Praise for Georgie

'It's headlong and compelling, and I read it between breath and breath.' – Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Guardian*

'…astonishing novel…' – *The Irish Times*

'…the character of Georgie and the narrative voice are compelling, and I flew through it…' – Claire Fayers

'…a remarkable book for both strong and reluctant readers.' – *Booklist*

'Doyle's subtle and perceptive portrait of Georgie's persecutory inner world is told in a daringly understated way.' – *Books for Keeps*

'It's powerfully told and strong.' – *The Observer*

'An assured and moving novel which is striking in its portrayal of damage and recovery.' – *School Librarian Journal*

'…a powerful story…' – *The Irish Post*

'A beautiful and moving account of a therapeutic process, painful, yet full of hope.' – *Children's Book News*

'This enthralling powerhouse of a novel takes you to hell and back as Georgie struggles to face up to the secret of his past.' – *Daily Telegraph*

'A very good book. What Malachy has done so effectively is to give a new kind of child a voice.' – Julia Eccleshare, *Radio 4*

'Powerfully written… breaks new ground.' – Dinah Hall, *The Sunday Telegraph*

'I was still thinking about it for a long time afterwards. Brilliant! Highly recommended.' – Jill Marshall, *Reading Matters*

'This book is exceptionally well crafted, from its gripping opening to its hopeful conclusion.' – *School Library Journal (US)*

'Georgie is an outstanding book and Malachy Doyle has written it with raw honesty.' – *Brisbane Courier Mail*

'It is sensitively written and exciting, classic storytelling … a tautly written, emotional masterpiece.' – Alan Gibbons, *The Ultimate Book Guide*

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GEORGIE

Malachy Doyle



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For Penny R

Foreword

Stories are the oldest method of information transfer. They are a psychological carrier bag that can contain anything from a recipe to a saga. They allow us to escape from the real world, while at the same time building our ability to manipulate ideas and to address the problems and challenges of real life. In the grip of a story our minds are untethered and our thoughts can take new paths and make new connections. Stories help us to understand ourselves and others and where we fit in the world. In short, stories matter.

Stories have deep roots so those belonging to each culture have their own distinctive atmosphere. The identity of stories that arise in Wales comes from many things: the land itself, its weathers and the wriggling coastline that connects us with the ocean realm; from the Welsh language, the oldest Celtic language in the

UK and the one with the highest number of native speakers; it comes from the diverse history of people from around the world, who over the centuries have made Wales their home.

I think the identity of Welsh stories comes from something else too, which is the great desire that people in Wales have to tell them. I grew up in a family of compulsive storytellers. Everyone had stories to tell about their life and I could request retellings from each person's repertoire as if choosing discs from a juke box. My favourites as a small child were Grandpa's, drawn from his experience as a miner in his youth. I especially loved 'the one about the pet owl' and 'the one about the time the pit ponies danced across the fields'. As I got older, I liked my mum's tales of her adolescent escapades too. Those always began with what she was wearing, how she'd made it, and where she got the fabric. My granny retold stories from her grandmother's

childhood and they put me in touch with the late 1700s, like time travel.

My father tailored his stories to fit me at all ages. When I was small enough to climb into his lap, he began with illustration: doodling something on an envelope. The 'something' would grow legs, eyes and begin to have adventures. Later he made aspects of his work as a scientist into narratives with real drama, and filled his travels with so much light, shade and humour that I saw the world open up, ready for me to set my feet in.

I was raised in England, so I thought this habit of making life into a narrative, of making stories grow out of thin air, was just my weird family; other people's families didn't tell stories like mine. It was only when I finally moved to Wales, that I realised that the culture of my family was something bigger: it was Welsh and that storytelling was my national heritage. So at this moment, at the start of the National Year of Reading,

I'm so glad to be helping to shine a light on these stories, told in many voices, grown from the many layers of the rich and surprising loam that is the land and the people of Wales.

Nicola Davies

Children's Laureate Wales

Introduction

I met Malachy Doyle when I was a brand-new writer. We had been picked by Ty Newydd, the National Writing Centre of Wales, as co-tutors on a writing retreat for young Welsh carers. I had never taught a residential course before, and I was terrified. But that weekend with those wild teenage writers, all full of fun and freedom, remains spell-like in my mind. The teens, of course, were luminous, but Malachy was too. I see now that the warmth, respect and deep care that Malachy threaded through his teaching likely shaped my own developing teaching practice. But it wasn't only his teaching style that influenced and inspired me as a new writer.

That weekend, Malachy introduced us to his young adult novel *Georgie*. As Malachy's soft voice drew us into the emotionally intense and wild gut-punch of Georgie's story, the room went quiet: the rawness and honesty captivating us immediately.

Georgie is indeed a magical thing. It is not only that rare sort of story that can still a packed room of effervescent teenagers into riveted concentration, but it is told in a teenage voice so startlingly close-in, unflinching and authentic that it represents a level of craft many YA authors would sacrifice years of their lives to cultivate. Additionally, *Georgie* explores themes as relevant and important now as when the book was written.

It tells the story of fourteen-year-old Georgie, a boy struggling with mental wounds, who is moving residential homes because his behaviour has become unmanageable. With deep empathy, the book explores how effects from unresolved trauma can impact, and crush, a young person's development. The book looks directly at the darkness of Georgie's emotional struggle, but there is hope and healing at its heart too. I suspect for many readers, perhaps even some at that retreat, *Georgie* could read like a lifeline, showing how recovery

from deep depression may be found in small acts of courage and care.

In today's risk-averse publishing landscape, a debut YA novel as provocative in voice and opening as *Georgie* might struggle to find a home. Firefly's decision to republish it within their Children's Classics from Wales series is an inspiringly bold and necessary act of preservation. By republishing *Georgie,* together with the other titles in this important series, Firefly celebrates the rich creative pedigree of Welsh storytelling for young people. They also strengthen a literary tradition that ensures Welsh children see their own landscapes, communities, and voices in the stories they read.

We need stories like *Georgie* right now, and not only in Wales. Ones that feel messy in all the right ways. Ones that speak directly and respectfully to their young audiences. Ones that demand reaction and discussion of sensitive teen-focused subjects. Recently, I reread *Georgie.*

I experienced it in the same way I did all those years ago: breathlessly and with awe for its craft.

So, I invite you to take a deep breath, and when you're ready … turn the page and meet this astonishing protagonist.

Dr Lucy Christopher

Former Course Director, MA Writing for Young People

Bath Spa University



2 April

'Are you awake, Georgie?'

I open one eye. It's Ruby, with my breakfast. They're not supposed to do that, come into my room. It's not safe.

'I've something to tell you, love,' she says. 'OK?'

I nod, just. But I don't like it. Don't like things different. It makes me nervous. They're supposed to leave the tray outside. Supposed to knock on the door, say 'Morning, Georgie. Here's your breakfast,' and go.

I'm not nice in the morning, that's why. I'm never nice.

I watch Ruby with my one open eye. She edges in a bit further, holding the tray out in front of her. To protect her, I suppose.

'You're going to a new home, Georgie,' she says. 'A new home in Wales.'

She watches me. I don't blink, don't move.

'It's Sally's school. Remember Sally who came to see you last week? She's lovely, and the school sounds great. You'll have your own room, all done up specially for you, and you'll have new friends, lots of new friends. You're going to be happy there, Georgie, happier than you've been in a long while. And I'm really looking forward to coming to visit you…'

She's talking too much. Too fast.

'But I'm going to miss you, Georgie,' she carries on, smiling the fakest smile I've ever seen. 'We're all going to miss you…'

Yeah, sure. I open the other eye, give her one of my death stares, one of my if-you-say-another-word-you're-finished sort of looks. And it works. It always works.

The words dry in her mouth. Her bottom lip hangs open and then it closes, slowly. I watch her face tighten, her body go stiff. Hands shaking, she puts the tray down on the end of the bed and glances over her shoulder at the

half-open door. There's someone outside. Waiting, keeping guard, in case it goes badly.

It's going badly.

But Ruby doesn't give up, that's one thing I'll say about her. Carries on to the bitter end, every time. So she has another go, even though she knows I'm about to lose it. She has another go, desperate to get the whole of her message across before I'm so out of it I won't even be able to hear what she's saying.

'We're leaving tomorrow morning, in the minibus,' she goes on, voice cracking. 'You, me and Keith. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you earlier, love, but I didn't want you to get upset.'

You didn't want me to get upset! Oh, that's nice of you, isn't it, Ruby? I'm gritting my teeth now, and she knows I'm about to blow. I can see the fear in her eyes, smell the sweat on her body. She's afraid to stay, because she can tell something bad's about to happen. But she's even more

afraid to run, because she knows that if she does, I'll hate her for it, hate her forever.

'You'll be able to make a fresh start, Georgie,' she cries, almost pleading. Her voice is rising, squeaking. 'It's what you need, you know it's what you need. A clean sheet. A chance to begin again. A chance to be normal.'

Normal! What the hell does that mean? I throw back the covers and Ruby finally realises she's gone too far. That there's nothing to do but run.

She backs out of the room, fast, slamming the door behind her.

I reach for my tea. Cold, always cold. I drink it anyway, and everything is white, white and angry. My fingers tighten on the plastic handle, and I squeeze till it digs into my skin. Then I fling the mug at the door. Another stain trickling down the paintwork. Another stain to add to all the others.

No way. No way am I leaving here. This is my home.

Some home. A mattress on a bare floor. Because that's all I've got left. All I've got left in the whole world.

I wreck everything, that's why. Everything they give me, everything I ever owned. I rip it, break it or piss on it.

I go out on the landing when everyone's gone. I make sure Molly cleaner's not around. She hates me, does Molly cleaner. Hates me to hell and back.

I sit on the toilet, pushing into my hand, and then I paint the walls brown. Brown to wash out the white of my anger. Brown to make them hate me. Oh, how they hate me.

Back in my room, I tear off my pyjamas and rip them to shreds.

I run to the window and thump it till my fist's sore.

I grab hold of the radiator, and I pull it, pull it. I'll have it off the wall one of these days, and then there'll be a right bloody mess.

When I've done enough damage, I stop. When I've burnt out my anger, I stop. When I'm tired and empty, I push the mattress up against the door and sit in the corner. Naked, cold, dirty.

Leave me alone. I want to be alone. I'm a nasty horrible boy and I don't want anyone near me.

Later

Ruby comes back up before she goes off duty. She brings me water, a towel, new pyjamas, in case I want to clean myself up. I want to clean myself up.

When she returns, I let her in. She's OK, Ruby. She used to safen me when I was smaller, when I came here first. Her long dark hair was my hiding place from the outside world. Whenever I got nervous or frightened or lonely she'd wrap me up in it, and I'd snuggle in her warmth, in her darkness, until I was calm.

But those days are gone, long gone. I scare her now. I'm too big, too strong.

She's still frightened because of the way I looked at her this morning. She tries to pretend she isn't but the fear's still there – in her sweaty skin, her whining voice. Pleading, she is, pleading to be forgiven.

How can I forgive you, Ruby? How can I possibly forgive you? I trusted you, Ruby, and look what you've done. You're kicking me out of my room, my home. You're sending me away from everything and everyone I know.

You tricked me, Ruby, tricked me into liking you, tricked me into thinking you cared about me, tricked me into thinking you were here, forever, that I was here, forever.

Yes, you tricked me, Ruby, and if there's one thing I can't stand, it's being tricked.

When she comes within reach, I grab her. At first it's only meant to be a warning, a sharp little tug and away. But I'm pulling and pulling, I'm lost in her darkness and the anger's rising. I can feel it in my guts, all queasy, like diarrhoea. Spreading into my chest, pounding, pounding. Up to my throat, the taste of vomit. And then the rage, the uncontrollable rage fires all around my body – my toes

twitching to kick, my fingers becoming fists, my skin, the whole of my skin, raw.

You won't protect me, Ruby, from the world, from myself. I used to think you loved me, Ruby, now I know you hate me. Because you're sending me away, you cow. From everything that's safe. You're sending me away, you bitch, from everything I know.

When she screams, I jerk away. A clump of her dark glossy hair stays in my hand, ripped by the roots from the top of her head.

She screams and screams, and it only makes me even madder. You fear me; I hurt you. You hate me; I hate you. Fear, hate, what else is there?

Keith comes rushing in and I lash out again, nails flashing. Ruby's cowering, trying to cover herself up so I can't attack her, but I seek out the gaps between her gentle fingers and gouge the side of her face. Nasty, sharp, never-cut nails on her soft, soft skin.

Blood. Blood on the whiteness of my anger. Blood on my hands and I freeze. Keith grabs me and pulls me off her. Roughly, too roughly. That's how it is with Keith.

But it's too late anyway. For me, for Ruby. It's always too late.

The door slams behind them and they're gone. Leaving only me, a mattress and a cold, empty room.

3 April

'Morning, Georgie. Here's your breakfast.'

A voice. Bright and cheerful.

Piss off! I don't want your brightness. I don't want your lies, your pretence, your trickery. Just piss off, all of you, and leave me alone!

I wait till whoever it is has gone, and then I climb out of bed and open the door.

There's a tray with the usual – soggy cereal, cold tea. But there's a pile of clothes too. I look away. I don't want to see them. They're someone else's clothes, not mine. They're new clothes.

I haven't been dressed for three months. Haven't been downstairs for four. It grew so every time I went down I lost it, so I stopped. At first, they used to come and get me, but that only made it worse. Dragging me down, kicking

and screaming. Upsetting them, upsetting me, upsetting the other children. What good was that to anyone? So they gave up.

I pull the tray inside, slam the door on the clothes so I don't have to think about them, and then I eat the food. I always eat the food. There's no point starving, is there?

There's a card by the bowl. A boy and a dinosaur. The boy's waving, smiling. Inside I can see lots of writing, lots of names. I can't read the words, but I know what they mean. It's obvious, isn't it?

Ruby's right. They're sending me away.

When they come up, I'm dressed in the stiff new clothes. I hate those clothes, almost as much as I hate myself. It makes me sick to the stomach to put them on. Sick to the stomach to feel them touching my skin. But there's no choice. I'm bad. I'm bad and I have to go.

Because that's what happens. That's what happens

when you're a Georgie. You can fight and fight but, let's face it, you're never going to win. You can kick and bite and yell and scream, but it never does you any good. In the end they're the ones that decide what happens. The adults. The ones with the power. They make all the decisions and when they tell you to go, you go.

I avoid their eyes. I always avoid people's eyes. But I walk down with them, because there's no choice. Slowly, sideways, with Ruby holding both my hands so I can't lash out. There's no kids around, of course. They've learnt to avoid me, learnt to keep out of my way.

When we get to the bottom of the stairs, Ruby lets go of one hand to unlock the back door. As she opens it, a blast of cold air hits me. A blast of outside air that I haven't felt in months. It's freezing, like the ice in my head, like the whiteness in my heart.

And suddenly I can't do it. I can't face starting all over again. I know there's no other way, of course. I know I

won't win no matter how hard I fight, no matter how hard I bite, because they've got the power and I've got nothing.

I know it's all I deserve, anyway. It's my punishment for being bad. And yet I still can't do it. I won't do it. I back up on the stairs, grab the post, bury my head in my arms and sink inside myself.

Ruby's gone out to open up the bus, so that only leaves Keith to sort it out.

'It's OK, Georgie,' he says, crouching down next to me. 'You're doing fine.'

It's not OK, though. And I'm not doing fine.

I don't like Keith. He's the one they always call when I lose it. Hissing at me through his teeth, threats that no one else can hear. Grabbing me too roughly, holding me too tightly. No one else seems to notice, but I know what he's about. I know how much he hates me, hates this job, hates himself. I know what he can do when the others aren't looking.



I'm bad and I've failed again. I was trying so hard, doing so well. I wouldn't talk, of course, I never talk, but apart from that everything was OK.

I'd eat with the others, ride on the bus, go to school every morning. And they were pleased with me. Everyone was pleased with me. Even I was pleased with me.

Till that stupid boy came. The one with the big teeth. I don't know where they found him, what hell-hole they dragged him up from, but he appeared one morning, all butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, all slimy smile. I took one look at him, and I could tell there was going to be trouble.

They put him in my class, on my table, and they should have known it wouldn't work. Someone should've known.

He didn't like me, right from the start. I didn't much like him either, but I wasn't planning to do anything about it. Other than pretend he wasn't there.

But he was there all right. Slap bang in front of me,

and he was going to make damn sure I was aware of it. He stared at me, hissed at me, and I ignored him. He pinched me, kicked me, and I ignored him. He spat at me, swore at me under his breath, and I ignored him. And no one noticed. No one cared.

And then he grabbed my book, my animal book, and started tearing out the pages. Slowly, slowly, one by one, holding the book out in front of me and ripping each page from top to bottom. Watching my face to see how I'd react. And that was it. I couldn't ignore him any longer.

I looked up into his eyes. I gave him a death stare to end all death stares. And he ignored it. Smiling at me, that evil smile of his, as he carried on ripping out the pages, tearing them from top to bottom.

As I reached across to grab the book back, he sank his teeth into my arm. The pain shot through me, and I snapped, I finally snapped. I jumped to my feet, pushing over my chair, and came flying round to his side of the

table. I hit him and hit him until blood poured from his face. I hit him and hit him until my hands were red. It took three of them to pull us apart.

Everyone blamed it on me, of course. Picking on the poor little new boy. Because no one had seen what that evil little bastard had been doing. Winding me up, tighter and tighter, loving every minute of it. Because no one cared. Because no one had even bothered to look.

And I couldn't tell them, of course. That's the worst thing about not speaking – you can never explain, never get people to understand.

I couldn't tell them he'd been asking for it, begging for it. Pushing me and pushing me until I cracked.

So I stopped going to school. Why should I, if that blood-sucking monster was going to be there? Why should I, if no one cared about me anyway? Why should I, if all they were going to do was blame me every time something went wrong?

They'd try to get me on the bus, and I'd fight and kick. I'd throw myself on the ground and refuse to move. I'd lie there, biting my wrists so hard they'd bleed. Biting anyone else, if they came too close.

So in the end they'd have to leave without me. I'd stay in the houseroom all day, doing nothing. And whoever had to stay behind to look after me would make it pretty obvious they were fed up, too. Fed up with having to stay behind in a boring room with a nasty, horrible Georgie.

So I took it one stage further and stopped even going downstairs. I wouldn't get out of bed, wouldn't get dressed, wouldn't come down for breakfast.

Because the more you do, the more they expect you to do. And the more they expect you to do, the more you disappoint them. So I stopped doing anything at all. And they gave up on me completely.

And now they're sending me away. Away to a new place,

new people. It's only natural, I suppose. You can't really blame them. It's what anybody with any sense would do, get rid of me. I mean, who'd want all this hassle, anyway?

There's just one problem. I don't want to go. I really, strongly, don't want to go.

It's not up to me, of course. I've no choice. No voice. They've got the power, and I've got nothing.

I could make any amount of fuss, but it wouldn't do me any good. I know that, really. I'm the loser, in the end. Always the loser.

I stand up. Put my hands in Keith's. Breathe deeply. Walk out the door.

We climb into the bus. I sit in the back against the window, where I used to sit. Keith's next to me, holding my hands tightly. Ruby's in front, her long brown hair hanging down the back of the seat.

Stupid, that. Asking for trouble. Why do they never learn?

Dave turns round and smiles. He starts the engine, and everyone appears outside the house: Justin, Zeta, Ragga, everybody. Smiling and waving, just like the boy with the dinosaur. Rest of the staff too, they're all there. Even Molly cleaner and she hates me.

They're all acting as though it's a special day, a happy day. A day to sing and cheer and wave flags. A new-king sort of a day. An end of the war sort of a day. We won and Georgie lost. Whoopee!

Philip the boss climbs into the bus and shakes my hand. 'Goodbye, Georgie,' he says. 'And good luck. You're a grand lad, you know.'

Yeah, sure. Easy to say that now he's rid of me.

And then, when he's gone to join the others, off we go, down the drive, through the gates and away. Away for ever.

I'm glad Keith's got my hands. I don't like him; I don't like how he holds me. Tightly, too tightly. I don't like how he whispers through his teeth, warning me to behave. But at least it stops me from doing anything I shouldn't.

I force my eyes closed, pretending to sleep. Safer that way. Stay cool, Georgie. You can handle it. Don't look at the road, the road that's taking you away. Don't look at Ruby's hair.

Don't think about your stomach, either. Your stomach, turning, churning.

Oh god, I think I'm going to be sick.



'Wake up, Georgie. We're here.'

I know we're here. We wouldn't have stopped if we weren't here. What do you think I am, thick? Why do you always treat me as though I'm thick?

Keith tightens his grip on my hands again, just in case I blow. Funny how it scares and settles me all at the same time, the way he does it.

I open my eyes. It takes them a while to adjust to the light.

A big grey building, alone. A woman comes out. Walks down the steps, past some yellow flowers, over to the bus. I remember her now. It's Sally. She's tall and thin and she's got long, dark hair. Why does everyone have long, dark hair?

'Hello, Georgie,' she says. 'Welcome to your new home.'

I avoid her eyes and hold on to Keith. I don't want a new home, you stupid cow! Don't want a new anything. I just want to go back to my room, my old room, and hide from the world, the world outside, the world that wants me to be someone I'm not.

But there's no going back, of course. I know there's no going back. I've lost Ruby, lost my room and I'm starting again with nothing.

I want to fight but there's no fight left in me. I want to scream and rage, to bite and kick, but I know I won't win. Keith will pin me down till it hurts. Sally will be disappointed, and I'll have failed already.

So I hold hands and we follow her in. Through the big wooden doors, into the main hallway, up the winding stairs, along a corridor.

There's kids all over the place, just doing what they're doing. Watching me. Not watching me. No one's told them who I am. No one's told them to hide. No one's prepared them for what's about to hit them.

'Here's your room, Georgie,' says Sally, opening a door at the end of the corridor. 'We've done it out specially for you. I hope you like it.'

Keith gasps. So do I. It's got a proper bed, a chest of drawers, wardrobe, pictures. There's even a music system! And then I see the mirror. A full-length mirror, made of glass – real, breakable, glass.

Is that Georgie staring out at me? Is that what he looks like now? Pale skin, dark eyes, lost. I turn away from him. I don't want to see him; I don't want him to see me.

They must be crazy, giving me all these things. Don't they know? Don't they know who Georgie is? Don't they know what he does to things?

It's quiet now. I stand by the window. Everyone else has gone, and I can see flowers. Trees. Sheep on a hillside.

I take off my shoes and sit down on the bed. I'm tired. So tired. I tried to sleep on the bus, but I couldn't. I tried to sleep last night, but I couldn't.

I hate the nights. I'm alone in the day, but I'm even more alone in the night. And it's stupid, so bloody stupid, because I spend all my life in my bedroom and yet I never sleep. Not at night, not properly.

I dream, that's the trouble. If I sleep, I dream. If I dream, I see knives. If I dream I see blood, squirting, pouring,

gushing all around me. It makes me wake, screaming. It's the only time I use my voice anymore. To scream.

You'd think they'd notice. Me, who never says a word, screaming the house down. You'd think they'd hear me from miles away. You'd think they'd drop everything and come running to see what was the matter. To see how they could help me.

All I want is for someone, anyone, to come and put their arms around me. To tell me it's just a bad dream. To tell me it's all right.

But it's not all right. And no one comes. The night staff leave me, shivering, alone. They turn up the radio to block out the sound of my screams.

Maybe they think I'm some sort of monster, that as soon as they open my door I'm going to come flying at them with an iron bar, smash them to a bloody pulp.

No. There's too much blood already. Every time I close my eyes they fill with blood. Every time I try to sleep I can

taste it in my throat. I'm choking on it till I can't breathe. Choking on it till I wake, crying out for someone to come, someone to care.

So here I am in my new room, my lovely, frightening, room. I climb in under the duvet, curl up in a ball. Close my eyes on all the things they've given me. Because I know what they mean.

Crawl out of your shell, Georgie boy, that's what they mean. It's time to become a human being, that's what they mean. Act normal and we'll treat you normal.

But I can't. It hurts too much. Don't they know how much it hurts, trying to be normal, trying to be human? You think things you don't want to think. You feel things you don't want to feel. You open up your mind and remember things you don't want to remember, things no one should remember. Things you've slammed the door on, things that never happened…

So I close my eyes. Tight. Tight. Close myself down, way down, beyond now, beyond memory. Close myself down, so far down, that I actually manage to sleep. Deeper than dreams, deeper than nightmares, almost deeper than life itself.

I sleep. For once, I sleep.