanny* is the story of a child gone missing, lured away by Dead Papa Toothwort, a shape-shifting trickster who is as old as the earth. But Porter also focusses on the adults in the narrative: Lanny's parents, a former actress turned horror writer and her less-than-extraordinary husband, and Mad Pete, a curmudgeonly artist who takes Lanny under his wing. As in "Grief," Porter creates a kind of long-form prose poem, but the language of "Lanny" is as mutable as Toothwort himself. Some sections mime Lanny's absence with bountiful white space and short, clipped declaratives. Others, describing the village-wide search for Lanny, are rushed run-

215 ons, lacking attributions and quotation marks, creating a sense of muddled panic and frenzy. Porter draws his central figures with different elemental touches. Lanny, an impish, "creaturely" child who is compared to a fairy, and Toothwort, with his "moss-socks, pebble-dash skin," echo Shakespeare's Ariel and Caliban—they're not just *from* but *of* the village, like Shakespeare's figures were of the island, and they're similarly enchanted by the lyrical delights of their world. (The

230 "sounds and sweet airs," as Caliban said.) Those delights are also in Porter's words, which are wonderfully tactile—darkness is "uneven, slippery," and Toothwort sees the "soft flesh of the village" from afar. Everything is pliable, porous, and Porter's typographical treats—alongside his turns with sound, repetition, and rhythm—exhibit his irrepressible sense of play. He's most engaging in the tense early scenes that foreshadow Lanny's disappearance, moments when Lanny temporarily slips out of sight and Toothwort stalks him like a predator. And the thoughts of the adults, which we encroach upon like Toothwort on the village (voyeurism is another main vehicle of the story), shade this magic tale with darkness. A hybrid morality tale about environmental awareness, parenthood, and growing up, "Lanny" is enriched by its textures and stylized approach. It's already been nabbed for a [big-screen adaptation](#)—and it's abundantly clear why.

240 New Yorker

A Rich, Twisted, Gloriously Cacophonous Novel of Village Life
Credit...Jonathan Player for The New York Times

245 When you purchase an independently reviewed book through our site, we earn an affiliate commission. By Laird Hunt June 25, 2019

Max Porter does damaged psyche well. In his widely acclaimed 2016 debut, “Grief Is the Thing With Feathers” – recently brought to the stage by Enda Walsh in a production starring Cillian Murphy – a human-size crow with an outsize personality imposes himself on a grieving father and his two young sons. In Porter’s winning new novel, “Lanny,” despair and unsettling entities are again on the menu, as are hard-won grace and beauty.

The setting is an English village an hour’s train ride from London. At the center of the story is the eponymous Lanny, a 5-year-old dreamer, whose infectious sweetness is matched only by his verbal precocity and otherworldly connection to nature. Around him, in close orbit, are his mother, a former actor and aspiring crime novelist; his father, an often-absent business guy; and a gruff elderly artist now living in self-imposed exile, whom the locals have none too lovingly dubbed “Mad Pete.” Under, around, above and occasionally even within these players is a troubling piece of ancient nastiness – “Lanny”’s leafy answer to “Grief”’s crow – who goes by the handle of Dead Papa Toothwort.

It is through the shapeshifting bulk and foliage of this being, clearly inspired by the Green Man legends of English folklore, that we first apprehend Lanny’s world: “Dead Papa Toothwort wakes from his standing nap an acre wide and scrapes off dream dregs of bitumen glistening thick with liquid globs of litter.” Papa Toothwort’s preferred mode of taking the measure of his surroundings is listening, and over the ensuing pages Porter lets spill and snake and undulate across the pages the handsome, banal and ugly bits of the “English symphony” that Toothwort hovers in: “choir clashes with Benders sadly,” “horrid parents,” “pretty in a smudgy kind of way,” “last glass then bed.”

We quickly realize that getting a fix on Lanny is what all this eavesdropping is about. The little boy’s elfin ways have woken Papa Toothwort and perhaps remind him of some early unruined version of himself. Lanny’s leaping and dashing and exploring and snuggling are equally mesmerizing to those close to him. Pete falls hard for him during the art lessons Lanny’s dotting though somewhat distracted mother has persuaded him to undertake, and even Lanny’s father finds himself obliged to emerge from his finance-world torpor enough to actually feel things, like fear and anger, around his son.

Plum-sketching and bower-building Lanny nonetheless remains fundamentally mysterious despite being the object of so much adult attention, and when he goes missing midway through the novel the question asked in different ways by all, “Where’s Lanny?,” takes on additional resonance. We understand then that the little wanderer has never been clearly seen, just longed for. Papa Toothwort, the frightening context for all this human desiring, has stepped into active, nightmare-dealing mode by this juncture, and some of the village voices we have heard only in snatches through the nasty one’s ears get to take the floor.

The ensuing polyphony – while less measured, more gloriously cacophonous – is reminiscent of Jon McGregor’s recent “Reservoir 13,” which was also set in an English village and also took up, through multiple perspectives, a search and its aftermath. “Lanny”’s achievement, like that of its predecessor, is nonetheless all its own. And if “Lanny,” even more than “Grief,” hums throughout with hope and

humor, the dark and the difficult are also always there. As one character says to another at novel's end, "Oh bloody hell, more nightmares." This reader hopes the response, "Always more nightmares," speaks to Porter's future novels too.

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Bookbrowse:

Book Summary

An entrancing new novel by the author of the prizewinning *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*.

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There's a village an hour from London. It's no different from many others today: one pub, one church, redbrick cottages, some public housing, and a few larger houses dotted about. Voices rise up, as they might anywhere, speaking of loving and needing and working and dying and walking the dogs. This village belongs to the people who live in it, to the land and to the land's past.

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It also belongs to Dead Papa Toothwort, a mythical figure local schoolchildren used to draw as green and leafy, choked by tendrils growing out of his mouth, who awakens after a glorious nap. He is listening to this twenty-first-century village, to its symphony of talk: drunken confessions, gossip traded on the street corner, fretful conversations in living rooms. He is listening, intently, for a mischievous, ethereal boy whose parents have recently made the village their home. Lanny.

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With *Lanny*, Max Porter extends the potent and magical space he created in *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*. This brilliant novel will ensorcell readers with its anarchic energy, and its bewitching tapestry of fabulism and domestic drama. *Lanny* is a ringing defense of creativity, spirit, and the generative forces that often seem under assault in the contemporary world, and it solidifies Porter's reputation as one of the most daring and sensitive writers of his generation.

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The Ancient Druids

It is likely that when you hear mention of the ancient Druids or Druidism, certain images arise—perhaps there are flowing white robes or oak leaves involved, there are also probably long, bushy beards and maybe a sprig of mistletoe. Over the centuries that separate us from this enigmatic group, we have done a great deal of mythologizing, culminating in what is now a well-established portrait. In his new novel, *Lanny*, Max Porter calls on ancient druidic lore—close communion with nature, prominent featuring of trees and an existence of an unknown Other beyond what our eyes can see. But how much of his portrayal is accurate?

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The stark reality is that there are only a handful of facts that we know for sure about the druids. They ...

Irish Times:

Lanny by Max Porter review: The accessible follow-up does not disappoint
John Boyne on a spellbinding second novel that is worth reading over and over

340 [Sat, Mar 9, 2019, 06:00](#)

When *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, Max Porter's debut novel, was published in 2015, it captured the public imagination in a way that few literary novels do and was successfully adapted for theatre by Enda Walsh.

345 Having achieved so much success, Porter's second book has a weight of expectation behind it, but he hasn't disappointed, for *Lanny* is a fine follow-up, perhaps more accessible than his first while still embracing his unique writing style.

350 Experimental fiction, by its very nature, can be a tricky business and, ironically, while so-called "difficult" books can be hard to sell to the public, some become successful simply because of the challenges they pose to readers, who must work hard to decipher the ideas and themes lying behind quirky syntax, disjointed timelines or unpredictable typography.

Often, gimmickry masks vacuity, and a fear of seeming out of step with the intelligentsia can allow an Emperor's New Clothes school of writing to flourish.

355 But, balanced against this, lie fascinating novels such as this that challenge the reader without seeking to alienate, offering up rich rewards for anyone prepared to unravel their secrets.

360 After reading *Lanny*, I did something I've never done before: I read it again. I felt that I would both understand and appreciate it better the second time around and was keen to study how the author managed to lure me in, even spellbind me, with such a magical and singular story.

The thugs who will beat up an old man on the basis of a groundless rumour. The discord between what England believes itself to be and what it really is

365 On the surface, there is a simple tale here: a couple move to a small English village with their young son, Lanny. The husband, Rob, is immersed in his London work, every morning choosing between a train that allows him to breakfast with his son but suffer a tedious conversation with a colleague, or an earlier one that means he will miss out on both. Of course, he chooses the latter.

370 • [Max Porter: Pushing the boundaries of the written word](#)

The wife, Jolie, is struggling to adapt to life outside the metropolis but her debut novel, a sadistic thriller, is due to be published shortly and she's excited about the opportunities this might bring her way.

375 Lanny, however, is a curious boy. He sings a lot, is artistic and tells stories. He asks strange questions and makes odd remarks.

“I’m a million cameras, even when I’m sleeping,” he says. “Which do you think is more patient, an idea or a hope?”

380 Remarks like these drive his father to distraction, and there’s a sense of something other-worldly about the child, particularly when a story is related about his infancy that, even in its bizarreness, is as chilling as it is believable.

To give too much away about what happens next would be to spoil the novel but suffice to say that an incident takes place involving the boy that leads to the triumphant central section of the book.

385 Across seventy pages we hear the voices of Lanny’s family, friends and neighbours, each chipping in with their thoughts on what has happened. No names are given, but Porter structures the prose in such a way that it becomes hypnotic, the narrative strands easily differentiated from each other.

390 Time and again, I found myself thinking of A Game of Chess, the second section of TS Eliot’s The Waste Land, where multiple voices collide and fight for attention, but where the symphony of language offers such beauty that the reader longs for it not to end.

395 Overlaying this are themes that resonate with English mythology; the secrets of the land, the wisdom of trees, the desire for the green fields to rise up in anger against any who would desecrate them. And in stark contrast to the peaceful past is the vicious present, the supposedly idyllic village steeped in prejudice for anyone who doesn’t belong there - the mob, the trolls, the drunken louts looking for a fight.

400 The thugs who will beat up an old man on the basis of a groundless rumour. The discord between what England believes itself to be and what it really is. The crash of lightning when these two ideas collide and find themselves incapable of occupying the same space.

405 Despite reading it twice, I suspect Lanny will be a novel I will return to again, simply to absorb the strangeness of the story, the cleverness of the structure, the authenticity of the dialogue and the ethereal mystery that surrounds the book’s titular character. For those who are put off by experimental fiction, and I confess to being one, this is a novel to shatter your prejudices, for Max Porter understands that even the most complex idea must have a decipherable meaning if it is to be of any worth to a reader.

I greatly admired Grief is the Thing with Feathers. But I loved Lanny.

410 *John Boyne’s most recent novel is A Ladder to the Sky (Doubleday)*

LANNY A Novel (Reading group choices)

415 [Max Porter](#)

There's a village an hour from London. It's no different from many others today: one pub, one church, redbrick cottages, some public housing, and a few larger houses dotted about. Voices rise up, as they might anywhere, speaking of loving and needing and working and dying and walking the dogs. This village belongs to the people who live in it, to the land and to the land's past.

420 It also belongs to Dead Papa Toothwort, a mythical figure local schoolchildren used to draw as green and leafy, choked by tendrils growing out of his mouth, who awakens after a glorious nap.

The Choir of Man: Max Porter's 'Lanny' Wants You to Listen

Callum McAllister March 25, 2019 |

425 Max Porter's second novel, *Lanny*, begins with an awakening. The semi-mythical village spirit "Dead Papa Toothwart," known to children through cautionary rhyme, wakes from his centuries-long sleep and at once begins to shapeshift:

He splits and wobbles, divides and reassembles [...] He slips through one grim costume after another as he rustles and trickles and cusses his way between
430 trees. He walks a few paces as an engineer in a Day-Glo vest. He takes a step in a dinner suit, then an Anderson shelter, then a tracksuit, then a rusted jeep bonnet, then a leather skirt. [...] [He] wanders off, chuckling, jangling in his various skins.

This isn't just a fitting introduction to Porter's style, but an accurate description
435 of it. His 2015 debut, *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*, was a genre- and form-bending work, sitting somewhere on the border between novella and narrative-poem. Beyond formal concerns, it is stylistically shapeshifting, riffing on ideas from Ted Hughes's *The Crow*, and full of heavy allusion, reference, and wordplay. The publication of Porter's debut was both a major publishing event and a
440 commercial success, despite its avant-garde leanings, and he gained a deserved reputation as a literary heavyweight.

It is therefore no surprise that *Lanny*, published in the U.K. by Faber, opens in language that owes as much to poetry as to the contemporary English novel.
445 Every word is chosen not just for its meaning but for its feel and its sound.

But in *Lanny*, the most striking formal choice is its typographical quirks. As he approaches the village, Dead Papa Toothwart listens for the sounds of human conversation, and what he hears is conveyed to the reader by the words
450 spreading themselves across the page as though floating through the air. Banal snippets of conversation wind in and out of each other, overlap, and run

backwards or upside down between other paragraphs in a way that's impossible to faithfully quote. It's the kind of innovation that could be called a gimmick. But it's also substantive. It helps us imagine how Dead Papa Toothwart experiences
455 "his listening." As readers, the shape of the words affects how we read them, and somehow influences the way it sounds. Of course, it doesn't sound like anything, unless read aloud. But in doing so, Porter reminds us that our language is not primarily a written form of communication. Language is, above all, spoken. In these sections, words mimic the way they would travel toward the ear, the way
460 the various villagers pronounce them, their country accents. They stretch out in the middle, or gracefully fall down the page like a descending scale. We feel as much audience to their everyday conversation as the enigmatic Dead Papa Toothwart does:

465 He swims in it, he gobbles it up and wraps himself in it, he rubs it all over himself, he pushes it into his holes, he gargles, plays, punctuates and grazes.

This focus on character as conveyed to the reader through narrative voice is a central concern of the novel. Porter uses language and form as a means to convey
470 the spirit of the village, as faithfully as possible, in text. Following our introduction to Dead Papa Toothwart, the novel splits into several first-person narrative strands, taking on the voices and thoughts of "Mad" Pete, an octogenarian and retired artist; "Lanny's Mum," Jolie; and "Lanny's Dad," Robert.

475 The eponymous Lanny, seen by adults around him as an unusually inquisitive, maybe even gifted child, isn't given his own sections, though he is central to the events of the novel, and to the thoughts and words of its characters. He is, of course, the main concern of his parents. Lanny's dad, commuting every day from this small village into the center of London, thinks about his son all day, but often
480 finds his playfulness, his sense of wonder, and his strange profundity a frustrating contrast to the supposedly sensible, practical concerns of everyday life. Lanny's mum works from home—writing her crime novel—where Lanny continually interrupts with his comings-and-goings, "stinking of pine tree and other nice things" like a woodland sprite. And Pete, their eccentric neighbour, is tasked with
485 giving the child art lessons, though they are as much conversations as they are lessons.

And Lanny is what Dead Papa Toothwart is most interested in, too—perhaps the reason he's awoken after centuries of sleep. Out of all the voices in "his English
490 symphony," Lanny's is the most delicious: "he wants to chop the village open and

pull the child out. Extract him. Young and ancient all at once, a mirror and a key.”

495 In a novel made up of first-person voices, sometimes all streaming in at once, overflowing across the page, Lanny is never given a voice of his own. His character and his thoughts are always mediated through the words of others. To them, Lanny often feels less like a person and more like a thing that happens to them. Pete even notes that “[At] times like this Lanny seems almost possessed.” Rather than a fully-fleshed out character that we have direct access to as
500 readers, Lanny is instead the thread that winds all the other characters and the overall structure of the book together. Like most children, he is implicitly patronised in this way: often more spoken about, and spoken for, than he is listened to.

505 The narrative pace speeds up in the novel’s second act. The once clearly distinct strands are replaced by long, unadorned sections. Character’s voices become brief vignettes without clear signposts as to who is speaking. We learn to infer from their idioms, their habits of speech, accents and turns-of-phrase. Here the whole village comes into play as a chorus of voices which butt in on the main
510 characters with casual conversation, speculation, thoughts, and insults surrounding a dramatic event. Without knowing who’s speaking, we get the same sense of familiarity. In the most powerful passages, from the perspective of Mad Pete, there is no separation at all between voices, and events take place as one long stream: What’s thought, what’s said, and what’s heard by Mad Pete are
515 distinguished only by tone and content.

It’s unsurprising how well-suited Porter’s work has become for theater. Lanny’s launch at London’s Southbank Centre will feature a dramatized reading. Grief Is the Thing with Feathers’s most recent iteration is a stage-play starring Cillian
520 Murphy. Lanny in particular has plenty in common with George Saunder’s Man Booker-winning Lincoln in the Bardo, which reads as much like a script as it does a novel, featuring a cast of more than 100 characters with almost no third-person exposition. Similarly, both of Porter’s novels lack an authoritative third-person perspective and are instead mediated through the voices of their characters alone. In doing so, Porter highlights the importance of character in his work. For
525 him, it is the way in which these voices are realised, rather than the content of what is said, that is most relevant.

Lanny, more than Grief, takes this idea of narrative voice as its subject and problematizes it. When the world of the novel is mediated through its characters,
530 it fundamentally affects the nature of that world. There’s a moment midway

through the novel that really draws this out. Lanny's mum goes to her neighbour Mrs. Larton in a moment of emergency. Their confrontation is conveyed to the reader twice. The paragraphs alternate between Mrs. Larton's voice and Jolie's, both of whom see themselves as the more virtuous and innocent victim of the other's rudeness. Even the specific wording of their conversation is contradictory. And afterward, they each reduce the wider problems of society to the small differences between them:

Oh god, you horrible crone, you are the worst thing about living here, you are the worst thing about this English village. You are the worst thing about England. And villages. I wish you would die so somebody nice could move in here.

[...]

I'd like to tell her about the real community around here, a community that is dead and gone thanks to people like her, buying up the houses and putting in ridiculous open kitchens and glass walls [...] she may as well be a bloody foreigner. I worry about the impact on the community. I worry about the standards slipping. I worry about this country. I wish she would get bored and let somebody decent move in.

If language is an unfaithful lens into reality, Lanny and Dead Papa Toothwart, two characters who aren't given their own unmediated first-person voice, are best understood by the reader as manifestations of, or reflections of, the people who describe them. The way Lanny is seen by the reader isn't necessarily the way he actually is. Instead, he's as much a reflection of the essential nature of the village as Toothwart is. Mad Pete, early in the novel, says of Toothwart:

He's real if people believe in him. So yes. Just as mermaids or Springheeled Jack or the Green Children of Woolpit are real if people have thought about them, told stories about them. He's part of this village and has been for hundreds of years, whether he's real or not.

Both Toothwart and Lanny come to us as embodiments of the village itself—Toothwart because the villagers invented his legend; Lanny because their version of him is the only version we get. Lanny and Toothwart reflect the village's essential, timeless character that is ultimately ambivalent to the temporary concerns of the humans that live in it. Both Lanny and Toothwart have an

innocence and an ambivalence to them that reminds me of Miyazaki's Forest
570 Spirits in Princess Mononoke. Somehow ancient, and yet at the same time, they
are an amalgamation of the villagers themselves, with all their contingent, messy
humanity.

At one point, Jolie sees this: "and she realises their life at home, his time at
575 school, what she thought of as his real existence, was only a place he visited."

It's a line that could only have been written by a parent: that realization that
something you thought of as entirely yours is an independent being. That your
children exist when you're not there. That they have a life beyond you. That for
them, as for everyone, they are the absolute center of their own experience.

580 Porter extends this idea to the village at large but conveys it in the exact
opposite way. He presents it to us, in Dead Papa Toothwart's all-hearing,
typographically experimental prose, as "A tapestry of small abuses, fights and
littering, lake-loads of unready chemicals piped into my water bed, green and
decline, preaching teaching crying dying and walking the fucking dogs, breeding
585 and needing and working."

By giving us this stream of unfiltered human self-involvement, Porter show us the
nature of a village as a microcosm of human society, and he shows how difficult it
is for people to live with one other. The existence of characters—such as Lanny
and Dead Papa Toothwart—who seem more attuned to the world, suggests that
590 there might be a way out. Lanny's character in particular implies that while self-
centredness is intrinsically human, it's not an inescapable part of the human
condition—maybe something learned rather than innate. Early in the novel, Mad
Pete gestures towards it: "Maybe it's just Lanny taking things from wherever he's
been listening, soaking up the sounds of this world and spinning out threads of
595 another."

Max Porter's Lanny is an attempt to capture a village, entirely, in language, and it
does so by trying to represent the village's breadth of narrative voices. It's an
ultimately empathetic, even humanist project. But its representation isn't always
positive. People are human. They're unsympathetic, rude, racist, ungenerous,
600 speculative. They beat up pensioners and make false accusations and invite
hysteria and sensationalism. They can be judgemental neighbors or maybe self-
aggrandizing, polluters or gardeners. But in the act of reading, we're made a
mute witness to them. Like Lanny and Dead Papa Toothwart, or Porter himself,
we are made active, careful listeners. In doing so, we give them space to speak.

605

We can't live each other's experience. But we can start by listening to them.

<https://themillions.com/2019/03/the-choir-of-man-max-porters-lanny-wants-you-to-listen.html>