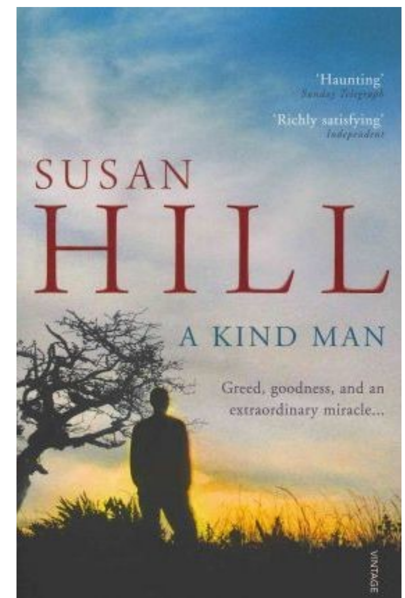
A Kind Man

Susan Hill

All are ultimately powerless – not simply on account of their economic precariousness but because each, like a puppet, is jerked this way and that by external forces which brook no resistance.
Human life is seen as fragile, impotent. Hill's justice is tough and unrelenting, the sort of harsh predeterminism once attributed to pagan deities. But such is the warmth and humanity of her writing that the reader continually dares to expect the impossible, with the result that, despite its shortness, this is a novel of huge emotional impact and moments of immense poignancy.

[https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/a-kind-man-by-susan-hill-2183845.html]



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Brief Author Biography

Novelist, children's writer and playwright Susan (Elizabeth) Hill was born in Scarborough, England, on 5 February 1942.

She was educated at Scarborough Convent School and at grammar school in Coventry, before reading English at King's College, London, graduating in 1963 and becoming a Fellow in 1978.

Her first novel, *The Enclosure*, was published in 1961 when she was still a student. She worked as a freelance journalist between 1963 and 1968, publishing her third novel, *Gentleman and Ladies*, in 1968. She became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1972 and was a presenter of BBC Radio 4's 'Bookshelf' from 1986 to 1987. In 1996 she started her own publishing company, Long Barn Books, editing and publishing a quarterly literary journal, *Books and Company*, in 1998.

She won a Somerset Maugham Award for *I'm the King of the Castle* (1970); the Whitbread Novel Award for *The Bird of Night* (1972); and the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for *The Albatross* (1971), a collection of short stories.

Since then she has written many other novels including *Strange Meeting* (1971), set during the First World War; *In the Springtime of the Year* (1974); *The Woman in Black* (1983); *Air and Angels* (1991); *The Mist in the Mirror* (1992); *The Service of Clouds* (1998); and *Mrs de Winter* (1999), a sequel to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. *The Woman in Black* (1983), a Victorian ghost story, was successfully adapted for stage and television and is one of Susan Hill's most commercial successes. Her recent novels include the series of Simon Serrailler crime novels and various further ghost stories.

Susan Hill is also the author of two volumes of memoir, *The Magic Apple Tree: A Country Year* (1982), about her life in rural Oxfordshire during the 1970s, and *Family* (1989), in which she writes about her early life in Scarborough.

Her books for children include *The Glass Angels* (1991); *Beware, Beware* (1993); *King of Kings* (1993) and *The Battle for Gullywith* (2008). She has also written radio plays, a number of books of non-fiction and has edited several anthologies of short stories including two volumes of *The Penguin Book of Modern Women's Short Stories*, published in 1991 and 1997.

Her latest collection of short stories is *Farthing House: And Other Stories* (2006) and her latest novel is *Black Sheep* (2013).

Susan Hill is married to the Shakespeare scholar Professor Stanley Wells. She moved back to the sea, but this time to North Norfolk, in 2013.

[https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/susan-hill]

Too Good for Words - A Review of *A Kind Man*

I confess myself baffled by this fable. The narrative is as clear, the prose as uncluttered, as one expects from Susan Hill, but its very simplicity leaves me wondering whether I've missed the point.

The strapline tells me to expect a tale of 'greed, goodness, and an extraordinary miracle'. Well, it doesn't seem to be about greed at all. There isn't a greedy person in it. Needy, yes; it deals with need. 'Goodness' is more like it. It is an analysis of goodness, and more specifically of kindness, of the moral interconnectedness of human beings.

The 'extraordinary miracle' (is there any other sort?) befalls Tommy Carr, the 'kind man' of the title, a man who has 'a deep sense of what was good or even holy but no connection with any church or chapel'. To create universality of meaning, Hill avoids anchoring her tale too fixedly in time and place, but it feels like the 1930s in the industrial north. Tommy marries Eve and takes her to live in the last cottage between the gritty manufacturing town and 'the peak, touched by sunshine' that represents freedom and, perhaps, the spiritual world.

Thus Tommy and Eve are placed apart from their families and workmates; other factors also separate them. Thrifty, sober and hardworking, they have a loving, inarticulate mutual understanding. Their one child, Jeannie Eliza, is perfect in every way, in contrast to the many unruly, uncared-for sons of Eve's downtrodden sister Miriam, just as Miriam's lazy husband is the opposite of Tommy — the opposite of kind. Tommy and Eve have hens, a vegetable patch, bright china on the dresser. Their happiness seems complete, until Jeannie Eliza dies of a sudden fever.

Her loss takes physical shape in Tommy, who within a few months is devoured by malignant growths. But as he is on the point of death, the burning heat that carried off Jeannie Eliza transfers itself to Tommy and resurrects him. Soon he discovers that, by a laying-on of hands, he can cure others with this mysterious heat. People pester him for treatment, which he gives, refusing payment.

His gift, and the purity of his kindness, however, come to be viewed with suspicion, not least by the formerly friendly doctor who accuses him of fraudulence. Isolated by his specialness, he becomes unemployable. The temptation to accept money becomes too great, but of course, as soon as he does so, the gift deserts him.

The tale is so clean and spare that every detail is telling, or feels as if it ought to be. The problem is that when a false note is struck, it resonates. Would an uneducated woman like Eve perceive the spring sky as 'lapis'? Why does she say 'the eggs are so good just now' straight after Christmas, when it's unlikely the hens would be laying at all? Why does Tommy, who's wasting away, put 'fresh notches' into his belt with his awl — surely he'd only make one notch at a time? Tommy is accused of being 'perfectly fit' by a factory woman — is that the kind of phrase she'd use?

I wouldn't mind, or even notice, such details were I convinced by the whole, but I'm not. I find myself impatient with the boringly perfect Tommy, and I long for a character who can string more than three words together. 'Nothing was said by any of them' — this phrase, or something like it, crops up all too often. I'm an admirer of Susan Hill's work, but I'm not sure what she's getting at here, though I accept this may be my fault, not hers.

[https://www.spectator.co.uk/2011/01/too-good-for-words/]

Susan Hill: "I was never good at anything else"

Last Thursday, Susan Hill, who is a vigorous 68, celebrated half a century as a published novelist. In what she describes as "a weird coincidence", her latest book, *A Kind Man*, a short, deceptively simple fable of loss and grief, appeared 50 years to the day after her precocious debut.

Nevertheless, despite a lifetime of published work, Susan Hill defies categorisation. "I hate being pigeon-holed," she says when we meet in her Gloucestershire farmhouse just after Christmas. Nor does she go out of her way to guide the common reader. Her answer to the question "What kind of a writer are you?" is a cheerful "I don't know".

This breezy, rather English, approach to her art extends to *A Kind Man*. "It's a funny old book," she declares. "I don't know what it's about really. It was one of those that just popped up from nowhere. Sometimes, like *The Beacon* [published in 2008], you write it, and then you think: Now where did that come from? It's really bizarre. It's as though it's been somewhere in your head and you just picked it up and popped it on the page. Strange."

Well, strange, if true. Rather at odds with the self-presentation of a chatty provincial housewife whose books just "pop up" out of nowhere is a forthcoming schedule that suggests 2011 might turn out to be an annus mirabilis in a life already rich in achievement. Come the summer, she will also be sitting in judgment as a member of the Booker prize jury. Her ghost story, *The Woman In Black*, comes out as a movie, starring Daniel Radcliffe, at Halloween. Then, next Christmas, BBC2 will screen a television version of *The Small Hand*, another ghost story.

Meanwhile, she will be finishing off a new Simon Serrailler crime novel (an ITV series is also in the works) and incubating a new novel entitled *The Summer Before the War*. If the time should hang heavy there's always her publishing imprint, Long Barn Books, and her involvement with a local bookshop. As if this were not enough, she'll also be providing a running commentary on Twitter and Facebook. It's hardly a surprise she does not know what kind of literary person she is.

Perhaps the key to the mystery – the odd juxtaposition of commonsense and creative catharsis – can be found in Scarborough, where she was born in 1942, to an RAF serviceman, and a self-employed dressmaker. "Yorkshire is so much part of me," she says, recalling her first 16 years, living by the sea in postwar Britain. "Those were my formative years." When her father got a white-collar job in a Coventry aircraft factory the family moved south to the Midlands, but by then her course was set.

Even as a classic only child, "I was always wanting to tell stories, to my friends, to my dolls. I was always writing." Her defining moment came at the age of eight. "I wrote a nativity play for my class. I learnt so much from that: about editing, adaptation and revision. I learned that a play, like any piece of writing, is never really finished." The storytelling became a way of making sense of herself. "I was an only child who was never really good at anything else. I had no other option. I could write; I wanted to write; I wrote," she concludes, simply. "Otherwise, I was unemployable."

Today, this kind of self-expression would be indulged and celebrated, but in the 1950s, Hill's precocity quickly encountered adult resistance. "My mother thought it was a bit odd. My father was very proud: I was doing things he would have liked to have done." When, in her teens, she wrote and published *The Enclosure*, all hell broke loose. "It wasn't a sex novel," she says, laughing, "but it did have grown-up people who were married. So it was in all the newspapers; there were reporters and everything." Her headmistress told her, "You have brought shame and disgrace on to this school."

Undeterred, she fulfilled her adolescent ambition and went to King's College London to read

English, and credits the course with grounding her in the canon. "We started with the Anglo-Saxons and finished in 1880 (with Hardy), and did it in chronological order. You can learn so much from people who are writing better than you ever could." Medieval English was her preference. "In another life I would be a medievalist. I loved Chaucer, far more than Shakespeare." Donne and the metaphysical poets were another favourite. Then Dickens, who is "the great master". She adds, surprisingly, that she "can't get on with Austen".

From this, Hill developed a plain, unflashy English style, down-to-earth, and very Yorkshire. "That's pretty deliberate," she concedes, and it certainly reflects her temperament. "I don't mind experiment if there's a genius behind it. If you're James Joyce, you can write Ulysses. But I don't want experiment from writers who can't do the real thing." That sounds like a credo and, as *A Kind Man* demonstrates, she favours a spare, lean prose, with no hint of purple. After Dickens, Greene is another master. "I learned how to take everything out, a lesson I still learn over and over again."

She first encountered Greene in 1960. *The Enclosure* was published in the same week as *A Burnt-Out Case*. Some mischievous literary editors reviewed them together, to her advantage. "I was horrified," she remembers. "I wrote Greene a letter saying how ashamed I felt." She got a charming reply. "Very short; said everything." In the matter of style, "I learned from Greene, but you have to be careful you don't pick up a style. The moment anyone starts thinking 'I'm going to be a stylist' they're finished."

Only a writer as robust and sensible as Susan Hill could say, as she does now, that her best work was written between 1968 and 1974, rattling off a list of books to make her point: *I'm the King of the Castle*, *Strange Meeting*, *The Bird of Night*, *The Albatross*. "It was one a year for six years. My best work was done by 30-ish." Reflecting on a lop-sided literary career, she adds, "You get this…" She searches unsuccessfully for the word and then says, "Something surges out of you at a certain age and you're full of it all. There's no stopping you. That was when I won the prizes." Her proudest moment was to be shortlisted by Elizabeth Bowen, George Steiner and Cyril Connolly for the 1972 Booker prize with *The Bird of Night*.

She was young, successful and in love. She remembers her fiancé, David Lepine, the young organist at Coventry Cathedral, as "a genius". Then, in 1972, quite suddenly, Lepine died of a coronary, a congenital weakness. Her world fell apart, she struggled on with some short stories, and only began to put herself back together again with *In the Springtime of the Year*, a powerful novel about grief which, she says, "had to be written".

But now that youthful creative ferment was over. "I wanted to be happy and normal for a bit." So she just stopped. She married Stanley Wells, the Shakespeare scholar, and had a baby. "It was the pram in the hall, but actually," she elaborates in her down-to-earth way, "it's very straightforward. When you're female and you have a child – as my doctor puts it – you're meant to be a cow eating grass in the field. You're not meant to be writing books. This is very difficult for women, but it's much easier if you accept it for a short time. I thought: I don't want to be writing books. I want to be looking after this baby."

Her daughter Jessica (the novelist Jessica Ruston) was born in 1977; then – another tragedy – her next child, Imogen, was born but died almost immediately. There followed "the long and desperate road to having [third child] Clemency in 1985". Out of this dark time came a classic ghost story, *The Woman in Black*, a novella that Alan Ayckbourn commissioned, in 1987, as a Christmas show for Scarborough.

The production transferred to the West End, where it has been playing ever since.

In middle age, Hill never stopped writing, though no longer with the frenzy of her 20s. There was a stint on *The Archers*, and books for children, including *Can It Be True?*, which won the Smarties prize. It seems redundant to ask if she enjoys writing. "Oh, God, yes!" she exclaims. "I can't stand those writers who make a fuss. I mean, you don't have to do it. I just can't understand this 'it's all so difficult' business. Yes, I love it, and I can't be bothered with 'it's such agony'. That is so pretentious."

Not only has she plugged away at a succession of short novels – fables, really – she has also branched out into crime, the Simon Serrailler series. This, she says, "is my contemporary fiction, where I look at the world as it is". There's also the thrill of a new audience. "I never really went in America, but now I have a huge following of 'mystery' readers. I like it, but it's odd."

So does she hark back to the Victorians, who wrote in all genres? "A Victorian?" She considers this sceptically. "Yes, but in the best sense. The one thing the Victorians really believed in was philanthropy. I think we've forgotten the obligation to be philanthropic. I think we need smaller government, but I want to make it clear I'm not the Sarah Palin of the Cotswolds."

[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/16/susan-hill-interview-kind-man]

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