

**DOUBLEHEIDER / :Sheena Blackhall, Hamish MacDonald Itchy Coo, 2003;
ISBN: 1902927729. Reviewed by [The Association for Scottish Literary Studies](#)**

This groundbreaking volume juxtaposes for young readers two novellas in Scots. The lively stories are told throughout in distinctive dialects. MacDonald's The Girnin Gates deploys a highly inventive, phonetic version of the patter of the Glasgow conurbation, whereas Blackhall's Loon uses confidently the whole range of the strong Doric of the North East. The two pieces make a stimulating pair, for though they are very different in language and in tone, they share intriguing similarities which invite exploration.

Both occur in the recent past, and are identifiably set in ordinary municipal housing estates, Garscadden on Clydeside and Bridge of Don on the northern fringe of Aberdeen (lightly disguised), places which have rarely been fictionalised. Gilbert and Donnie, the first person narrators, are resilient teenagers who believe, often rightly, that they are being put upon and unjustly blamed by parents and teachers. They live among feckless, damaged adults whose own prospects have been stunted by poverty and unemployment. Across perilous social frontiers the youngsters catch glimpses of the fabled otherworlds of Milngavie and Auld Tullyvar.

Both narratives are reminiscences about growing up, episodic mixings of domestic tragedy and comic knockabout. Outlying countryside is shown as a liberating influence on the youngsters' constricted lives, and an element of magic and mystery is crucial to both plots... the ominous black swan of the Forth and Clyde canal and the talking white hare of Braegarr.

The endings are hopeful: Gilbert's aspirations successfully break out through the phantasmagoric gates of the long demolished mansion house of Garscadden, and finally Donnie's mother declares she is 'affa prood' of him. One attraction of these short texts is that they may well tempt young readers to use their own familiar language forms to make fiction out of their own experiences and locale. They should be encouraged to persist with both stories, to enjoy their striking differences and similarities.