

# After the glass of Stop'n Grow

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Patrick Gale's new novel places a parish priest at centre stage. **Sarah Meyrick** asks him why

WHEN Daniel James died in 2008, his death was widely reported. Aged 23, and formerly a promising rugby player, Mr James was paralysed from the chest down after an accident in the scrum, during a training session. He took his own life in a Dignitas clinic.

His youth, and the fact that he relied on the help of his parents to travel to the clinic in Switzerland, made the story particularly shocking. But, after consideration, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer QC, ruled that prosecuting his parents would not be in the public interest.

The case inspired Patrick Gale's latest novel, *A Perfectly Good Man*, as well as another novel out this year, Jojo Moyes's *Me Before You*.

In Gale's book, after suffering a similar accident on the rugby pitch, Lenny decides that life is no longer bearable. He breaks off his engagement, tracks down the necessary drugs on the internet, writes goodbye letters to his mother and his ex, and asks the parish priest to call round. The Revd Barnaby Johnson unwittingly becomes the only witness to his death.

"Having heard the news story, I wrote the first chapter very fast," Gale says. "Then I stopped, and thought about it for a year."

Gale is best known for his last-but-one novel, *Notes from an Exhibition*, published in 2007 (Books, [5 March 2010](#)), which was featured by the powerful Richard and Judy Book Club, bagging him at least 100,000 readers more than the quietly respectable numbers who had bought his earlier titles.

GALE had long planned some kind of follow-up to *Notes from an Exhibition*, and, bit by bit, this new novel emerged. It is a companion rather than a sequel: some of the characters from the earlier book appear in this one, too. "A reward for my loyal readers," he says.

"I wanted to write something about fatherhood, because I've previously written about a lot of difficult mothers. I hadn't planned the priest to be the central character, but I found Barnaby gradually grew. People in west Cornwall [where Gale lives] refer to the clergy as 'Father', and I realised that that was a gift."

Set against a sometimes bleak and desolate Cornish landscape, *A Perfectly Good Man* charts the fall-out from the tragedy of Lenny's death within the close-knit community where it occurs. It also explores the complexities of Barnaby's apparently blameless life, and that of his family, which are nothing like as straightforward and happy as might first appear.

Gale is in favour of assisted suicide, "provided the wishes of the would-be suicide are absolutely clear, and not merely assumed, and provided they are of sound mind."

“I would certainly have no hesitation in asking for it for myself, in the event of something like paralysis or motor neurone disease. I’ve never seen what is gained from prolonged suffering, or prolonged periods in ‘palliative’ care, apart from extra suffering for loved ones and carers.

“I happen not to be remotely frightened of death, however, which perhaps makes me biased. And I have never recognised the religious objections to suicide. I’m certainly not a tub-thumper about the issue; I can respect that, for some people, the idea of an English equivalent to Dignitas is frightening or abhorrent.

“I’ve also noticed how people’s professed attitudes can change with age, how elderly friends who’ve joked about having ‘Do not resuscitate’ tattooed across their tummies can become tenacious in their hold on life as the end of the conveyor belt comes into view. . . So I dare say my own attitude might change with time.

“What is so awful about the situation, as it stands, is the way the moral burden is dumped on to everyone but the person who wants to die.”

GALE’s novels have always tackled challenging subject-matter. In the past, he has written about bipolar disorder, Down syndrome, dementia, and HIV/AIDS, for example. But, at their core, his books are about the knotty stuff of family life, particularly when crisis strikes, and the threads begin to unravel.

Like *Notes from an Exhibition*, the book is structured in flashbacks. It is told from the viewpoints of different characters, through which the story unfolds. Gale crafts his vividly drawn characters one at a time, and then assembles the whole at the very end.

We meet Barnaby’s wife, Dorothy, a farmer’s daughter, who finds her life changed beyond belief by marriage to a priest, just as her mother had warned her; their children, Carrie and Jim, the latter adopted. A thriller element emerges in the form of Modest Carlsson, Barnaby’s repellent nemesis, who stalks him through the book with devastating consequences.

“Modest began as a minor character, but, once I realised it was a book about a priest, I needed someone evil to balance it out,” Gale says. “But I hadn’t bargained on how deeply disturbing it would be, creating him.”

All the characters are trying to be good, he says, apart from Modest, who only passes for good. “It’s in the nature of cohabiting space in a family that people unwittingly hurt each other. Barnaby is unwittingly destructive, and that’s true of so many parents. They can get things wrong. It’s about favouritism — even when that’s unconscious — and its effects.”

THE crux of the novel is Barnaby’s calling, which takes him into all areas of the community. When he suffers a profound crisis of faith — his “season of hell” — he visits the Archdeacon, who (fortunately) is patient and diplomatic, “profoundly spiritual but sturdily practical”, and rejects his resignation.

The Archdeacon prescribes the closer study of Thomas à Kempis (he knows Barnaby is a devotee), the continuation of his sacred routine, and a visit to his GP to discuss the possibility that he is suffering from depression. And so Barnaby learns a way to keep going.

Gale offers us glimpses of other ministers, too, who act as foils to Barnaby’s style of priesthood: Tabby Morris, the Sunday-school teacher who flourishes as she discovers a vocation as a non-stipendiary minister; Derek Hawker, who has recently returned from missionary work in Africa,

has a fish sticker on his car, and has unfashionably strict ideas about his daughter's upbringing; and the leader of an Evangelical church that meets in an old warehouse, who sets up a Facebook group in support of Barnaby after Lenny's death.

Gale admits that he is nervous about the reception of *A Perfectly Good Man*, "because I'm not a priest, and it's territory close to home". He grew up in a family of stalwart Anglicans — his grandfather and great-grandfather were both priests — and he has previously described himself as "genetically Christian".

His own spiritual nourishment tends to come largely through the choral music he imbibed as a cathedral chorister and Oxford choral scholar.

THE research for the book made him realise how much we expect of our clergy, he says. "I tried to show some of the non-theological side of their working life — all that unrecognised social work that goes on. The clergy still have a totemic value to non-churchgoers: that's what people require. In west Cornwall, that is particularly the case. Somehow, there's a need for magic.

"The more successful parish priests recognise that, and don't fight it, and do what they can. In a rural parish, of course, the clergy are much more visible — they tend to live in the centre, and are expected to show up in the non-religious life of the village.

"The negative side is that when a priest does something wrong, such as having an affair, or fiddling the books, there's something in the glee with which people react that shows it does matter. It's not exactly superstition, but a deep need for someone to be good."

This was evident in the BBC series *Rev*, he says, which he loves, and describes as "horribly recognisable and honest". Even when the Revd Adam Smallbone (the lead character) messes up, he is still a very good priest, Gale says.

"The lesson Barnaby learns, even though his faith is wavering, even though he thinks he is just going through the motions, is that what he does has meaning in the community, and is of huge value."

Gale is now working on a commission for BBC2 — a three-part drama, scheduled for 2013, which offers entirely different challenges. There is another novel, too, not quite in the pipeline but certainly out there somewhere, which will explore what he calls "a murky corner of my own family history".

Alongside the writing, he continues his involvement in the St Endellion Festivals, in Cornwall, and in fund-raising for Endelienta, a centre for spirituality and the arts.

He confesses to having tentatively given a copy of *A Perfectly Good Man* to the real vicar of Barnaby's Cornish parish, who is thanked in the acknowledgements at the end. He has yet to receive a response. "Probably far too busy to read anything as lightweight as a novel," Gale says.

## Lenny's last rites

THERE was a fresh blast of music from outside. Perhaps the front of the parade was already coming around again. Was that possible? Barnaby glanced away towards the sound and Lenny seized the moment to drain his glass. Barnaby didn't see him do it. Lenny knew he had no idea.

It was unbelievably bitter, like drinking a whole glass of Stop'n Grow. Like drinking death itself. He gasped but managed not to retch. He felt utterly calm. A seagull hovered briefly outside the window then rolled off to the side. They can because they think they can.

"Not long now," Lenny said and saw that Barnaby had realised then what was happening.

"No!" he shouted. He took Lenny's hands in his. He kissed one of them. "Len?"

"You'll send the letters?"

"I'll send them."

"You can pray now. If you like."

His mouth was going funny already and he wasn't sure Barnaby had even understood him. Barnaby was gazing at him with those I-will-find-you eyes and he whipped out a little silver bottle and tipped some oil on to his finger, hands shaking, and touched Len's head with it.

"O Almighty God," he said, "with whom do live the spirits of just men made perfect, after they are delivered from their earthly prisons, I humbly commend the soul of this thy servant, our dear brother Lenny, into thy hands as into the hands of a faithful Creator, and most merciful Saviour; most humbly beseeching thee that it may be precious in thy sight."

Fr Barnaby's voice grew quieter. His face was wet with tears but his words didn't falter. It wasn't like a prayer in church. It was like an important conversation with someone in the room. Someone else. Len's sight clouded and he felt his head grow insupportably heavy. For a short while he was aware of nothing but the continuing voice.

"Wash it, we pray thee, in the blood of that immaculate lamb, that was slain to take away the sins of the world; that whatsoever defilements it may have contracted in the midst of this miserable and naughty world, through the lusts of the flesh, or the wiles of Satan, being purged and done away, it may be presented pure and without spot before thee."

Without spot, Len thought. That's nice. Like sheets. And he pictured bed sheets on his mother's washing line high above Morvah on a day when the sea down below was deep blue with white horses on it, and the temptation was strong to hold your face in them as they flicked and cracked in the wind and the bleaching sun. Pure. White. Without spot.

**From *A Perfectly Good Man*, by Patrick Gale, published by 4th Estate, £16.99; (£15.30); 978-0-00-731347-1.**