

Carys Bray's latest novel explores family relationships, climate breakdown, and loss of faith. Interview by Sarah Meyrick

IT IS the middle of winter, and the weather is appalling. As the rain hammers down and the damp crawls up the walls of their house, the Abram family are struggling to keep their heads above water.

While Emma is doggedly making preparations for Christmas, her husband is preparing for the end of the world. Emma makes do and mends; Chris stacks the garage with rice and beans and turns off the heating. Throw in two maggoty rabbits, a pair of hormonal teenage sons, and a religious mother-in-law who takes passive aggression to a whole new level, and harmony over the festive season looks unlikely, to say the least.

Carys Bray — best known for her prize-winning 2014 novel *A Song for Issy Bradley*, about a Mormon family — says that she had been contemplating the perils of climate change for some years. The issues simply became more pressing.

"I knew I wanted to write about a marriage under pressure," she says. "My first book was about a family from their different perspectives, and my second [*The Museum of You*] was about a father and a daughter. But, while I was thinking about that, we had a really wet winter up here [Southport].

"We live in a long thin town by the sea, with farmland on the other side that became quite waterlogged. My children play football, and that winter the pitches were often unplayable. Like in the novel, there was that feeling of being surrounded by water.

"I'd been thinking about climate change. We live not far from where they were experimenting with fracking, and that had been bothering me. As I completed the novel, thousands of people were preparing to engage in non-violent protests in an attempt to force the Government to tell the truth about climate change."

When the Lights Go Out is about coming to terms with our changing environment, she says. But it's also about a crisis in a marriage. "I'm interested in the ways in which things can go wrong between a couple that you don't anticipate. I know people whose marriages came under pressure over the Brexit vote. That's not something you could plan for," she says.

"[The book] is about the solace and sorrow of modern life, and I hope it's also an entertaining exploration of anxiety and avoidance in a fraying marriage."

ONE of Bray's skills as a novelist is the almost forensic attention to the tiny details that shape family life. In *Issy Bradley*, for example, she depicts with heartbreaking sensitivity the impact that the death of a child has on the surviving siblings and their parents, individually as well as collectively. She ascribes this insight to having come from a large family.

"I'm one of five children, and my husband is one of six. That's a really great education in understanding character," she says. "You learn pretty quickly about the conflict between nature and nurture. You can have almost identical upbringings

Nature under pressure

COLIN MCPHERSON



“Now I can feel anxious about the future while wearing a homemade scarf

belted in and unable to get out,” we read.

“The journey was long, boring and cramped. There were no rest breaks. Heaven was the destination, but without a fixed route there were U-turns and diversions and sometimes the same roads were traversed year after year. There was no point in asking, ‘Are we nearly there yet?’ They were always nearly there.”

Chris has turned his back on faith, while his sister has clung on. (The fact that Chris has turned into a version of his Old Testament prophet of a father is an irony that escapes him.) Meanwhile, his widowed mother has callouses on her knees from praying for her wayward son and daughter-in-law.

Bray's study of faith, whether lost or found, is nuanced, offered with the authority of one who has lived it. She says that she has met no resistance to the subject-matter from publishers. "I did wonder if it was going to be a problem, but it seems to have been OK."

For all the seriousness of its subject, *When the Lights Go Out* ends on an optimistic note. So, is she hopeful about the environment?

"I'm with the writer Rebecca Solnit, where she says: 'Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures, and the grinding down of the poor and marginal.'"

Her personal feeling is that she does what she can while she waits for governments to take action. "It's the only way. So we have no heating on between March and September — we just put on another layer. We grow vegetables in our garden; we have chickens. We have an electric car.

"And, while there's a list of things I'm trying to do, such as composting kitchen waste, repairing clothes, planting native trees, and learning to knit — now I can feel anxious about the future while wearing a homemade scarf — I've also made a list of things I won't do, such as buy bottled water or replace my phone, laptop, or shoes unless they are beyond repair."

There is nothing preachy about *When the Lights Go Out*. It is a good story, deftly told, with a lightness of touch and plenty of humour. Her purpose is not polemic. "I'm not a great person for telling other people what to think and what to do," she says. "I'm saying, Here's a few things I've been thinking about, worrying about. Mostly, I hope people will enjoy it."

When the Lights Go Out by Carys Bray is published by Hutchinson at £14.99 (Church Times Bookshop £13.49); 978-1-786-33234-9.

yet experience life very differently."

As a teenager, she suddenly understood how a writer could use this to her advantage. "I was always a big reader, and I remember the first time I realised a writer was telling me things to make me feel a certain way, and another character would make me feel the opposite way. Margaret Forster's *Private Papers* gives an account of same events told by a mother and a daughter. That hit me like whiplash. She'd done it on purpose, and it was so clever."

The large families she mentions is reference to the fact that she and her

“I miss singing hymns. I don't have any substitute for that

husband grew up in strict Mormon families. She was married by the age of 20; and five children within seven years followed. In her early thirties, she decided to go to university, and, at about the same time, she and her husband abandoned their Mormon faith.

"I left the Church because I

stopped believing in God, and there was no reason to continue," she says. It was a gradual realisation. "I don't believe in any supernatural presence." Her extended family and her husband's family are "still all very religious". None the less, their leaving has not resulted in any great rupture. "It's been absolutely fine. It was more difficult in my imagination. That was a great relief."

There are things that she misses. "I miss singing hymns. I don't have any substitute for that: singing in a choir doesn't come close. And I miss bits of the community, that kindness.

"When my husband and I moved to this town 19 years ago, we called the Mormon congregation to let them know we were coming. We didn't have much money; so my husband hired a van and we drove through the night. At 6.30 a.m., when we arrived, all the men from the church were waiting there, on their way to work, and they helped unload the van. And when I had the children, people cooked for us."

Some of that sense of community has emerged during the pandemic. "In recent months, I've had some of that feeling with my neighbours. When we realised the first lockdown was coming, I put a letter through doors.

"I hadn't lived here very long, and

I didn't know many people apart from immediate neighbours, but now we have a WhatsApp group for the street, and everyone's looking out for old people and doing their shopping. There's been support and encouragement."

Something else that has remained is the Bible. "One of the things I've taken with me from religion is a love of the stories I grew up hearing, and a sense that they may be useful to us as we consider how to talk about climate change. For example, the story of the Good Samaritan asks 'Who is my neighbour?', and listeners are invited to widen their idea of that category. Perhaps we can do that, too.

"Recently, I've been reading Dave Goulson's *The Garden Jungle*, and I've been struck by the fact that I have non-human neighbours I can look after, such as earwigs, bees, and hoverflies — under-appreciated heroes of the natural world."

THE exploration of faith and loss of belief is deeply woven through her fiction. Chris, the husband in *When the Lights Go Out*, was brought up by restless, fundamentalist Christian parents. "Chris's childhood was dominated by his parents' epic spiritual journey, his father in the driver's seat, his mother beside him, and Chris and Ruth in the back,