

**The Morville Hours by Katherine Swift published by Bloomsbury, £17.99.**

Radio 4's Book of the Week from May 5<sup>th</sup> is the newly published *Morville Hours* by Katherine Swift. I don't know if it's the first time that a locally placed book has made it on to national radio, but I am definitely not surprised that this one has been picked out for such attention.

Katherine's book is thoughtful, reverent, absorbing and inspiring. The book begins some 30 years ago when Katherine moved from Dublin to Morville, but it reaches back to other, older beginnings, and just a few pages in we are taken into the frozen wastes of the ice age; following the progress of the juggernaut glacier that stopped, finally, (breath-takingly) at Morville. Katherine's descriptions of the creaking and groaning of the frozen earth matched perfectly with the heavy snow that fell as I was reading, tucked up at home in Clungunford.

I've lived in Shropshire now for over 30 years, and feel at last that I can call myself local. For nearly all of those thirty years I have either lived or worked in this beautiful patch of the county that stretches from Bridgnorth, across to Wenlock and then down the Corve Dale past Holdgate and Tugford, to the south Shropshire hills. I love this bit of land, and to read its history, from the ice age and on through the medieval period, right up to the present day, is an astonishing treat. What makes it even more special, is that the history of the land is told through the history of the garden, and the history of the garden is told through the history of its plants and wildlife, and through the lives and livelihoods of the people who have been living here for thousands of years.

Another layering that Katherine uses beautifully, and which is to be expected from the title of the book, is that of the medieval Book of Hours. Each chapter represents a different month, and a different time of the night or day, as well as a different historical period. Additionally, in the medieval Books of Hours there are horticultural or agricultural labours assigned to certain times of the year. So, for example, February will be "Keeping Warm", March will be "Digging", June will be "Mowing" and so on. The sense of time - and timelessness - that Katherine achieves through this very particular structuring of the book is a very large part of its charm. It gives the long view, and shows how something as personal as gardening is worked upon by the times in which we live. So for example, the destroying of the Twin Towers in 2001 leads to a yearning for private gardens, walled in, protected from the outside world.

I loved the interconnectedness of it all: the history, the gardening, the local people now still doing the tasks that people have done down the centuries, and through it all is Katherine's voice, telling her story, too. It's a book full of wisdom as well as knowledge, and I found myself torn between wanting to stop and reflect upon what I was reading, and wanting to turn the pages to find out what happens next! This is definitely a book to return to, and I like to think that once I have read it all, I shall keep it close to hand, and then re-read each section at the appropriate time of year, or even at the appropriate time of day. It will make me see more than I have seen before, because instead of only seeing what's in front of my eyes, I shall be looking under the surface too, to what is hidden, and what I have sometimes felt, but never really understood. This beautiful book is a love song to the Dower House Garden; to Morville and to Shropshire! We are *so* lucky.