

There's no place like home

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Sarah Meyrick on *The Music Room* by William Fiennes

IN HIS first book, William Fiennes wrote — beautifully — about his slow recovery from illness and his quest to follow the snow geese on their 3000-mile annual journey from their winter home in Texas to their breeding grounds off Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic.

The Snow Geese is a travel book and work of natural history combined — all interwoven with a poetic meditation on the unmistakable call of home (the Greek word is *nostos*, “return”, from which we derive “nostalgia”, the longing that drove Odysseus to claw his way home to Ithaca after the Trojan War).

The book ends with the author's return to his own home, the medieval castle owned by his family since the 14th century. “Nowhere was my sense of belonging as complete or unambiguous as it was in my childhood home,” he wrote.

In 2009, seven years on, Fiennes published *The Music Room*, just as compelling and lyrical as its predecessor, in which he explores the notion of home still further. At one level, it is an account of growing up in an extraordinary childhood home: “I had a castle to explore whenever I wanted,” he writes. “I didn't question the world as I found it: our wide moat and gatehouse tower, the medieval chapel above the kitchen, the huge uninhabited rooms to the west and the parade of strangers that passed through them each year.”

His school friends are (unsurprisingly) enthralled by the spiral staircases, battlements, secret rooms, “swords you could pick up and wield two-handed”, and the suits of armour in the Great Hall, which his mother polishes with WD40. He spends his summers fishing for pike in the moat.

Life is lived in a bizarre mix of public and private space, where paying visitors pass through, and film crews make historical dramas. The private family quarters are beyond the music room, where, lying in bed at night, he listens to his mother playing the viola, “each scale like someone coming up the stairs then going down them again on second thoughts”.

His parents see their life as stewardship, lovingly looking after the house for the present, and “on behalf of everyone who might one day appreciate it”, rather than for their own benefit or enjoyment. The house is regarded as “a sentient being vulnerable to injury”: at one moment of great stress, Fiennes finds his father with his palm pressed flat against a buttress, imploring the house to lend him strength.

All this might be enough for a book: a love letter to home. But, more importantly, *The Music Room* is a love letter to Fiennes's older brother, the quixotic Richard, who suffers terribly with epilepsy and subsequent brain damage. Fiennes documents Richard's deterioration: the frightening seizures and terrible mood swings, and the days the family tread on tiptoes around him.

At his best, Richard is full of joy and enthusiasm, tenderness and warmth, taking pride in showing round visitors, in singing, in word-play. There is a wonderful scene towards the end, where the

vicar comes to take communion in the family chapel (where the prayer books and hymnals are held together with torn-up strips of blue pillowcases).

Richard is in his element: welcoming new arrivals, ushering them into pews, passing round prayer books, his voice ringing out. Afterwards, he leads the way down to the kitchen for coffee, pressing biscuits on visitors, eagerly looking forward to the football that afternoon.

But, at his worst, he is a force to be feared, rude and violent, smashing windows and holding a hot frying pan up to his mother's face. The family is under assault, just as the castle was during the Civil War.

Richard is a passionate supporter of Leeds United, to the point where a poor result is devastating for everyone. "The whole character of the day hung on the result at Elland Road," writes Fiennes. "We became Leeds supporters by proxy."

The family struggles to find the right treatment and support for Richard. Alongside this, Fiennes explores the treatment and understanding of epilepsy through history.

There are good phases and bad ones. Towards the end, things settle a little. "Richard's days found a more even keel. Drugs reduced the frequency and severity of his seizures. . . The fits and violent outbursts seemed things of the past. He loved his job in the horticultural unit, his music and singing, his pipe, his holidays with Mum and Dad, his visits home. Leeds were winning again, his bedroom decked in blue and gold."

But then: "He was forty-one when a night seizure stopped him breathing." Fiennes was away from home, having flown the family nest in a way that Richard never would. The book ends with a memory of Richard singing, in the music room. It's Christmas: he launches into the anthem "Lead me, Lord", his expression solemn. "We all hold our breath as he breathes in."

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The Music Room by William Fiennes is published by Picador at £8.99 (CT Bookshop £8.10); 978-0-330-44441-5.