



PREVIEW

# Enys Men

+ Q&A with director Mark Jenkin, hosted by Mark Kermode

On an uninhabited island off the Cornish coast in 1973, a wildlife volunteer's daily observations of a rare flower take a dark turn into the strange and metaphysical, forcing her to question what is real and what is nightmare. Is the landscape not only alive but sentient?

Mark Jenkin joins us to discuss his follow up to 2019's strikingly original *Bait*, a mind-bending Cornish folk horror shot on grainy 16mm colour film stock and featuring his trademark post-synched sound.

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A cross between folk horror and nature documentary, Mark Jenkin's *Enys Men* is as idiosyncratic as his acclaimed first feature, *Bait*. Told through poetic visuals, it is similarly shot on grainy 16mm, in colour this time. Rooted in Jenkin's Cornish childhood, *Enys Men* was conceived in response to audiences' reactions to *Bait*: the foreboding tension in that fishing village drama had led viewers to expect a horror film, which prompted the director to make one. *Enys Men* is anything but straightforward genre cinema, though: as with *Bait*, Jenkin uses the cinematic grammar of the past, this time taking inspiration from the 1970s, and reconfigures it into a revelatory experience.

On a deserted island overlooked by an ancient stone, a woman (Mary Woodvine) takes a daily walk to the cliff to monitor a bunch of peculiar flowers. As the woman goes through her repetitive routine, anxious to record any changes, the camera meticulously observes the choppy sea, the dark cliffs, the seagulls and the heath. It is not just the wildlife that is attentively documented, but human artefacts too, old and new: ruined buildings, rusting tracks, a red generator. Its title meaning 'stone island' in Cornish, *Enys Men* offers a sensorial immersion into the textures, shapes and colours of the place, charting both the harsh beauty of the landscape and the evocative traces of human activity.

According to Jenkin, the woman is a Wildlife Trust volunteer, but in the film the purpose of her activities remains unexplained. The enigmatic accumulation of observations leads to seeing things that are not only beyond the limits of wildlife documenting, but well beyond the realm of the visible. The yellow raincoat and the broken boat sign she finds among the rocks seem like clues or charms that can conjure up the ghosts of the past: women in identical bonnets, grimy miners, a rugged seaman, a young girl in flares standing precariously on a roof all start to appear and disappear with alarming regularity.

The carefully constructed sound design potently contributes to the feeling of haunting that pervades the film. The crackling of the radio, the disembodied voices over the airwaves, the clanking of metal in the mineshaft create a forbidding atmosphere whose threats are realised, although not in a conventional way. Like the visuals, the soundtrack diverts habitual horror motifs from their expected uses. Sinister low drones and strident frequencies build up tension and genuine unease, but they are made all the more

disquieting by the jarring contrast with the nature imagery or mundane objects they often accompany.

As May Day approaches, the flowers start to change, the stone's presence seems more ominous, and the invasive lichen grows in impossible places. The elliptical sense of tension culminates in an eerie sequence where white-clad children bearing hawthorn branches sing outside the woman's house. These folk-horror elements are used in an oblique way that revitalises their power. *Enys Men* shares with folk horror its concern with what lies deep in the land, with buried archaic connections between humans and natural forces, which still exert an influence over the living. In Jenkin's film, these connections are rooted in the physical reality of death, in the decomposed bodies of past inhabitants whose broken-down components have become part of the sea and the soil.

There is a playful element of eco-horror, nodding to *The Day of the Triffids* (1962), in the flowers with their weird red pistils, and the lichen that is infused with a life of its own. But the lichen also has a central thematic resonance, and the film draws on the real strangeness of this plant-like life form that is not a plant: a composite organism formed of fungus and alga, which can break up rock and help disseminate minerals into the soil, lichen embodies symbiosis and the dissolution of boundaries between separate realms.

This dissolution of boundaries lies at the heart of the film. As the narrative progresses, the demarcation between reality and perception melts away. Temporal planes merge and bleed into one another. The notions of presence and absence become elusive and relative. As the woman interacts with the apparitions, her sense of self becomes blurred and unstable, and through her fragmentary impressions we are led to experience the world of the island as a rich, disorientating coexistence of multiple dimensions. Her bedtime reading is *A Blueprint for Survival*, and perhaps *Enys Men* aims to offer its own transformative manual for the unnerving complexities of human experience.

**Virginie Sélavy, *Sight and Sound*, 20 May 2022**

*Enys Men* is a mind-bending Cornish folk horror set in 1973 that unfolds on an uninhabited island off the Cornish coast. A wildlife volunteer's daily observations of a rare flower take a dark turn into the strange and metaphysical, forcing both her and viewers to question what is real and what is nightmare. Is the landscape not only alive but sentient? Shot by Jenkin on grainy 16mm colour film stock and with his trademark post-synched sound, the form feels both innovative and authentic to the period. Filmed on location around the disused tin mines of West Penwith, it is also an ode to Cornwall's rich folklore and natural beauty.

Mary Woodvine (*Poldark*, *Judge John Deed*, *Doc Martin*), who played Sandra in *Bait*, is The Volunteer. She reunites with *Bait* co-star Edward Rowe (*The Witcher*, *House of the Dragon*) who is The Boatman. Based in West Cornwall, and previously working in theatre, film and television for over 30 years, Mary Woodvine is in almost every scene of the film and gives an astonishing, naturalistic performance, working with minimal dialogue and with the camera following her in extreme close-up.

Filmmaker Mark Jenkin is based in a studio in Newlyn, West Cornwall where he writes, edits and scores his films himself. After making a number of short and mid-length films including *Bronco's House* (2015), his debut feature *Bait* premiered at the Berlinale 2019. Through critical acclaim and word-of-mouth

it became a huge arthouse hit, eventually screening at hundreds of cinemas and taking over half a million at the UK box office. Mark Jenkin and his producers, Linn Waite and Kate Byers, won the BAFTA for outstanding debut by a writer, producer or director. Mark received further awards from film festivals around the world and he was honoured with a Grand Bard’s Award for Special Achievement in Cornwall.

To contextualise the film and the inspirations behind it, giving audiences the opportunity to enjoy some rich and rarely seen content, BFI Southbank and BFI Player have invited Mark Jenkin to programme a season, The Cinematic DNA of *Enys Men*. Including features, documentaries, TV programmes and shorts, the season will run throughout January 2023.

*Enys Men* is pronounced ‘mane’ and means stone island in Cornish. Menhirs, or standing stones (from the Cornish for long stone) are monumental stones, prolific across Cornwall, typically dating from the Bronze Age.

**bfi.org.uk, 20 September 2022**

**ENYS MEN**

*Directed by:* Mark Jenkin  
*©:* Bosena Ltd  
*a Bosena production:* Bosena  
*Presented by:* Film4  
*In association with:* Sound Image Cinema Lab  
*Executive Producers:* Deborah Boden, Ben Coren, Lauren Dark, Johnny Fewings, Kingsley Marshall, Denzil Monk  
*Produced by:* Denzil Monk  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Michael Todd  
*Written by:* Mark Jenkin  
*Original Story Idea by:* Mark Jenkin, Adrian Bailey  
*Director of Photography:* Mark Jenkin  
*Lighting Camera:* Colin Holt  
*Film Editor:* Mark Jenkin  
*Production Designers:* Joe Gray, Mae Voogd  
*Sound Editor:* Mark Jenkin

**Cast**

Mary Woodvine (*the volunteer*)  
Edward Rowe (*the boatman*)  
Flo Crowe (*the girl*)  
John Woodvine (*the preacher*)  
Joe Gray (*the miner*)  
Loveday Twomlow (*the baby*)  
Denzil Monk (*Charles Green*)  
Kingsley Marshall (*Mathi Keast*)  
Jonny Dry (*Robert Spargo*)  
Luke Hudson (*Harry Uren*)  
Michael Eddy (*John Trebilcock*)  
Isaac King (*William Angove Sr.*)  
Morgan Ansell (*William Angove Jr.*)

UK 2022  
96 mins

Courtesy of BFI Distribution

**IN PERSON & PREVIEWS**

**Preview: Enys Men + Q&A with director Mark Jenkin**  
Mon 5 Dec 20:45  
**TV Preview: Happy Valley Final Series Episode 1 + Q&A**  
Tue 6 Dec 18:15  
**Preview: Emancipation**  
Wed 7 Dec 18:00  
**Book Launch Event: The Shining (Extended Version) + Q&A with Lee Unkrich**  
Thu 8 Dec 18:40

**Peter Greenaway in Conversation**  
Fri 9 Dec 18:20  
**The Precious Things: BBC Centenary Special + intro**  
Sat 10 Dec 14:20  
**TV Preview: His Dark Materials + Q&A with Cast & Crew TBC**  
Tue 13 Dec 18:00  
**TV Preview: Ghosts Christmas Special + Q&A with cast and crew**  
Thu 15 Dec 18:20

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