

The period immediately following World War II was one of scarcity and dullness. Robert Appleyard was 16 years old and had spent more time looking out of the window at school than studying, since he was more interested in the natural world than his destiny of a life in the Durham coalfields. He lacked confidence and believed that further education was for other people. But, on leaving school, he decided to spend the time prior to receiving his exam results in walking out to gain a spell of freedom before the shackles of work were fastened around him.

*The Offing* by Benjamin Myers follows Robert on his journey and his coming of age. Robert's wanderings gave him a real sense of freedom; that is until he came across a cottage inhabited by Dulcie Piper. He is invited to tea by her and, owing to being very thirsty, he accepts without realising that it was nettle tea being offered. Dulcie was much older than Robert and had a very direct manner, but he began to fall under her spell. She expressed views and used language that Robert found quite shocking. She was understanding of the Germans, which was almost unacceptable at the time and introduced him to novels, such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. She also spoke with understanding and wisdom, although had a rather pessimistic view of the future. In addition, there seemed to be a steady supply of food, particularly seafood that was foreign to Robert, whose experience consisted of kippers with the consistency of the inside of a miner's boot. And Dulcie still had several bottles of good wine.

Although he wished to continue with his wanderings, Robert found himself staying on. At first it was just to clear a bit of the encroaching meadow, but continued with him doing up a nearby lean-to shed. It was while staying in the shed that he came across a briefcase containing a manuscript of poems entitled *The Offing*. They were by Romy Landau, and Robert found himself developing a feel for their language and style, even though he couldn't understand some of the words. It turned out that Romy and Dulcie had been together, but Romy had drowned herself in the sea below the cottage.

The reason for her suicide seems to have been depression about what was happening in Europe, particularly in Germany during the 1930s. Dulcie never really recovered from Romy's death and just wanted to allow the manuscript to fade away. However, she recognised that Robert was not dull academically and questioned why he felt that higher education was not for him. He managed to persuade her that the poems were fit to publish.

Robert returned home on learning of his exam results, which were better than he expected. He secured a job in the mine office rather than going down the pit. Nonetheless, he finds himself at odds with the whole employment structure and resigns the following year. He returns to the cottage and Dulcie bequeaths the lean-to shed to him as accommodation. Although not specifically stated, it can be assumed that she also assisted him to gain a place at university.

Everyone loved the book, its characterizations and sense of place. The setting is Robin Hood's Bay, near the North York Moors, an area that the author seems to know well. It was written from the viewpoint of the older Robert who is remembering that summer with Dulcie as a time which changed the direction of his life from the prospect of being a miner in a slowly dying coal industry to becoming a successful author. There was the feeling that Robert had, in a sense, become like Dulcie, though without some of her passion and sense of loss, and he was now living his last days in the lean-to that was now decaying in the way it had been before he repaired it.

And the Offing? It is the sea distant from shore approaching the horizon – which was where Romy had aimed to be.