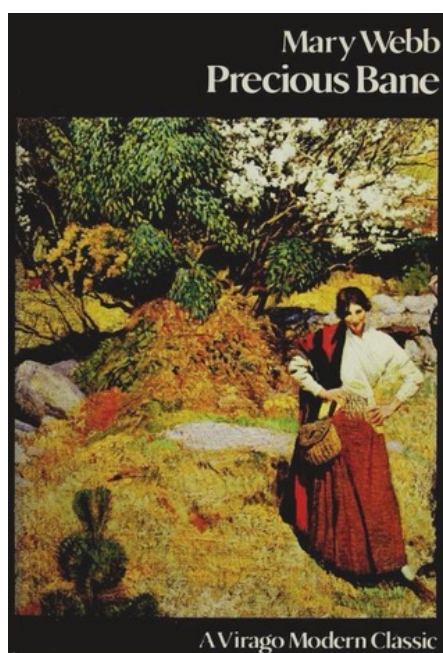




Precious Bane (A Virago modern classic)

Mary Webb

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Precious Bane (A Virago modern classic) Mary Webb

Books like PRECIOUS BANE are as rare as blue moons. A forgotten classic set in rural Shropshire at the turn of the 19th century blends a simple, rustic love story with a profound sense of nature's mystic truth.

Prue Sarn is an original and appealing heroine of English literature as she triumphs over a physical handicap to win her heart's desire. Skillfully woven through this story is the aura of the English countryside, its flora and fauna anticipating every turn of the plot.

Mary Webb's work won her the admiration of her contemporary writers and in 1925 PRECIOUS BANE won the Femina Vie Heureuse prize.

Precious Bane (A Virago modern classic) Details

Date : Published January 1st 1982 by Dial Press (first published 1924)

ISBN : 9780385272162

Author : Mary Webb

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From Reader Review Precious Bane (A Virago modern classic) for online ebook

Corinne Edwards says

This book was an absolute pleasure to read, from start to finish. The depth and character development were stunning and you get such a glimpse at human nature - at it's best and worst. It's almost a spiritual journey - after reading you find yourself savoring different passages to find all the truth you know is within them. Precious Bane is AMAZING. I don't know what exactly it was about it struck me as exquisitely beautiful, but it touched me and I finished it feeling like a better person. Prue Sarn is such a relatable and sympathetic heroine, without ever becoming soppy or whiny. She becomes your friend and you want so much for her life to be happy. A FANTASTIC book.

Melanie says

A book unlike any I've read before, but it was one of the most pure and beautiful stories I've ever read. Precious Bane is not a quick read, the language in particular made the reading a bit slower (it is written in Old English and dripping with 19th century superstitions), but it could not have been told any other way. Prue Sarn, the tragically cursed narrator speaks from her heart, and she is what endeared me forever to this book. The sentiment of a 'precious bane' carries through both Prue's character and her brother. I found their banes to be what proved them, and Ms. Webb crafts a beautiful ending for the strong & beautiful characters of Prue & Kester.

I can't wait to discuss this at book club!

Sylvester says

Had to order this from a distant library - which is sad, to think of this book being neglected. I know I mocked "Gone to Earth", and with good reason, but there was something about it nonetheless that made me think I'd like to check PB out. I wasn't disappointed. I knew it would be melodramatic, but this is Webb's way, you either like it or you leave it alone.

Reasons I liked Precious Bane:

1. Interesting dialect. Made me feel as if I'd been dropped directly into another time (dialect is iffy business to write in, but I think she did okay) - I like old words.
2. Webb is a wonderful nature writer. Nature is another character for her. Her description of the changing seasons, the variety of wood and hedge plants, birds, etc. just beautiful. I especially loved the bit where she goes to see the dragonflies breaking out of their larval bodies (Chapt. 5) and drying out their iridescent wings. Lovely, lovely - and every description of the Mere with its outer ring of bulrushes and inner ring of waterlilies - wonderful. A recurring theme is the reflections on the face of the Mere. And the description of "Harvest Home" in Chapt.6 is very picturesque - all the neighbors gathering to help bring in the wheat.
3. Pru has a harelip. I like protagonists who are not paragons of beauty, and the difficulty of Prudence's particular disfigurement is that she is considered "cursed", a witch, even. This added considerable interest to her character.

So there. I'd maybe go so far as a 3.5*.

Mrs. Meers says

One of my very favorite works. Mary Webb creates a fascinating, jealously enclosed environment whose landscape, characters and situations are almost otherworldly in their strangeness and intensity. Told through the eyes of Prue Sarn, a young woman born with the "curse" of a hare lip, emotions range from deification to humiliation, complete submission to complete selfish possession, passion to apathy, lust to absolutely pure love. I only recommend this book to people I "trust" to appreciate it.

Dolors says

Being the devoted reader of British classics I am, how I've managed to miss this little gem of a book for so long I honestly don't know. But beware, my dear reader, this is not Jane Austen. This is a harsh tale, in the style of Thomas Hardy or even George Eliot, you'll see the characters you so much come to care for struggle in an unfair and prejudiced world, and you'll suffer along with them.

Prudence Sarn is a country girl who lives with her simple mother and her older brother, Gideon, "*Maister of the place*". Prue is gentle, goodhearted and has a fine figure along with a sharp mind. But she also has a harelip, meaning her whole existence is blighted, as it's impossible that anyone would marry a girl with a curse like that. In spite of her bleak future, she makes light of her woes and from very early on, she develops a special relationship with everything alive, her senses being aligned in harmony with the wild natural world; animals, trees and even the wind are her most beloved companions.

Gideon, in contrast with good natured Prue, is as ambitious and severe as he is handsome. He works hard (and slaves Prue to do the same for him) to be wealthy and prosperous and his pride prevents him from marrying the girl he loves, fair Jancis, because he wants to be well-off before he gives himself that pleasure, not caring if others suffer because of his material whims.

But Prue's peace of mind crumbles down when she meets the new weaver, Kester Woodseaves, whom she starts to worship in secret not believing herself worthy of him. It's up to this Prince Charming to perceive the real beauty of Prudence Sarn and free her from gossip and hateful stares.

"This was the reason for the hating looks, the turnings aside, the whispers. I was a the witch of Sarn. I was the woman cursed of God with a hare-shotten lip. I was the woman who had friended Beguildy, that wicked old man, the devil's oddman, and like holds to like. And now, almost the worst crime of all, I stood alone".

What mainly got me about this novel is Webb's capacity to transmit such a crude story in which guilt, hatred and prejudice get the worst of its characters, as if it was an innocent and sweet fable. And in that sense, the brutality of the morals which are trying to be taught become more evident and disturbing. Also the evident contrast between brother and sister, between evil and goodness: Prue's silent acceptance and her brother's endless thirst to yield power; her ability to be at ease with herself in spite of her faults versus Gideon's incapacity to accept his position in the world; her humble ways, his capricious goals. As if opposed poles inevitably attracted to each other. Yin and yang. Dark and light. Life and death. One can't exist without the other.

"Why, it was only that I was your angel for a day," I said at long last. "A poor daggly angel, too".

What also had me bothered for some time is the subtle way in which Mary Webb implies that **no one is**

naturally evil , what the characters (and ultimately what WE) become is the uncontrollable combination of fate, desire and chance altogether with their skill in taking the right decision at the right moment. This way to view life as a running river whose course we don't have the power to change produced a kind of claustrophobic feeling of impotence, with this constant foreboding, lurking behind my consciousness, that something gruesome was going to happen and that no one would be able to stop it, and I'd sink along with all the characters.

"There are misfortunes that make you spring up and rush to save yourself, but there are others that are too bad for this, for they leave nought to do."

So, imagine my joy, when out of the blue, some shining and pure light came through and gave me hope and a new understanding, teaching me a valuable lesson: never stop believing in the magic of life, because the moment you stop believing, you will start fading away only to become an invisible spot of dust in this infinite nothingness which some call existence.

Emily says

This was a somewhat enjoyable story with good character development. The main character was pure, strong, and loving...a truly likeable heroine. The love story in it was real with a dash of fairytale...I really enjoyed that part of the book. Unfortunately, it was a minor part and Webb didn't devote enough time to their relationship as I would have liked. Although the characters were richly developed, I didn't really care for any of them except Prue and Kester, and because the majority of the story revolved around all the other characters, I was disappointed. It could make for a great discussion regarding the many "banes" that each of the characters clung to that lead to their ruin. There was some goodness in the book, but overall it was a tragedy. I had such high hopes for this book after reading so many fantastic recommendations, and it did not measure up. It did take a lot of work getting through the Old English language, but I was willing to sift through it for a fantastic story and characters. Maybe my expectations were too high, or maybe it's because I read it after a book that had a great story, great characters, and was a much easier read. Regardless, I can't agree with all the other great reviews of this book.

My favorite quote:

He was a strong man, which is almost the same, times, as to say a man with little time for kindness. For if you stop to be kind, you must swerve often from your path. So when folk tell me of this great man and that great man, I think to myself, Who was stinted of joy for his glory? How many old folk and children did his coach wheels go over? What bridal lacked his song, and what mourner his tears, that he found time to climb so high?

Jim Leckband says

When you read most history books, you get a lot of trees and not much forest. You read that Napoleon conquered but you don't really understand or feel what the people felt as they were living in those times. Understanding Napoleon is important, but I think it is just as important to know how people made their lives in times and places that are so different than ours.

"Precious Bane" takes place in a galaxy far far away. A very isolated English rural village, Sarn, circa 1810. The heroine, Prudence (Prue) Sarn, is the Jane Eyre of the book, even though she still has her family. In

other words, she is the innocent, romantic heroine who has horrible things happen around her but still keeps chugging. Rather than being afflicted with plainness like Jane, she has a hare-lip - which in those times means you are a witch! Her self-esteem understandably suffers.

The "Precious Bane" in this novel refers to the temptation of the world (mostly money) to turn a man away from what is important. There are only a few characters in the book who won't be tempted, and I don't have to tell you who one of them is. Prue's brother Gideon is the antagonist who must succumb to the bane. His downfall (not much of a spoiler after the first few chapters) is a mixture of Macbeth and "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre".

The real star of "Precious Bane" is the language of an insular people. Webb wrote this in the 1920's, but the language seems ancient. Every paragraph there are idioms, obscure rural terms, and familiar words pronounced very differently. The village folk have legends and superstitions that have very real consequences as they really believe them. The modern world has not touched them at all it seems. But as a warning, to get through the book with any satisfaction, you have to be able to deal with sentences like:

You still go frommet me a bit, I see, Prue Sarn, It mun be toerts, not frommet

Jenifer says

This book had never come across my radar before we chose it as a Book Club selection. Thanks be to the Book Club! We had a great discussion and once again, I am just thankful for those ladies who brighten up my every third Wednesday by sharing our joy of reading and bringing into my life books that I would never have known.

I read some of the Goodreads reviews, and it turns out that everyone of the disposition to read a book like this - exploring human nature, bringing the reader into the story's local dialect, customs and superstitions, and demonstrating an overwhelming love of place - ends up loving it. This book takes its place among the great classics for me.

We had fun at book club talking especially about the "naked lady" scene. Some thought it was just awful of old Beguildy (and yes, he was despicable) but some, myself included, read it with much more humor and with the attitude that that's the sort of thing that could happen without child protective services showing up. Not exactly harmless, but not much more than an ill-concieved money-maker for the old fool.

My favorite thought is that what Gideon held to be precious, (money) turned out to be his bane, and what was Prue's bane is actually what made her precious as it refined her personality and made her the longsuffering, thoughtful and quietly passionate girl that she was.

And I love Kester in his green coat!

Rachel says

This is my number one favorite novel of all time. I can't really define the reason I love it so much. Sure, there's the lyrical writing, the sweet-yet-spunky protagonist, the gorgeous setting, and the best love story of all time. But there's something beyond all that which touches my soul. I always know I'll be life-long friends

with anyone else who has ever read and loved this book.

Cissy says

This novel is unlike any I've ever read, but its beauty and strength drew me in. You can read summaries in myriad other places, so I will just say that the story, told in first-person, is sweet, wise, tragic, and real. I give five stars only to books I would 1. buy, and 2. re-read. I had not even finished my borrowed copy before I ordered my own and have already started skimming it again. I cannot recommend this to everyone, because it is definitely unusual; however, I think it is a worthwhile, thought-provoking read with truly beautiful language. This is literature. (Be forewarned of heavy dialect and atypical vocabulary that will slow down your normal reading pace.)

Karen says

Honest emotion beautifully expressed. It took a while getting into the book because of the dialect, but after I did I loved it. One of the best books I've read.

Stacy says

This is a book that is so amazing that if you don't like it, I really don't want to hear about it. I only give it those of the race who know Joseph. Written in an old English vernacular it tells a beautiful story of redemption and love. If you love literature this is a gem. My ultimate favorite for the last few years.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Imagine the English language as a man who had passed through life's many stages, from infancy to adulthood. This novel may then be considered to have been written in English when the language was still a young boy of thirteen. Adding a lot to its quaint charm is the novel's simple, rustic setting, as if saying that when the language was young, so was the world then.

There's a love story here, and tragedy, and family. When she was a young girl the narrator expressed wonderment that her mother kept on telling her father, in moments of anguish--"Could I help it if the hare crossed my path? Could I help it?" I, too, found this puzzling not knowing what it meant until later it dawned on me: it has something to do with superstition, of which there were plenty during the old times, and what the girl-narrator is (though she be unconscious of it). Superstitions which, themselves, bring informative delight.

I've never heard, for instance, of this concept of a "sin eater" before. Of course, in the Christian belief system Jesus Christ, the redeemer, was supposed to have died to redeem the world from its sins. Maybe this was what was being faintly echoed in what these old English folks came up with, as narrated by the principal protagonist here with her grieving mother, her brother Gideon and her dead father about to be buried:

"At the coffin foot was our little pewter measure full of wine, and a crust of bread with it, but nobody touched them.

"The Sexton stepped forrard and said--

""Be there a Sin Eater?"

"And Mother cried out--

""Alas, no! Woe's me! There is no Sin Eater for poor Sarn. Gideon gainsayed it.'

"Now it was still the custom at that time, in our part of the country, to give a fee to some poor man after a death, and then he would take bread and wine handed to him across the coffin, and eat and drink, saying--

"I give easement and rest now to thee, dear man, that ye walk not over the fields nor down the by-ways. And for thy peace I pawn my own soul.'

"And with a calm and grievous look he would go to his own place. Mostly, my Grandad used to say, Sin Eaters were such as had been Wise Men or layers of spirits, and had fallen on evil days. Or they were poor folk that had come, through some dark deed, out of the kindly life of men, and with whom none would trade, whose only food might oftentimes be the bread and wine that had crossed the coffin. In our time there were none left around Sarn. They had nearly died out, and they had to be sent for to the mountains. It was a long way to send, and they asked a big price, instead of doing it for nothing as in the old days. So Gideon said--

""We'll save the money. What good would the man do?"

"But Mother cried and moaned all night after. And when the Sexton said 'Be there a Sin Eater?' she cried again very pitifully, because Father had died in his wrath, with all his sins upon him, and besides, he had died in his boots, which is a very unket thing and bodes no good. So she thought he had great need of a Sin Eater, and she would not be comforted.

"Then a strange, heart-shaking thing came to pass.

"Gideon stepped up to the coffin and said--

""There IS a Sin Eater.'

""Who then? I see none,' said Sexton.

""I ool be the Sin Eater.'

"He took up the little pewter measure full of darkness, and he looked at Mother.

""Oot turn over the farm and all to me if I be the Sin Eater, Mother?' he said.

""No, no! Sin Eaters be accurst!"

""What harm, to drink a sup of your own wine and chumble a crust of your own bread? But if you dunna care, let be. He can go with the sin on him.'

""No, no! Leave un go free, Gideon! Let un rest, poor soul! You be in life and young, but he'm cold and helpless, in the power of Satan. He went with all his sins upon him, in his boots, poor soul! If there's none

else to help, let his own lad take pity.'

""And you'll give me the farm, Mother?'

""Yes, yes, my dear! What be the farm to me? You can take all, and welcome.'

"Then Gideon drank the wine all of a gulp, and swallowed the crust. There was no sound in all the place but the sound of his teeth biting it up.

"Then he put his hand on the coffin, standing up tall in the high black hat, with a gleaming pale face, and he said--

"I give easement and rest now to thee, dear man. Come not down the lanes nor in the meadows. And for thy peace I pawn my own soul. Amen.'

"There was a sigh from everybody then, like the wind in dry bents. Even the oxen by the gate, it seemed to me, sighed as they chewed the cud."

A long quote which gives the idea of what kind of English was it that I was trying to describe earlier (direct quotes, for me, are like movie trailers or food samplings: instead of draining one's barrel of adjectives attempting to describe, better just present a choice morsel of the thing!).

This novel transports the reader to another world, makes him hear a language strange, yet comprehensible, introduces him to an unlikely and very unconventional heroine who comes alive in the pages, capable of making grown men swoon to her love story everyone knows can never happen but does happen, credibly, in the hands of this great writer. A total of 1,050 readers have rated this and the average stands at 4.26. Which means that very few, if any, had found any reason to say that they did not like it a lot (4 stars) and still many, like myself, found it amazing (5 stars).

A used, discarded, torn treasure which I bought for the price of a can of Coke (20 pesos).

Alun Williams says

This book has been one of my favourites for about 25 years, ever since I bought it almost at random, and then read it on a long train journey through France. It is one of the very few books I reread regularly, and my pleasure in it never lessens.

I won't repeat what the other reviewers to give this book 5 stars have said, which I think gives a good idea of how much most readers will feel about this book, but just tell you that a few months ago I, somewhat diffidently, recommended it to a book group I am a member of, half afraid that some people would find its old-fashioned plot and rural dialect a little ridiculous. Instead, every member of the group loved it, and it is the only book ever to get a 5 star rating from everyone.

I have read all Mary Webb's novels, and this is by far her best work, and sadly the only one I can recommend whole-heartedly, though "Gone to Earth" is also well worth reading - especially for anyone interested in feminism or the history of attitudes towards sexuality. Seven for a Secret is a good tale, The Golden Arrow not quite so good. The House in Dormer Forest is quite unlike her other completed novels, and is sometimes supposed to have inspired "Cold Comfort Farm", although it is quite satirical enough itself. But all these

other books are marred to some extent by third person narrative, which unfortunately allows Mary Webb herself to become an at times intrusive and preachy presence. Precious Bane, with its first person narration, by one of the most endearing heroines ever to grace an English novel, is perfect.

Kristen says

On the one hand I wonder why this book isn't on my sons high school AP English book list, and on the other hand I wouldn't want to be the teacher who would have to put up with the groans and complaints about village dialect.

The Bane represents the thing in a persons life that is toxic to their happiness. For the protagonist, Pru Sarn, it is the hare lip she was born with. Her bane is her outward appearance; but, because of her bane, she learned to love life and she holds nature and purity dear and her inward soul is beautiful because of it. Her brother, Gideon, had a bane too. His soul was dirty, greedy, selfish; but, because of his bane, he was strong, good-looking, desirable. Other characters in the story also had banes, I think. Jancis cared too much about Gideon and not enough about herself. I find it interesting in the Goodreads reviews that hardly anyone talks about Jancis. Tivvy, Beguildy, Felena - I think almost all of the characters had a bane. All, except for Kester.

I can't believe I am able to give 5 starts to a book with such a predictable plot, but, this read isn't about the plot. This read is about the beauty of Mary Webb's writing. The authors ability to create a little village that draws you so far in that you feel it is rare. When Pru says she senses impending trouble, you do too. You know the characters so well that you just can see the train wreck coming.

If Thomas Hardy had written this story it would have felt dark and doom-filled. Thank goodness Mary Webb wrote it - it feels poetic.

Recommended only to thoughtful readers who are willing to not rush, to readers who could sit by a pond for an hour just to watch a Dragon Fly come out of its body.

Brenda Clough says

This is one of my favorite types of fiction: the kind that you can fall into, like stepping into a manhole. Bam! One step and you are in a totally different world. The insular life of rural Britain comes to vivid life in this highly romantic old novel, which brought posthumous fame and fortune to its unlucky author (<http://marywebb.org/synopses/precious...>).

I particularly admire the use of reading and the spiritual life as an escape for the heroine, Prue, from a really harsh and unpleasant existence. The contrast between her rich inner life, and the impoverished one of her status-seeking brother, is lovely. The modern reader might have problems with the incredibly limited options open to the characters -- why on earth doesn't Prue just leave? But that's part of the worldbuilding; I doubt if she could have done so -- certainly she never considers it -- and we have to believe that. So this book feels more authentically 'old' and historical than many a historical novel or historical romance.

Kristen says

I give this book six stars. I wanted to begin it again the second I finished it. I would never have heard of this

book were it not for Goodreads. Thanks Goodreads friends!! This is truly a miracle of a book.

Set in Shropshire, England, after the Napoleonic Wars. Narrated by Prue Sarn, a young woman with a cleft lip, or hare-shotten lip, as it is called in the book.

The book is beautiful in three ways. The writing--the Shropshire dialect---is so wonderful that I whispered almost the entire book aloud. My family thought I was insane. It was lovely and delicate. Next, the content. Here is an excerpt from the introduction--

"..what Mary Webb (author) gives us is more than the archetypal happy ending of the fairy tale, where transformations come to princesses and princes trapped in bear and frog skins, where the kiss from one who sees the trapped creature as beautiful sets the real beauty free. For when the princely weaver kisses Prudence Sarn upon the spot of her deformity, it does not go away, she does not shed it suddenly. Rather, the blemish, loved and kissed at last, can make her whole and open up the gates of entry to the joys it threatened to deny. Thus what is finally evoked in us is more than the fairy tale longing that our inner beauty will be seen so clearly it will make us beautiful before the world, it is the longing to be known and loved for all our blemishes, our warts and wens and contradictions, to be "let in" whole."

Thirdly, the sense of place.

And fourth---the original sketches by Rowland Hilder are phenomenal---if you read this, get the 1980 edition that has these original sketches reprinted.

A truly remarkable tale.

Saysha says

While the dialect can be a challenge and the plot a bit slow, I was very impressed. It sounds like Thomas Hardy but is written by a woman, which makes me frustrated that it isn't as renowned as Hardy's work. There are passages that are so beautiful I had to read them out loud. Read Webb's biography on marywebb.org, too; her own life is fascinating. I also love that Stella Gibbons was parodying Webb (among others) in *Cold Comfort*. I understand why, but that doesn't diminish my feelings for Webb's work at all.

Dawn Marie says

When I was 16, PBS blew my mind. I was sitting up watching Masterpiece Theater on the local affiliate station, and right in the middle of this period drama they showed a man's naked ass. PBS was, and apparently had always been, astonishingly cool. Later, my PBS affiliate aired a highly controversial documentary about gay men called *Tongues Untied* despite great hue and cry (and to this day, my brain insists that it was actually entitled "Tongues United", which kind of makes its own sense), but until that point, PBS was mainly a parade of dull, wearying shills pimping fundraising coffee mugs, dreary Saturday afternoons of *Dr. Who* (Who fen, I know you luff heem, but I have always found the theme music unsettling, and also they killed Adric and it freaked me out and I apparently cannot forgive) and period drama that kept its baggy costumed pants on. Oh, and guess what? The ass? It belonged to Clive Motherfuckin' Owen. I know, right?

Anyway, all that to say that I saw the film adaptation of *Precious Bane* before I even knew it was a book.

The BBC movie was apparently never officially released on video *koff, koff*, and so I can only tell you that I loved it utterly and that Prue Sarn seemed completely real to me, and her brother Gideon (Clive Motherfuckin' Owen) was fierce and driven and hot. Also, although I didn't think Kester was much to look at, I adored him anyway, as he deserved, and while the Prue and Gideon from the book look nothing like their BBC counterparts in my mind's eye (both are more like the moody and evocative charcoal illustrations by Rowland Hilder – in Hilder's work, Prue's face is always in shadow or turned away, her body rawboned and rangy, that of a woman who spends her days plowing fields) Kester was very much informed by my impression of him from the film.

What impressed me first about the book was Prue herself. She is a woman of little education but great scope – she learns to read and write in her late teens, and spends her days in arduous labor, finding respite and reflection in the attic, writing in a journal. Prue is not your typical “plain” heroine – she is no perky thing longing to be head cheerleader, worried about a flat chest or boring hair. She is in fact actively disfigured – Prue Sarn has a harelip, and is sore afflicted. Despite that, it is apparent from the first page that a) Prue has lived to be a comfortable old woman and b) she lives with Kester, who we hear of in the first line of the book: “It was at a love-spinning that I saw Kester first.” So, whew, we get that whole “will true love prevail?” thing right out of the way. Of course, how that love comes to pass is the heart of the story, which runs parallel to that of her brother Gideon and his rise and fall due to overreaching ambition, and what follows is absolutely ensnaring narrative, the story of a woman recounting her turbulent youth using the journal she kept as her touchstone, and told in dialect: some of the most immersive and captivating first person I've ever come across.

Prue is a surprisingly cheerful woman, given her situation. She works her family farm and endures the stares, the pity and the whispers of small town life in an age where a harelip was a sign of dark dealings with denizens of the underworld. Although she has never been to school, she has a sharp mind, a sense of humor and an all-encompassing love of natural beauty. Mary Webb was a masterful storyteller, but she absolutely shines in the descriptions of the countryside. The fields and lakes around the farm keep Prue sane; every time she thinks she'll break her heart with envy or rage, she goes to nature for solace. Mary Webb is brilliant at plotting, foreshadowing, at dialogue, and most of all depicting the world Prue lives in:

“That was the best time of year for our lake, when in the still hot noons the water looked so kind, being of a calm pale blue, that you would never think it could drown anybody. All round stood the tall trees, thick-leaved with rich summer green, unstirring, caught in a spell, sending down their coloured shadows into the mere, so that the tree-tops almost met in the middle. From either hand the notes of the small birds that had not yet given up singing, went ringing out across the water, and so quiet it was that though they were only such thin songs as those of willow wrens and robins, you could hear them all across the mere. Even on such a burning day as this, when I pulled the honeysuckle wrathes, there was a sweet, cool air from the water, very heady and full of life.”

Webb certainly doesn't neglect the senses, and it is her sense of sound that I find especially intriguing:

“There was a frittining about the place, too, and what with folk being afraid to come there after dusk, and the quiet noise of the fish jumping far out in the water, and Gideon's boat knocking on the steps with little knocks like someone tapping at the door, and the causeway that ran down into the mere as far as you could see, from just outside the garden gate, being lost in the water, it was a very lonesome old place. Many a time, on Sunday evenings, there came over the water a thin sound of bells. We thought they were the bells of the village down under, but I believe now that they were nought but echo bells from our own church. They say that in some places a sound will knock against a wall of trees and come back like a ball.”

Webb's diction is simple, but vivid and alive, like Prue herself.

That said, Kester is such a sweetheart that you may find him almost too good to be true, but as it happens, I know such a man in real life!, and so you can put away your paintball guns of incredulity and accept Kester

for the handsome wrestling, weaving, animal rights activist that he is. At the very least, it's easy to believe that he has the excellent judgment necessary for recognizing that Prue is a woman of parts. Kester's good opinion of Prue is held, too, by her brother Gideon. Indeed, as the book deepens and Gideon's savage pride is broken by harrowing loss, his reliance on Prue's strength and his regard for her become his most redeeming features.

If you want a depiction of a woman who is genuinely heroic, and yet absolutely credible as a human being, and a book so enthralling you'll feel like you're breathing the pure, sweet air of a pre-industrial age, then Precious Bane is the book you've been looking for. If at all possible, try to score a copy with the Hilder illustrations; they really bring something.

Hilary says

Set in the 1800's this tale of rural life shows what a hard, hard life ordinary people endured. It could have been set in medieval times, for the superstition, religious brutality and the treatment of women, children, and animals are awful.

After Gideon and Prue's father dies Gideon is determined to better their lives, and at first his character seems quite admirable, hard working and driven to look after his mother and sister and not heeding of superstitious nonsense. However as Prue observes money is his 'precious bane' and he will strive to acquire it at all costs. Gideon changes, and remembering the opening scene of his fathers awful treatment of his children, it's not suprising.

The description of the English countryside is beautiful and the use of dialect helps this era come alive. This book also has hope as well as hardship, and kindness as well as brutality. Prue is a wonderful character, you feel for her immensely throughout the book. One of the best books I have read. If only there were a sequel, I should love to have read about Prue's much hoped for basket of rushes.
