

Each month we will focus on an inspiring author based in or writing about Wales! You'll have an introduction to their latest book, what inspires them to write, and any advice they have for young writers!

# Get to know

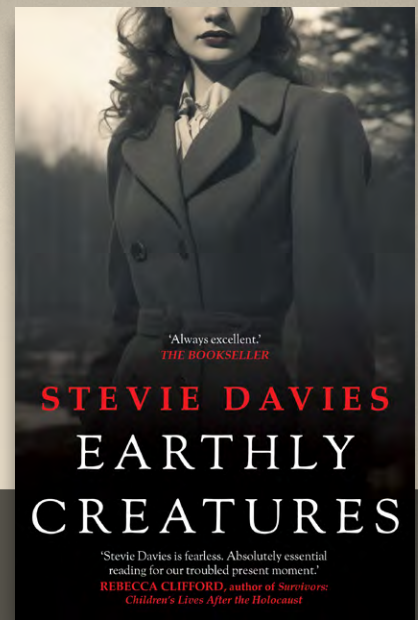
## Stevie Davies



Stevie Davies is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing at Swansea University. She has published widely in the fields of fiction, literary criticism, biography and popular history. Her novel *The Web of Belonging* (1997) was adapted as a Channel 4 television film. Her novel *The Element of Water* (2001) was long-listed for the Booker and Orange Prizes and won the Arts Council of Wales Book of the Year in 2002. Stevie has three children who are the joy of her life. She is a cyclist and sea-swimmer.

### Summary:

Davies' latest work is *Earthly Creatures*, a riveting, epic historical novel set in 1940s Germany. For all her life, 20-year-old bookworm Magdalena Arber has been split down the middle: veering wildly between fidelity to indoctrinated Nazi beliefs, and her father's humanist values. Then comes the summons - the Nazi War Labour Service is conscripting her into a teaching position in East Prussia. Magda is elated. It's a release from the cosy cage of childhood, and a chance to form young minds.



She enters a lush rural world of forests, lakes, and meadows, where order prevails. Yet there are monstrous hands out to shape the whole continuum of earthly creatures. The Gestapo are a lurking darkness. There is bombing further East, and news of a moving Russian front. Will Alt Schonbek burn as well? Can Magda survive?

### As a young person, who or what influenced you?

To further my education, my parents decided to invest in a set of encyclopaedias – I remember the Encyclopaedia Man coming to our house to flog us the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The outlay was huge. We bought 8 red volumes which from then on accompanied us on our travels. My father read entries with me every night. I could choose. Although nowadays this might seem a dull acquisition, then it was anything but. It offered a series of windows on the world.

People: the overarching, faithful presence of my parents, however difficult and contrary I seemed and was. My mother covering me in her skirt during a sandstorm in Egypt, like a bird protecting her chick.

We had no television. Memories of a big wooden Marconi radio which travelled with us, and the BBC News as a constant background. *The Dandy* and *The Beano*. Our only books apart from the Bible were my mother's wartime recipe book entitled *The Right Way to his Heart* (!) and the said encyclopaedias. In the 1960s: university and freedom. Deep and loving friendships for life. Feminism, the peace movement, socialism, environmentalism.

### In what way have libraries influenced you during your lifetime?

Home from home in childhood and adult life. I remember sitting cross-legged in Oystermouth Library as a child leafing through poetry books for children.

### Do you have suggestions of how to encourage children and young people to read more for pleasure?

Read with them every night. If they have a chance to meet the author and talk to her or him about the books, that can create a living bond. If the author and illustrator can come along together, that's even better.

### Do you have a quote that inspires you?

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* has been my guide along the way. She teaches the art of listening empathy and something of its cost:

*If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.*

Here is part of an entry in my *Commonplace Book* for August 2021 about rereading George Eliot's *Middlemarch*:

*It's now 54 years since I first read this greatest of English novels – and it taught me how to live, or at least showed the way – and I would always fail, like Lydgate, like Dorothea, like Bulstrode even – but would get to my feet again, having fallen, and see the woman holding the light ahead – and go on, in the hope of being my best self.*