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# British Council Nature Writing Seminar
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# Literaturhaus München and Stiftung Nantesbuch

**Helen Macdonald** is an English writer, naturalist, and an Affiliated Research Scholar at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge. She is best known as the author of *H is for Hawk*, which won the 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize and Costa Book Award. In 2016, it also won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger in France.

Helen Macdonald was educated at Cambridge University and was a Research Fellow at Jesus College, Cambridge. Macdonald has written and narrated radio dramas, and appeared in the BBC Four documentary series, *Birds Britannia*, in 2010. She was the subject of the 2018 documentary *H is for Hawk: A New Chapter* (PBS and BBC) Her books include *Shaler's Fish* (2001), *Falcon* (2006), and *H is for Hawk* (2014).

Macdonald won the 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction for *H is for Hawk* - the book—which also became a *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* best-seller—describes the year Macdonald spent training a Northern goshawk named Mabel after her father's death, and includes biographical material about the naturalist and writer T. H. White.

Macdonald also helped make the film "10 X Murmuration" with filmmaker Sarah Wood as part of a 2015 exhibition at the Brighton festival.

**Bibliography**

2016 Falcon, new edition
2014 H is for Hawk
2006 Falcon
2001 Shaler's Fish

**Awards**

2016 Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger, winner
2015 Thwaites Wainwright Prize, longlist
2015 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction, shortlist
2014 Duff Cooper Prize, shortlist
2014 Samuel Johnson Prize, winner
2014 Costa Book of the Year, winner

**Telegraph, 27 January 2015**

Helen Macdonald: H is for Hawk

'A soaring triumph'

By Christian House

"The hawk had filled the house with wildness as a bowl of lilies fills a house with scent. It was about to begin," writes Helen Macdonald in H Is for Hawk, a book filled with the elemental heft of hawks and the lingering bouquet of death. It opens with the sudden loss of Macdonald's father, a successful Fleet Street photojournalist, from a heart attack. In the wake of his death, Macdonald buys a goshawk, names it Mabel and begins the slow waltz of its training.

A historian at Cambridge, she has the countryside at her feet and the need to fill her time. Mabel in return needs endless supplies of chick meat and a reason to trust. When the bird emerges blinking and jittery from a box on a Scottish quay, her new owner is instantly bewitched. "Two enormous eyes. My heart jumps sideways. She is a conjuring trick," writes Macdonald. "A griffin from the pages of an illuminated bestiary."

Lay readers will soon realise that comparing a hawk with a falcon is akin to comparing the Beatles with the Stones. Goshawks are the bad boys of the sky and Mabel is Mick, Keith, Ronnie and Charlie all rolled into one furious flurry of feathers. Hawks are bigger and more feral than falcons and training one is no mean feat. The taming of Mabel is told in the fruity vocabulary of the falconer, a delightfully arcane lexicon. "Hawks don't wipe their beaks, they feak. When they defecate they mute," explains Macdonald. Her days are soon taken up with jesses (leather straps) and sails (wings).

From Gavin Maxwell's Ring of Bright Water to Richard Mabey's Nature Cure, there is a long literary tradition of paying tribute to the curative company of animals. And Macdonald knows only too well in whose wellingtons she walks, referencing the work of Peter Matthiessen and William Fiennes among many writers who have found their way back to happiness by muddy, paw-and-claw marked paths.

One predecessor stands out for her. T H White's 1951 study, The Goshawk, provided her with a childhood starting point for her obsession with these brooding birds. White – closet homosexual and sadomasochist – used falconry to flee his own character. "My reasons weren't White's," notes Macdonald, "but I was running just the same." Throughout her tale she refracts White's experiences into her own. "I have to write about him," she states, "because he was there." This delightful book is therefore a memoir of training a goshawk, a diary of grief and a peek inside the troubled mind of T H White.

Bereavement is shown in all its oddity. "It happens to everyone, but you feel it alone." A picture of her father fixes through her recollections. We learn that he discovered photography as a boy, and spent his adult weekends photographing Thames bridges: "Somewhere in the files of slides back at my mum's house is a complete photographic record of ways to cross the Thames from source to sea."

Macdonald is a "state-school kid born to parents who'd never gone to university, to whom Cambridge was the mysterious haunt of toffs and spies". She fears that by walking the faculty's grounds wielding a hawk she has become the college novelty. And yet Mabel proves an unlikely social lubricant. Joggers, shoppers and professors are all intrigued.

This book is a soaring triumph. It is a joy to follow Mabel and Macdonald's flight out of such disconsolate scenes as one settles into a new roost and the other gradually comes to realise that "hands are for other human hands to hold. They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks."

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/h-is-for-hawk-by-helen-macdonald-review-a-soaring-triumph/

**New York Times, 19 February 2015**

Helen Macdonald: H is for Hawk

By Vicky Constantine Croke

If birds are made of air, as the nature writer Sy Montgomery says, then writing a great bird book is a little like dusting for the fingerprints of a ghost. It calls for poetry and science, conjuring and evidence. In her breathtaking new book, "H Is for Hawk," winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize and the Costa Book Award, Helen Macdonald renders an indelible impression of a raptor's fierce essence — and her own — with words that mimic feathers, so impossibly pretty we don't notice their astonishing engineering.

The premise of her memoir is simple: Macdonald loses her bearings after her beloved father's sudden death. She retreats from the human world. She's a poet, historian and longtime falconer, and for complicated reasons, she seizes upon a strange yet sublime prescription for what ails her: She will raise and train a young goshawk, a cur of a bird to some, notoriously difficult to tame. Bigger, "bulkier, bloodier, deadlier, scarier," she says, than other hawks they are sometimes confused with.
Although "animal as emotional healer" is a familiar motif, Macdonald's journey clears its own path — messy, muddy and raw. Early on, she drives to Scotland from her home in Cambridge to pick up a captive-bred, 10-week-old, Czech-Finnish-German goshawk she's seen online. At the first glimpse of her bird, Macdonald's "heart jumps sideways." And so does the reader's, for here is a creature worth writing about: "A reptile. A fallen angel. A griffon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like gold falling through water."

Back home, the bird fills "the house with wildness as a bowl of lilies fills a house with scent." Fatherless mourner and baby hawk become acquainted. Macdonald grew up obsessed with birds of prey and later trained them, so she knows what to do and has all the necessary equipment: the tiny leather hood, as beautifully made, an observer says, as a Prada shoe; the jesses, or tethering straps; bells; and transmitters. The freezer is a morgue for dead chicks used to train and feed the hawk. Except for using devices that require a power source, Macdonald handles her bird much as a 15th-century falconer would.

The bird becomes Mabel, derived "from *amabilis*, meaning lovable, or dear," and she learns to fly to Macdonald's fist at the sound of a whistle: "There is a scratch of talons on wood, a flowering of feathers, one deep downstroke, the brief, heavy swing of talons brought up and into play and the dull *thud* as she hits my glove."

There are tearful misunderstandings and glorious steps forward. But Macdonald's progress is not as steady as her hawk's. Training proceeds, but not without an existential hitch. "While the steps were familiar," Macdonald writes, "the person taking them was not. I was in ruins. Some deep part of me was trying to rebuild itself, and its model was right there on my fist. The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief and numb to the hurts of human life."

Looking back at her mad mourning, she realizes a painful transformation is taking place: "What the mind does after losing one's father isn't just to pick new fathers from the world, but pick new selves to love them with."

Macdonald feels safe in the dark house, barricaded from the outside world, but knows she must go out for Mabel's sake — to the woods, where the goshawk's "long, barred tail feathers and short, broad wings" are perfectly suited for the speed and hairpin-turning ability necessary for aerial slalom in dense forest.

We get to know Mabel as her trainer does. Macdonald stays so close, and the house is so quiet when they are together that she can hear the bird blinking. The hawk's breath is like "pepper and musk and burned stone." Her preening sounds like a deck of cards being shuffled. Every mood can be read: Feathers held in tight is fear; when Mabel fluffs herself and shakes her feathers into place, she is content. We come to love the bird's "shaggy trousers and waggy tail," her "café au lait front streaked thickly with cocoa-colored teardrops," and even her formidable weapons — the "curved black beak" and the black talons.

Soon enough, Macdonald doesn't even consciously inventory the body language of her bird; instead she seems to just feel what Mabel feels. On a hunch, Macdonald even discovers a little bit of whimsy in this ultra-serious predator. She rolls up paper into a ball and hands it to Mabel. The hawk plays with it like a toy, eyes narrowed in "bird laughter."

That's not our image of hawks at all. And it's an important point to Macdonald, who worries, rightly, that generations of preconceived notions rob us of truly seeing some creatures as they really are. "Wild things are made from human histories," she writes.

This handler is determined to see her own hawk for who she really is, and, of course, she comes to see herself more clearly too. The two go further and further afield, and through scrapes, wounds and mishaps, Macdonald sheds something, changes, becomes something new — but not what she might have intended. She thinks she's becoming a hawk herself. Her identity has shifted enough so that when she slips out of her hawking clothes and into street clothes for social events, she feels she's in disguise.

Perhaps not so surprising for a woman who calls herself a "watcher," who grew up as an "invisible girl," who, like her father, a news photographer, felt more comfortable observing others than being seen. Her personal history, the history of falconry and historical and personal notions of identity and belonging surface as she aches for her lost father. She experiences vertigo and depression. She keeps denting her father's car, breaking dishes. Falconry with Mabel feels like an addiction, as dangerous as "if I'd taken a needle and shot myself with heroin."

And yet the hawk also helps her to remember what happiness feels like. "There was nothing that was such a salve to my grieving heart as the hawk returning," she writes. She and the hawk are "parts of each other," incomplete when separated. Macdonald notes: "I remember thinking of the passage in 'The Sword in the Stone' where a falconer took a goshawk back onto his own fist, 'reassuming him like a lame man putting on his accustomed wooden leg, after it had been lost.' "

Caring for Mabel revives Macdonald's interest in the author of the book, T. H. White. His memoir "The Goshawk" haunts her; she has a fascination, often reluctant and dark, with the writer and his inept, troubled and even cruel relationship with a goshawk he tried to tame.

There is a funny mingling of tame and wild in hawks. They can be bred and raised by humans, Macdonald points out, but they are not domesticated. I've brought a gloved fist underneath a trained hawk who was "mantling" a dead pigeon (covering it with his wings), and hissing at me with eyes blazing. It shocked me that he left the kill to hop on my novice's hand. And I've seen injured wild hawks being treated in veterinary clinics where the caregiver plunges a gloved hand into the cage and then pulls it out with a hawk on board. Imagine trying this with an injured tiger.

But those wild hawks are every bit as predatory as any big cat. When Mabel is deliberately dropped to a lower weight, her desire to kill, something falconers call yarak, ratchets up. The hunting is brutal. And Macdonald and Mabel are co-conspirators. They look for prey together, work in tandem on the release, and even share the killing and its spoils. Mabel brings down pheasants and rabbits, and she merrily begins eating them before they're dead. Macdonald steps in then, breaking the necks of Mabel's catches to hasten the end. As the hawk becomes tamer, she says, she herself grows wilder. Maybe she's gone too far on her journey. "Hands are for other human hands to hold," she writes. "They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks."

Her own hands, by now, are records, written in "thin white lines," of her months with Mabel, months of grief and healing. "One is from her talons when she'd been fractious with hunger; it feels like a warning made flesh. Another is a blackthorn rip from the time I'd pushed through a hedge to find the hawk I'd thought I'd lost. And there were other scars, too, but they were not visible. They were the ones she'd helped mend, not make."

In some traditions, hawks are considered spirit messengers to a world beyond, and Macdonald comes to understand that part of her bond with Mabel was her desire "to fly with the hawk to find my father; find him and bring him home." But as Mabel matures into a confident hunter, she brings Macdonald a different kind of discovery: that grace resides in the most unlikely places — and that moving forward means leaving some things behind.

https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/books/review/helen-macdonalds-h-is-for-hawk.html

**Washington Post, 17 March 2016**

What's next for Helen Macdonald, author of 'H is for Hawk'

By Sadie Dingfelder

Reeling from the death of her father, British author Helen Macdonald did something peculiar. She bought a goshawk, a massive, mysterious raptor with a reputation for being extremely difficult to train. For a year, the two of them stalked the English countryside together, hunting rabbits and eschewing human company. Macdonald isn't the first British writer to seek solace at the breast of a bird of prey. In the 1930s, T.H. White, the closeted author of "The Sword in the Stone," trained a goshawk in an attempt to tame his own sexuality. In Macdonald's stunning 2014 memoir, "H Is for Hawk," the author describes how her bird helped her find her way through the tangled forest of grief, while telling White's story in parallel. How do you follow up such a singular work? We asked Macdonald about that and more ahead of her talk Monday at Politics and Prose.

**It took you five years after your father's death to write 'H Is for Hawk." Was it hard to relive such a difficult time in your life?**

I had to get back into that state of mind that I was in, in that very dark but beautiful year. Sometimes I'd sit down just trying to remember what it was like. It was really quite hard and there were quite a few tears while I was writing. But by the time I came to writing, the person that was in the book wasn't really me anymore. She was this other person I had been, and I could treat her as a character. It was very freeing to have that distance, to write with what felt like objectivity.

**Did anything else surprising emerge as you wrote?**

There was far more T.H. White in it than I thought there would be. I began to be really haunted by this strange, sad and amazing character. He was a writer best known for "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Once and Future King" — these sort of Arthurian legend books. He also tried to train a goshawk himself in the 1930s and made quite a bad job of it. He wrote a book about it that I read when I was small, and I hated it. He didn't know what he was doing, and he was unconsciously pretty cruel to the poor bird. Trying to weave his story alongside mine was a really interesting formal challenge. Hopefully I'm a very different person from him, but I found that dual narrative really interesting.

**How did training a hawk, of all things, help you cope with your father's death?**

I wanted to be like a hawk, and the book traces this very strange psychological transference. It took a toll on my mental health at the time, but it seemed necessary. They are amazing animals. They come across as being very unlike us, very self-possessed, very powerful beings. But you can communicate with them, and that relationship between these two very different souls is what falconry is all about. And that's why I love it. Here you have a wild animal and you let it go completely free and it chooses to come back to you. It's an enormously emotional experience, and I treasure it.

**Do you have any hawks in your care now?**

I haven't got time to have a hawk right now. I do have a small, green parrot. People think of parrots as much more cuddly and friendly than hawks, which is true, but it's also much more vindictive. I've had more bites and more blood drawn by this parrot than I ever had with my goshawk. I love it to bits, though. It's a great companion.

**Will your next book also be about animals?**

I think it's going to pick up on a theme of "H Is for Hawk" — how we humans see the natural world. That's the most important subject there is, in these environmentally apocalyptic times. We think the wild is something out there, which we shouldn't touch. The spaces we live in are carefully policed as human-only spaces, where you're only allowed to keep a few kinds of animals. Of course, there are issues with people keeping wild animals, but I still think that contact with animals is a good thing. They teach you what it is to be human.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/wp/2016/03/17/whats-next-for-helen-macdonald-author-of-h-is-for-hawk/?utm_term=.07ba99075dae

**Guardian, 1 August 2014**

Helen Macdonald: 'I ran to the hawk because I was broken and grieving

The writer and naturalist talks to Patrick Barkham about grief, hunting, and breaking into the earnest, masculine world of nature writing

There are bees and butterflies but the midsummer skies above Thetford forest in East Anglia are bereft of birds. This sunny, tranquil scene bears no shadow of swooping danger, no hint of the goshawks that have once again made their home here after falling extinct across Britain more than a century ago. Then, suddenly, an enormous grey object materialises above the trees, roaring, bristling with weapons and menace.

"It's an F-15E," says Helen Macdonald almost admiringly, before returning to point out wasps' nests, old bomb craters and other intricate details of otherworldly Breckland. Macdonald's plane-spotting skills should not really be a surprise because the author of just-published *H Is for Hawk*, an already acclaimed account of her acquisition of a goshawk after the death of her father, is a strikingly unconventional polymath. A poet, historian, naturalist and illustrator, she has also worked as a professional falconer and has bred and trained hawks for Arab sheikhs.

The plane-spotting is derived from her father, Alisdair, a Fleet Street photographer from whom Macdonald inherited a questioning mind. She sees parallels between fighter jets and birds of prey. "That sense of fear and awe and being problematic in terms of being involved in death is very much the same feeling people get when they see hawks. It's mesmerising."

*H Is for Hawk*, her first book aside from an academic history of falconry, tells of her father's sudden death and how a grieving and virtually homeless, jobless and relationshipless Macdonald bought a young goshawk, named it Mabel and took it hunting. If this sounds like a pastoral study of a nature cure, it isn't. One goshawk is "as muscled as a pit bull, and intimidating as hell … so wild and spooky and reptilian," writes Macdonald; another is "like a Victorian melodrama". And the idea that embracing wildness will soothe human trauma is "a beguiling but dangerous lie," she writes in a book that is a dark, pacy and witty challenge to conventional nature writing. It has attracted some impressive endorsements from Andrew Motion and Mark Haddon, but praise makes Macdonald squirm. "Stop! I feel like a slug that has had salt put on it," she says when I mention the vivid poetry of her writing.
Macdonald, "a horribly precocious reader" who read TH White's *The Goshawk*when she was eight, has been obsessed with birds since "before I can remember". Her journalist mother was washing the floor when Macdonald explained in great detail "something about how goshawks were very popular in German falconry. I vividly remember her saying, 'That's very interesting' as she scrubbed. They never said, 'Oh shut up Helen, go and do something else.' I wince when I think about it. I was so obsessive and unaware of other people."

She trained her first hawk, a kestrel called Amy, when she was 13, before keeping merlins – like Catherine the Great. While contemporaries traipsed into City jobs after Cambridge, Macdonald went off to breed falcons for an organisation aiming to save endangered wild populations by supplying sheikhs in Gulf states with captive-bred birds. Later, she returned to Cambridge where she failed to finish her PhD, did some teaching and was then struck down with depression in 2007 when her father died.

Macdonald's response to bereavement – buying a goshawk and living with it for 24 hours a day in urban Cambridge – is unusual. "I didn't feel I had any choice," she says. "I started dreaming about goshawks and I knew I really wanted to train them and fly them. It was the only certain thing in my life." She realised her solitary life with Mabel might make an interesting book but could not write it for nearly seven years. "It needed that distance. A lot of people have said they are really surprised how open and honest it is about grief. When I started it, I wasn't so confessional but it didn't work. I realised I had to be truthful about what happened."

During her depression, Macdonald came to feel that the hawk was part of her; she was more hawk than human. "It was massively strange, that empathy, because I didn't want to be me any more," she says now. She wrote: "I was nervous, highly strung, paranoid, prone to fits of terror and rage; I ate greedily or didn't eat at all; I fled from society." Her comparison is interesting – 19th-century falconers saw these magnificent birds as hysterical women who needed to be tamed. The rich jargon of falconry reflects this: to train a hawk is "to man" it. As Macdonald reveals in her examination of the controversial cultural history of hawks (she doesn't shy away from discussing their association with Nazism), falconry has long been a male preserve, suffused with myths of masculinity and conquest. "It was a massively male sport and that persisted until the 1950s and 60s," she says. "But if you look further back, to 13th and 14th century Europe, women were renowned for their falconry skills."

Training a hawk is arduous, requiring patience, attention to detail and an inner calm: so do women make better falconers? She is wary of such generalisation. "People say women are very good at nurturing hawks because they have babies. It's nonsense. There are good falconers and bad falconers. There's nothing essential about women that makes them better or worse." And yet there is a lovely moment in *H Is for Hawk* where she acknowledges her own maternal feelings when she helps Mabel pluck the first ever pheasant she has killed in the wild. "It was very raw and strange, a coming of age moment, a first day at school moment," she says. "Maybe guys feel paternal when their falcons catch something."

Hawks have been stalwart companions of the dispossessed in literature. "*Kes* is the best example," says Macdonald. "This sense of falconry only being undertaken by the rich and privileged comes from the 19th-century tradition and it is no longer true. I ran to the hawk because I was broken and grieving." Another troubled outsider who ran to the hawk was White, best known for his Arthurian legend, *The Once and Future King*. Alongside JA Baker's *The Peregrine* and contemporary nature writing such as Tim Dee's *The Running Sky*, White's *The Goshawk* is a huge influence on Macdonald and she delves deeply into his celebrated tale of his ill-fated attempt to train a goshawk. She feels sorry for White, whose bombastic exterior hid a damaged "lost soul" who suppressed his homosexuality. "He couldn't be himself, so he wanted to associate with the hawk because it was all the things he wanted to be – powerful, sadistic," she believes. But trying to civilise his hawk turned out to be just another "tragic" form of repressing himself.

Although Macdonald emerges as a far better falconer than White, she says her struggles with Mabel were another consequence of grief. "I felt like a new person. I didn't know who I was any more. I had to relearn all the expertise I'd learned over the years. I needed to feel like a novice, like I was starting again." Nevertheless, she forms a profound

understanding of Mabel as she watches her play, as well as commit comically illegal acts on shooting estates near Cambridge.

If Macdonald confronts falconry stereotypes, then her writing is also a challenge to earnest nature writing. The American writer David Gessner has discussed how "you're not allowed to swear in nature writing and you're not allowed to be funny. It's all very quiet and reserved," she says. "So my book has got brand names and jokes." And plenty of moments were naturally comic, such as when she pursued Mabel into the gardens of a grand home and was shouted at from a window by a woman dressed in a "recreational" maid's outfit, whose mid-afternoon shenanigans she had interrupted.

Contemporary nature writing is often seen as rather blokey, despite a plethora of talented writers including Sara Maitland, Esther Woolfson and the "fantastic" Kathleen Jamie. "The sense of objectivity and authority that has been a feature of writing about nature since the 19th century is quite gendered. Perhaps inhabiting the role of an expert has been traditionally more difficult for women," suggests Macdonald. But she feels her own more reflexive, subjective approach may result from grief rather than gender. "I found it very hard to inhabit that position of objectivity but that was more to do with me being grief-stricken than being a woman."
*H Is for Hawk* could challenge some bird-loving readers too. Macdonald has been quizzed about bloodlust at dinner parties, where people have glibly theorised that her falconry was about her destroying the world, one piece at a time, after the death of her father. For her, however, hunting with Mabel created a deeper connection with nature than birdwatching. "It was a very visceral inside-the-landscape feeling," she says. "When you look through binoculars it is as if the bird is in a field guide, a cut-out image. There's no context. Because I wasn't using binoculars with the hawk I started to see birds in a different way. You come to know them by how they behave rather than look – the way linnets move about makes them look like musical notation."

Organisations such as the League Against Cruel Sports want to ban falconry, and many people disapprove of a big hawk being trained to kill pheasants and rabbits (one of the goshawk's old French names is "cuisinier" because it can catch such a wide range of prey). "It's unusual to see animal death up close. I was responsible for these [deaths] because I had the hawk, but people who eat meat are responsible for the deaths they cause. They just don't see it," says Macdonald. Was she troubled by using a wild bird for sport? "It didn't feel like sport. It was nothing like sport. It was an entirely natural phenomenon, only I was there. I'm probably a bit unfashionable in this regard, but I have this utopian notion that if you have close personal contact with wild animals you experience that animal with a wonderment and you feel a responsibility and a love for it, which is what drives proper conservation."
Macdonald's close identification with her hawk has eased in recent years and eventually she gave Mabel away to assist a breeding programme. Sadly, the bird died suddenly last winter; Macdonald keeps her unique identifying ring in her jewellery box.

Today she is definitely more human than hawk. "I'm very changed but I don't know how much of that was to do with the bird and how much was to do with loss. Confronting mortality was something I did with the goshawk on a daily basis and that was very instructive," she says. "As I got more cheerful, that sense of invisible connection, of being two parts of the same organism, faded. It became very obvious that I wasn't a hawk and the hawk wasn't me, but for a while it was hard to tell the two apart."

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/01/helen-macdonald-interview-hawk-grief

**Bookbrouse**

An interview with Helen Macdonald

Helen Macdonald talks about her memoir *H is for Hawk*, the complicated relationship between instinct and training, dealing with grief, experiencing wilderness and much else

Julie Goldberg, on behalf of the Creative Writing at The New School and the NBCC, interviewed Helen Macdonal about her book H Is for Hawk(Grove Press), which is among the final five selections in the category of Autobiography for the 2015 NBCC Awards.

Julie Goldberg: Part of the magic of H is for Hawk is how alive your goshawk Mabel becomes—in her body and moods, in her power and playfulness. What was it like to write about her, years later, in such detail?

Helen Macdonald: Writing about her was much easier than writing about my father's death, my family, or myself! I can recall my time with her that year with crystalline clarity. Grief does strange things to the workings of memory. Back then I wanted to assume her rapturous, wordless, hawkish mind, and I tried, as I wrote, to match my style to that imagined subjectivity. Short sentences to capture her world as a series of fleeting, present moments; lyrical

passages to suggest the strangeness of the landscape through the eyes of a hawk. I edited the hell out of most of the prose, but the sections about the hawk — what she was like, how she flew and hunted — they were written fast and hardly edited at all. I'm very sad to say Mabel died suddenly a few years ago of a fluke fungal infection called Aspergillosis that's been the bane of goshawkers for centuries and kills many wild hawks too. She's buried on one of the hillsides over which she used to fly. I miss her so much.

JG: The complicated relationship between instinct and training/social conditioning is something you explore throughout the book. Do you think the impulse to pour yourself into the hawk after your father's death came in part from having learned and internalized older narratives of "running to the wild to escape... grief and sorrow," or do you and the subjects of those stories share the same innate drive?

HM: When you train a hawk you're forced to think deeply about the differences between innate and learned behavior, positive and negative reinforcement, and consider conditioning in both a physical and psychological sense. But not just in the hawk—in yourself also. Hawk-training is not a one-way process. Partly I wanted a goshawk because I knew how hard it would be for me; they're famed for their fearful nature as much as for their predatory power. Taming it would be a challenge and a deep distraction from grief. Another reason was T.H. White's book The Goshawk. Even in my childhood I saw that it was about a man running away from something to train a hawk. I didn't know what he was running from, back then, but that trajectory, that attempt at a salve or cure—it stuck with me. It was powerful, even at an early age, because unconsciously I'd already bought into that narrative about running to the wild to heal yourself, and I think the same can be said for the subjects of those other, older stories in the book. I'm wary of explanations that see that drive as innate. I think it rests on a palimpsest of historically and culturally-shaped notions of what the natural world is, what 'wild' is, and what we need from it. On a related note, there's an increasingly common argument that we should interact with the natural world because it makes us feel happy, or has other kinds of therapeutic value. I'm scared of a version of nature that is to be valued primarily for its effect on our mood. But it is true that being out there, out in the wind and rain and sun, surrounded by things that are not you: it can change your perspective on yourself and your place in the world.

JG: Your experience training Mabel and T.H. White's experience training his hawk Gos were (fortunately) very different, as were the personal struggles played out through your relationships with your hawks. Why did you choose to intersperse his narrative so completely and seamlessly with your own?

HM: White's story was always going to be part of the book because it was part of mine. I'd read The Goshawk as a child and over and over again as I trained and flew Mabel. But it wasn't until I read through White's unpublished journals, notebooks, letters and manuscripts that I began to see the book needed more of him. I wanted to pleat his story together with mine partly because I wanted the book to have more than one voice; wanted to pull away from that seamless, smooth and expert voice of the old-school nature writer, which tends to erase alternative ways of seeing, writing, or thinking about the natural world. But mostly I wanted his story to work in counterpoint to mine because both of us made the same mistake. TH White and I used real hawks as a mirror of our imagined selves. White saw the hawk as several different warring versions of himself—something to be pitied, something to fight against, to sabotage, to try and love. I saw Mabel as everything I wanted to be—solitary, self-possessed, powerful, free from human hurts and grief. Both stories were the same story, despite the manifest differences between me and White: together I hoped they would work as an extended meditation on how, when we are talking about nature, we are usually talking about ourselves.

JG: At what point did you know that you wanted to write about Mabel and your experience after your father's death? Did you have a sense of the scale and breadth of the ideas you wanted to explore, or did that grow through the writing process?

HM: Towards the end of that first year with Mabel I began to see what had happened as a story. Not necessarily one that'd be written down, but something that felt older and much bigger than a story dealing merely with the day to day life of a miserable woman and a bird. Years passed before I could think about it being a book. I needed to gain emotional distance, couldn't write the character of my past self until she felt quite far away, though I could perfectly remember how she felt and thought and spoke. There was a detailed chapter breakdown in my book proposal, but things didn't go according to that careful plan. The book started to push back as it was written. Many things I thought would be in the book I had to throw out—one long chapter about a literary party in London in the depths of my hawkish depression, for example. Things I never expected to be in the book insisted they should be there; particular repeating lines, thoughts, themes. I spent a lot of time working on the formal aspects of the book, but at the same time I began to think of the writing process as analogous to wrangling a half-tamed animal. It's an encounter with something you have to listen to very attentively, that may or may not work with you on any given day, that will show you things you didn't expect or had ever thought of before.

JG: You write that the rarer wild animals become in our lives, the fewer meanings they can hold or resist. And through your relationship with Mabel, you show how something uniquely wonderful and complex can emerge when humans engage with the wild. How can readers (who may not be ready for goshawks of their own) more productively

interact with or participate in wildness? To protect the wild world, do you think we need to see ourselves as outside it?

HM: Haha! I absolutely do not recommend goshawks. Falconry's an exacting art that requires enormous dedication and a lot of free time. Even after a long apprenticeship with an expert falconer, a goshawk is one of the worst birds to start your falconry career with. But you don't need a goshawk to encounter wildness. It is there in anything that is not human, anything self-willed, working according to its own motives. You can feel wild by watching a spider, legs tensed against silk across your bathroom window. There is a wildness in the healthy functioning of biodiverse ecological systems, and there is a different wildness that comes from understanding that the world is full of things that aren't us. One of my favorite poets, the late RF Langley, wrote about how meaning can come from the contemplation of the tiniest things in this way: the wings of a grass moth furled like a cigar on an English pub toilet wall, for example. Perhaps you could go outside and look for something very small and alive, an insect of some kind, a thrip or aphid, and regard it very closely, with the greatest attention, for a very long time. That kind of natural-historical observation can literally make the world wonderful. Sometimes I think that being alive to the mystery of a moth on a wall is quietism in the face of environmental disaster. But I hope not. I hope that wonder is what drives the fire to save things that are not us. Of course we are part of the natural world, though we are fast doing our best to destroy it. It's why I worry that hands-off is not always the best way to preserve nature. Why would anyone fight to save something if they have no knowledge of it and no emotional tie to it?

JG: Now, a year and half after H is for Hawk was first published, what has most surprised you about the response you've received from readers?

HM: I've had many letters from people telling me that H is for Hawk reminded them of how it feels to be alone at home with a new baby. That astonished me. But it makes such perfect sense. You're responsible for this infinitely precious thing. It doesn't speak. You're not sure if you're meeting all its needs. Sometimes you get anxious, worry that you're doing everything wrong, that somehow you might break it, cause it harm by mistake. And of course, it is an all-consuming and life-changing relationship. Those parallels surprised me a lot, and the letters moved me a great deal. (But I can guarantee that goshawks are far better than babies at flying over wintry hillsides and catching you rabbits for dinner).

https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/2599/helen-macdonald

LITERATURHAUS MÜNCHEN

BRITISH COUNCIL UK/DE 2018

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Kunst und Natur

# British Council Nature Writing Seminar
# Thursday 7 – Saturday 9 June 2018
# Literaturhaus München and Stiftung Nantesbuch

The poet **Helen Mort** was born in Sheffield in 1985, and grew up in Chesterfield, Derbyshire. She was awarded a double first for her bachelor's degree in Social and Political Sciences at Christ's College, Cambridge in 2006, and alongside her subsequent literary activities completed an interdisciplinary PhD project (in English and Neuroscience) at the University of Sheffield.

Mort has published two pamphlets with tall-lighthouse, *the shape of every box* (2007) and *a pint for the ghost* (2009), and *Lie of the Land* (2011) for the Wordsworth Trust (where, in 2010, she was appointed the youngest ever poet in residence). Her first full-length collection, *Division Street*, which was published by Chatto & Windus in 2013, was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Costa Prize, and won the Fenton Aldeburgh First Collection Prize.

These accolades are only the latest in a string of prizes that her work has collected in her short career. Mort has received the Foyle Young Poet of the Year award five times (and now acts as one of its judges). In 2007, she received the Eric Gregory Award from the Society of Authors, and the following year, she won the Manchester Young Poet Prize.

Mort was crowned as Derbyshire's fifth poet laureate in 2013, serving a two-year term. In 2014, she was named as one of the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation poets, a list that appears only every ten years. She is currently the Douglas Caster Cultural Fellow in the School of English at the University of Leeds.

## Bibliography

2018 Black Car Burning (expected March 2019)
2016 No Map Could Show Them
2013 Division Street
2011 Lie of the Land
2009 a pint for the ghost
2007 the shape of every box

## Awards

2013 Fenton Aldeburgh First Collection Prize
2013 Shortlisted: TS Eliot Prize
2008 Manchester Young Poet Prize
2007 Eric Gregory Award

**Huffington Post, 7 June 2016**

Helen Mort: No Map Could Show Them

By Phil Brown

*"Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison."*
*Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 1796*

The title of Helen Mort's *No Map Could Show Them* evokes the opening poemin one of the most important collections published since the Second World War. Elizabeth Bishop's question, 'Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their own colours?', is a key reference point for much of this collection, as Mort considers the female mountaineers of history and how they have gone beyond their 'assigned' paths. I wonder if Mort is deliberately putting herself at a perpendicular intersection with Bishop's *North and South* in the line 'Due west, due east, you are / x-marks-the-spot'.
The first half of the collection is a meditation on the trailblazing female climbers of the 19th and early 20th Century, and the social circumstances which made their pursuit all the more difficult. The ironic 'An Easy Day for a Lady' bears the epigraph from Etienne Bruhl:

*'The Grepon has disappeared. Of course, there are still some rocks standing there, but as a climb it no longer exists. Now that it has been done by two women alone, no self-respecting man can undertake it.'*

In the poems which follow, Mort often uses pronouns to emphasise conflict between the female climbers and the male hegemony they are flouting; "Where you made ways, / we will unmake" ('An Easy Day for a Lady') and "Take off the clothes they want to keep you in" ('How to Dress').
The men who the speakers encounter on the mountains are often characterised as insufferable mansplainers, as we see in 'Miss Jemima's Swiss Journal': 'I'll be devastating in my notebooks / reserve my best scorn / for the tour guide // with his winter field of hair', and the sardonic 'Ode to Bob' in which the speaker celebrates an imaginary male climber who could never possibly exist:
"He never steals the morning / with a story of a pitch he climbed / one handed, wearing boxing gloves ... For, when he has advice / he will not offer it // and when we have advice / he takes no heed."
This strand of post-Duffy, witty millennial feminism reaches its darkly humorous peak in poems such as the Dandy fan-fiction piece, 'Beryl the Peril':

*"In my badly-drawn version, / Beryl is getting shit-faced / with Desperate Dan, / matching him / with every dripping forkful / of cow pie."*

and then in poems like 'My Diet', and 'Difficult' which adopt the language of lifestyle magazines and web-forums in ways which amuse while they shock:

*"In London, it's said you're never more than 6 feet / from a difficult woman. Have you or a colleague / had a difficult woman in the last 6 months? If so, you may be entitled to compensation."*

But all humour subsides by the time we reach 'Rachel in Attercliffe', a sonnet spoken by a prostitute to the partners of the men who pay her for sex on Boxing Day. As 'Your dad, your boyfriend nips out for a beer / then indicates down Derek Dooley Way', the speaker of the poem finds ways to reconcile the morality behind her work. 'Sometimes, I say I work in mental health' she writes, and then the final, crushing couplet: 'I like to think there's hospital, a recently-dead wife. / I like to think I'm saving someone's life.'

An interesting shift occurs in the collection after this poem, in the sense that the speakers in the final third of *No Map Could Show Them* are no longer distracted and obstructed by male figures and possess the freedom, the altitude perhaps, to engage with the sublimity of their environment on their own terms. As a reader, it is hard not to breathe a sigh of relief when we get to a poem like 'Hathersage' towards the end of the collection, in which the speaker is allowed the freedom to engage with the environment through their own, unfiltered lens:

*"It's hard to say a thing simply, / but here the sun manages it, / a flashbulb through the branches / taking your photograph / all the way out of town."*

*No Map Could Show Them* is a highly intelligent, yet very accessible collection and an interesting addition to the ongoing discussion of where our culture is with gender identity. In a zeitgeist which celebrates Jennifer Lawrence's approach to femininity, the *Sufragette* movie and the *#likeagirl* campaign, there is something which feels very necessary about this collection and there are moments throughout where it feels like a worthy successor to *The Feminine Gospels* and *The World's Wife*.

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/phil-brown/no-map-could-show-them_b_10319208.html

**The London Magazine, 20 June 2016**

Helen Mort: No Map Could Show Them

By Isabel Galleymore

*No Map Could Show Them,* Mort's second collection, explores the narratives of Victorian and modern women –mountaineers, campaigners, runners – and considers, more broadly, the marks, narratives and pathways we leave, or don't leave, behind us. The opening poem, 'Mountain', serves as an introduction in which geology meets female body: 'Your stomach is a boulder. /To hold you up, your legs grow stony too.' This 'you' takes on a surprisingly urban quality in the couplets that follow:

You buy coffee,
run board meetings where no one says

you're made of scree
but above your head, their talk is weather

This simple comparison is made more interesting by the way it seems to speak to the subject of a woman in a (perhaps male-dominated) workplace. There's a tension here between a confident persona who appears in charge, and a vulnerable, crumbling interior. Yet, these tensions seem less relevant as Mort moves away from such particular detail and creates further metaphors between the body and the mountain – 'Your feet could hold you here/forever but your sides/are crumbling, and when you speak/your words are rockfall'.

These metaphors between mountain and body repeat themselves in the opening pages of the collection. 'How to Dress' describes 'your mouth becoming fissured/and your ankles malachite'. Given that Mort's collection draws attention to overlooked female mountaineers, these metaphors serve to emphasise the closeness, the intimacy of woman and mountain. This is refreshing in the way it takes ownership of an otherwise male 'ruggedness' usually associated with such landscapes. Yet, given that Mort is aware these mountains have claimed lives – 'Above Cromford' alludes to Alison Hargreaves' death descending from K2 – there's an issue as to whether these metaphors underplay the power and scale of the landscape and assume likeness where there's striking difference.

A more risky, vertiginous sense of the landscape, and of the mountaineer's place within it, is afforded in 'Miss Jemima's Swiss Journal'. Written 'After Jemima Morrell and her tour of the Alps, 1863' Mort takes her perspective:

I could stand in my blue dress
beneath the falls
at Lauterbrunnen, higher
than all society, a teardrop
if you only saw me
from the sky.

This stunning juxtaposition of scale and its inversion of height and depth echoes Mort's epigraph to the collection by Antonio Porchia: 'Suffering is above, not below. And everyone thinks that suffering is below. And everyone wants to rise'. Whilst Mort's collection is clearly seeking to reverse our presumptions about gender and landscape, as a whole it often seems less evocative of Porchia's stark aphorism and more committed to exploring liminal states. 'The Fear' and its depicted paralysis,

sourced from the speaker's anxiety and self-consciousness, is generated through carefully devised repetition:
I worried about the party and fear
was a drink, a pale flute pushed into my hand. I worried about drink, so fear
leaked through the seams of my clothes, grew into a stain on my wool coat

Worries accrue into a dense prose poem that concludes 'fear is a pledge, a lifelong IOU, a signature that / looks like this'. Given its line lengths, the poem is the only one in the book to be printed lengthwise: the signature is bulky, unwieldy, unstoppable. Unlike most of the poems in this collection 'The Fear' isn't framed as a mountaineering-themed poem and whilst it doesn't quite mirror the vertiginous quality of 'Miss Jemima's Swiss Journal', there's certainly a dizzying quality to the way each worry sparks another and another.

It seems that when Mort lessens her grip on the central concept of the collection, a more subtly crafted and conceptual poetry appears. In 'The Old Dungeon Ghyll', Mort writes of a bird entering the building and 'the pub divided: those who tried to swoop for it/and others, too afraid to move'. A second sestet parallels this juxtaposition of confidence and fear:

Behind us was the wooden table, scored with signatures
where I once tried to carve my name
and nicked my wrist, the penknife shaking
till the barman took my hand:
*If you have to leave a mark, don't make it shit.*
I tried again, half meaning it.

The careful pace of this narrative and Mort's restrained use of rhyme effectively create a rhythm that echoes the uncertainty and reluctance depicted in the poem. Whilst there's no reference to mountaineering here, 'The Old Dungeon Ghyll' works metaphorically in light of the collection's central (and paradoxical) narrative – of the astonishing feats of women mountaineers and their disappearance from history. Throughout, Mort returns to the motif of making, marking and scoring as a way of talking about the routes and paths women have taken. 'An Easy Day for a Lady' makes this parallel clear. With the epigraph stating that 'Now that it [the Grepon, a mountain] has been done by two women alone, no self-respecting man can undertake it', Mort writes 'we are magicians of the Alps –/we make the routes we follow/disappear' and 'Where you made ways,/we will unmake'. There's some confusion as to what nature makes of this: the forest 'curls into a fist' and the ground 'retracts its hand'. When the poem draws attention to a female challenge of the male ego, of man's presumed territory, it's unclear why nature appears complicit. This would seem parodic if the poem wasn't so sincere.

Uncomfortable sexist tension comes to the forefront of poems that explore more contemporary contexts. 'Difficult', with an epigraph from the AskMen website, adapts the list form to write on 'difficult women':

Difficult women don't care about what time it is, they're
crowding the bus stop with their difficult bodies,
refusing to budge for the light, or in the parks,
dragging their difficulty behind them like a fat dog

Likewise, 'Skirt', a found poem drawn from Wikipedia and an online forum, exposes what, from their awkwardness, seem to be authentic, unedited forum comments with explanatory notes. Of men eyeballing women's bodies in summer clothes:

*I know we enjoy it*
*however it ruins our summer*
*and I am tired, you can't look at their face*

A more masculine look
including flattened breasts and hips
short hairstyles like the Marcel Wave, the Eton Crop.

When Mort focuses upon the physicality of the female body and takes a more personal perspective the poems become suddenly surprising, affecting. Writing on Kathrine Switzer, who in 1967 (as the Notes explain) 'ran the Boston Marathon, a race only open to men', Mort opens

If I run too far, too quickly, my breasts
will drop to my kneecaps and my uterus will fall out.

My light hair will grow heavy,
My hips will drag along the floor

Surreal humour and a darkly ominous tone – all achieved through a lightness of touch – make these poems lift off the page. 'What the papers said', included in Mort's 'Big Lil' sequence, demonstrates a similar ability. Explained in the notes, Big Lil (or Lillian Bilocca) battled to change safety legislation on board fishing trawlers, but was often mocked.

Lil is meeting Harold Wilson next week
and, at 17 stone, she's bound to make an impact.
The 17-stone Hull woman has called for a reform
of fishing laws in her distinctive Yorkshire accent,
Standing at 17 stone and 5 foot 5.

The repetition of '17 stone' continues throughout the poem. In this sequence, Mort not only manages to return a presence to a woman who 'sank as if I never swam at all', but also manages to provoke thought on contemporary gender issues – the fact that a woman's significant contribution is still frequently devalued through irrelevant comment upon her appearance. Mort's *No Map Could Show Them* is an important book in the way it embraces a range of female narratives. Mort looks at fearlessness *and* fear, strength *and* weakness, not settling for a simpler story, but engaging with a variety of perspectives over time. Whilst questions might be raised over Mort's treatment of the landscape as an overly simplistic background to the mountaineers she focuses upon, Mort clearly succeeds in drawing attention to neglected female figures obviously deserving of greater recognition in a sensitive and engaging manner.

https://www.thelondonmagazine.org/no-map-show-helen-mort/

**London Review of Books**

Helen Mort on Poetry and Prose

By Helen Mort

The single thing I get asked most often at readings and other events is this: what makes poetry distinct from prose? It's an enduring question because it's a good one. Poetry seems so elusive to define it's tempting to explain it in terms of what it isn't, setting it in opposition to novels, short stories, creative non-fiction and other prose forms. As **Mimi Khalvati** puts it, poetry is about line breaks - the *sine qua non* of free verse. But even then the boundaries blur. What about prose poems? What about prose that we might deem 'poetic', without ever stopping to interrogate that word?

I'll never be able to answer that question satisfactorily. But I can talk about other things: what feels different about writing poetry and writing prose, why so many of my ideas turn into poems before they've had a chance to become anything else. Over the past year or so, I've been absorbed by two parallel writing projects – a second collection of poems and a first novel. There are thematic similarities between the two. Both explore trust and risk in the context of rock climbing, both feature female protagonists, both draw on my own experience. But sitting down to write my novel feels like a very different experience from the way I write so many of my poems – on the move, running or walking with a line in my head. For me, poetry is drawn from movement while prose happens when I'm still, centred and thoughtful. For me, poetry is about whittling a thought down, paring it back to its essence. Prose is about building something up, layer by layer, line by line.

Already, I'm tripping myself up: I might have written most of my novel at a desk, but I lived with the characters so long I carried them with me wherever I went, listened to them talk while I drove or sat on trains or walked through Leeds early in the morning, leaning into the rain.

I loved writing the first draft of my novel and felt bereft when it was finished. So I ask myself other questions: why does poetry always come first and last? Why do most of my ideas have line breaks in them? Why do my thoughts get shaped by a rhythm I associate with poems?

Watching *Amy* recently – the heartbreaking documentary about the life of Amy Winehouse – I was struck by her words in an early interview: "I don't think I'm going to be famous… I don't think I could handle it. I'd probably go mad." Her words seemed hauntingly prescient as the film unfolded, dramatising the conflict Amy felt between writing songs, staying true to her art form, and the commercial pressures and obligations of the music industry. One of the reasons Amy gave for her logic ("I don't think I'm going to be famous") was that she was a jazz singer. She seemed to suggest that her medium was always going to be appreciated by the few rather than the many.

I think there's a strange link to our assumptions about poetry here, and it gives poets a kind of freedom. If you're a prose writer, fame is a distant but not impossible idea; some novelists get their books turned into films, or aspire to huge sales figures. Poetry books don't usually get the same kind of coverage: engagement with them tends to be deep rather than broad. That doesn't mean that poets don't write with large audiences in mind (indeed, the work itself might aspire towards the universal). But poets don't usually become famous in their lifetimes – it's a joke that gets thrown about… the most famous poets are dead ones. Something about that knowledge can turn your attention inward, I think, and it can make you feel incredibly free when you write. Whatever the differences and the reasons for them, I've enjoyed expressing myself through poetry and prose over the last twelve months, finding I could write one when I wasn't in the mood for the other. Long may the unexplained parallels continue.

https://www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/blog/2015/8/helen-mort-on-poetry-and-prose

**Granta**

Helen Mort: Interview
Helen Mort & Rachel Allen

Helen Mort's first collection, *Division Street*, is published by Chatto & Windus. She has published two pamphlets with tall-lighthouse press, *the shape of every box* and *a pint for the ghost*. She is a five-times winner of the Foyle Young Poets award and in 2010, she became the youngest ever poet in residence at The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere. Here, she talks about her writing process and poetry and interconnectedness.

*RA: Hauntings, in the form of ghosts (your first pamphlet is called 'a pint for the ghost'), near misses (as in the collection's title poem) and glimpsed epiphanies appear throughout the collection. Where does this interest stem from for you?*

HM: I think poetry itself is a kind of haunting for me. That's how poems start – I'm visited by an idea that won't go away and I often carry it around for months. The shapes of poems seem to bother me. And like the glimpses you describe, they always stay somewhere just out of reach. The best poem is always the one you're nearly-but-not-quite writing.

*You write on your blog about the idea of apophenia: the linking of phenomena, and the idea of 'pretended' and 'real' illocutionary acts. Are these hauntings an extension of this interest – a haunting less as spectre or vision but as a connection between the haunted thing and the thing that haunts?*

I think poets are often people who are obsessed with connecting things. It's almost superstitious, that kind of noticing. I often wish I saw the world as somewhere less interconnected, really. John Burnside writes beautifully about these things in his autobiography *Waking Up in Toytown* and, elsewhere, he's described how he suffers from what he calls a 'nostalgia for the present', never quite being able to occupy the moment you're in, perhaps because you're always thinking about how you could write about it. Making connections. I think the ideas he explores in both his prose and his poetry have really influenced me.

*The narrative voice and characters your collection portrays are enigmatic. It feels as though we are given a glimpse at the side of a character in darkness – you illuminate that side. The collection feels like an assembly of characters, each attached to a memory, or fleeting dialogue, or a feeling. How did it feel to create these characters – either known to you, or invented – and know how much of them to give away, and how to colour them?*

Someone pointed out to me years ago that I'm often addressing a 'you' in my poems and its true, I am. I'm always writing to someone else, but that person isn't so much a real 'you', a person drawn from my own life, but more an amalgam of different people I've known. Perhaps it just seems enigmatic because that person isn't fully realized! I think there's something seductive and liberating about the way you can create shadowy characters in a poem. The people I imagine in my work are often like those faces you see in a crowd and convince yourself it's someone you know, someone dear to you

perhaps, only to draw in close and find that it's a stranger after all. But of course, strangers are just people you're yet to meet. To quote John Burnside again: 'Any first meeting is the occasion for a romance that might last a lifetime.'

*Could you talk a little about your PhD on metaphor, contemporary poetry and the influence of neuroscience?*

There's been a lot of interest recently in how cognitive science can enhance our understanding of the ways in which we read literature. I was interested in the converse – what poetry can say to neuroscience. It strikes me that, in their preoccupation with consciousness and what makes us uniquely human, neuroscientists and poets are often concerned with the same philosophical questions, even though they address them in different ways. In particular, I got interested in Norman MacCaig and how his work challenges what he sees as language's inadequacies, particularly in relation to metaphor – he's interested in the gap between what we perceive and what we express. I think that's a gap that obsesses a lot of writers actually. I think we write because, at heart, we think we're actually quite inarticulate people. Or because we're aware of language's limitations.

*A number of the poems in the collection focuses on the aftermath of the miner's strikes in the North in the 1980's, especially the longer poem in the middle of the collection, 'Scab'. What was it like to write a difficult and recent history like this into a poem?*

It took me a long time to get round to writing 'Scab' because I was worried about how to approach it – as someone who was hardly born at the time of the strike, I felt in some ways I wasn't qualified to say anything about it. But I really wanted to. I'd always been aware when I was growing up of the impact the strike had had on local communities, and I'd recently read David Peace's powerful novel *GB:84* on that theme. To return to that idea of connection, a lot of my ideas for poems get carried around for a long time until something completely different connects with the original thought. So, in this case, I could only write 'Scab' when I'd figured out what my connection with it really was, why it bothered me so much. And that centred around experiences at Cambridge University, the idea of having crossed an invisible picket line. I had to come at it a bit slant.

*What are you reading at the moment?*

I've just been reading everything the American poet D. Nurkse has ever written, because I think he's a wonderful writer. His poems certainly have that haunted quality you mentioned earlier – they're incredibly atmospheric. Apart from that, I always have a novel on the go and I recently finished M. John Harrison's brilliant novel *Climbers*. As a rock climber myself, it really rings true and there are some sublime passages of prose.

https://granta.com/interview-helen-mort/

**Telegraph, 14 January 2014**

Helen Mort: poetry is like trying on a hat

Helen Mort is the rising star of British poetry. Charlotte Runcie talks to her about Margaret Thatcher, climbing, and being shortlisted for the T S Eliot prize

By Charlotte Runcie

Helen Mort has just run a race. She tells me this as she pours two mugs of tea in the kitchen of her cottage in the Peak District, on the first foggy Saturday of 2014. She is full of energy.
The morning's 5km run in Sheffield is not the only race on her mind. In the poetry world, Mort is leading the pack: at 28 years old, she is shortlisted for this month's T S Eliot prize, the most lucrative award in British poetry. Previous winners include Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. It's an enormous vote of confidence – especially given that the shortlisted collection, Division Street, is Mort's first full-length book.

But it's not out of character for a poet whom Carol Ann Duffy has described as "among the brightest stars in the sparkling new constellation of British poets".

Division Street has the sting of directness you find in Simon Armitage, but Mort is more surprising. She is the standout poet of her generation. She was shortlisted for the 2013 Costa Poetry Award, as well

as a clutch of other prizes, and was given a Foyle Young Poet of the Year award so many times (five) they made her a judge. In 2010 she became the youngest poet in residence at the Wordsworth Trust, in 2013 she was crowned Derbyshire Poet Laureate, and she is now in her third year of a PhD at Sheffield University.
I meet her at her home in Hathersage, where we settle into the beamed living room with Charlie, Mort's sandy-coloured whippet. On the wall is a framed photograph from the Orgreave miners' strike by Don McPhee. It's the same image on the cover of Division Street, and shows a miner in a policeman's helmet, leaning in close to a line of officers.

"I was really chuffed they used that image," she says. "I think it sums up not just division, but also the idea of drama and part-playing… and of course all poetry is a kind of performance. It's like trying on a funny hat." She hesitates. "I don't know if this is true, but somebody told me the miner in the picture died really early, from choking on an egg sandwich."

Mort often catches you off-guard with a slanted take on her own history, a lightness of touch that's built on local humour. The poem "Stainless Stephen" begins: "He haunts the chippies mostly, / nodding his approval / at the puns: A Salt & Battery, / In Cod We Trust".

It means that reading her poems can be a surreal experience, as you lurch from quirky detail to neatly observed scenes in nature (the kingfisher that "darned the river"), and then on to haunting pictures of mental distress: the "thinspiration" that fuels an eating disorder, a sparsely written outline of the "fatal dance" of sex. And then Eighties politics loom in the long poem "Scab", which focuses on the bizarre decision to stage a re-enactment of the strike at Orgreave.

Born in Sheffield and brought up in Chesterfield, Mort was a child of the miners' strikes, with a state education and a father who read her Wilfred Owen.

"I wanted to capture something of that resonance," she says. "But also write about it from a certain remove, and as an outsider in a way." Margaret Thatcher is namechecked and her death came just as Division Street was nearing completion.

"The collection isn't just about Thatcher, it's about the legacy. One of the pubs I go to a lot in Sheffield was in a YouTube video of everyone singing after Thatcher had died… I did see that and feel a sense of recognition and a sense of community. At the same time I thought, why are you celebrating? Because the legacy lives on."

Growing up Mort says she felt like an outsider – "I liked to get my head down and work, as a bit of a swot" – and was the first in her family, and her school, to go to Oxbridge.

But while at Cambridge, reading Social and Political Sciences, she didn't feel at home. "Maybe it's partly that writers have a propensity to feel like this, maybe we're just awkward – but some things I could never quite get used to. Some of the rituals – passing port, doing grace in Latin – it's a different world." She smiles. "Which isn't to imply that I was in my room all the time, working or weeping. I spent a lot of time in the pub too."

Though Cambridge gets a cameo in the book, the landscapes of Sheffield, Oldham and the Peak District are anchoring points in Mort's poems. She writes about the houses, chip shops and streets of her childhood (Division Street itself is a road in central Sheffield).

The hills and moors have an almost mystical pull: in "The Dogs", we hear her plans to "set off past the meadow, down / behind the beck, beyond the blunt profile of Silver Howe / and nobody will call me back".

There is a wildness and a freedom. "I feel truly alive when I'm outdoors, when I'm climbing or running," she says. "When you get moments in running where everything's going well, there's a kind of clarity to it. Climbing's the same – or perhaps even more amplified. I like to think of climbs as a set of instructions for the body that you have to interpret, and they only make sense when you do it. So a climb can't be paraphrased, it can only be done. And there's an affinity with poetry because a poem's a bit like a set of instructions to the reader. You can't paraphrase a poem. You can only write it or read it."

Last year started strangely for Mort. One of the most beautiful poems in the book, "Deer", was plagiarised by another poet, who changed a smattering of words and then entered it into a competition

under his own name. “I was mostly angry that he'd messed up the rhythm! If he’d done something that had respected the music with which it was written then perhaps I wouldn’t have minded so much…” A year on, Mort is philosophical about the experience. But I wonder if, to make a name in poetry these days, a young writer has to be fairly combative. “It would be naive to think you don’t have to promote yourself and your work,” she concedes, “but on the other hand… my experience on a day-to-day level, and certainly locally, is that there’s a real sense of community in poetry.”

That sense of community is keenly felt in Derbyshire, as Mort settles into her two-year laureateship. Her most recent task was to write a poem about football for Chesterfield FC.

She had to do research: “How am I going to write something that’s going to be of some interest to the kind of person who might run from poetry as a whole? I’m really ignorant about football, but I’ve picked up quite a bit going to matches. It’s challenged my preconceptions about football in the way that I’d like to challenge preconceptions the Chesterfield fans might have about poetry.”

Her plan for the future is to keep writing, a task that’s harder than it sounds. A few days after our interview, I ask her if I can read the football poem. When she sends it, there’s a part that resonates: “This is our chance, or we could let it go: / we run with all that we don’t know.”

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/10564436/Helen-Mort-the-new-star-of-British-poetry.html

LITERATURHAUS MÜNCHEN

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# British Council Nature Writing Seminar
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Travel writer, memoirist and children's author **Horatio Clare** was born in London in 1973. He read English at the University of York and later worked as a BBC radio producer on cultural programmes 'Front Row', 'Nightwaves' and 'The Verb'. As a freelance journalist he has contributed numerous travel pieces to newspapers and magazines, as well as to 'From Our Own Correspondent' on BBC Radio Four.

*Running for the Hills* (2006), a memoir of his childhood on a sheep farm in West Wales, was nominated for the Guardian First Book Award, and received a Somerset Maugham award. Its autobiographical sequel, *Truant: Notes from the Slippery Slope* (2007), detailed his descent into and recovery from drug addictions and mental problems. He was shortlisted for the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award in 2007.

Having lived in Palermo, he edited the anthology *Sicily: Through Writers' Eyes* (2006), collecting works by D.H. Lawrence, Giuseppe de Lampedusa, Norman Lewis and others, with his own lyrical observations on the island's rich culture and history.

His travel book *A Single Swallow* (2009) follows the migration of swallows from South Africa to South Wales, recording encounters with people along the way. In 2010 he won the Foreign Press Association Award for his feature 'Rock of Ages – Ethiopian Highlands'. His novella *The Prince's Pen* (2011) is a contemporary re-working of the tale of 'Lludd and Lefellys' from the Mabinogion.

He was awarded the 2015 Stanford Dolman Book of the Year for *Down to the Sea in Ships* (2014), an account of two voyages on container ships. His first book for children, *Aubrey and the Terrible Yoot*, published in 2015, was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal and won the Branford Boase Award. The sequel, *Aubrey and the Terrible Ladybirds*, was also nominated for the Carnegie Medal in 2017. While continuing to travel the world, he divides his time between London, Wales and West Yorkshire.

**Bibliography**

2018 Icebreaker: A Voyage far North
2017 Myths & Legends of the Brecon Beacons
2017 Aubrey and the Terrible Ladybirds
2015 Orison for a Curlew
2015 Aubrey and the Terrible Yoot
2014 Down to the Sea in Ships
2011 The Prince's Pen
2009 A Single Swallow
2007 Truant: Notes from the Slippery Slope
2006 Sicily: Through Writers' Eyes
2006 Running for the Hills: A Family Story

**Awards**

2017 Carnegie Medal shortlist
2016 Branford Boase Award
2016 Carnegie Medal shortlist
2015 Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year
2010 Foreign Press Association award
2007 Somerset Maugham Award

**Guardian, 7 January 2018**

Horatio Clare: Icebreaker: A Voyage far North

Horatio Clare signs on for a journey of discovery
A seemingly bleak 10-day mission in the Bay of Bothnia is the source of surprisingly vivid insights into the Finns' national character

By Stephanie Cross

Would you like to travel on a government icebreaker? I think if you do the journey, something will come of it." Something does and to Horatio Clare's great credit, since this could have been a book-length advertorial, he recognises the invitation by the Finnish embassy, to mark the centenary of the country's independence from Russia, for the PR exercise it is. Nevertheless. Clare, whose Down to the Sea in Ships (2014) chronicled his experiences sailing with the Danish Maersk container company, leaps at the chance.

His berth is aboard the Otso: 7,000 tonnes, 100 metres long, 40 metres high. Its bridge bristles with technology; its engine room, provisioned with 50,000 spare parts, roars with scarcely contained power. It has two saunas (one for officers, one for the crew), a gym, a "stinking coffin" of a Playboy-plastered smoking room and the atmosphere of a working men's club. During Clare's 10-day stint, the ship escorts a variety of carriers across the Bay of Bothnia, just shy of the Arctic Circle, and smashes free those that have become ensnarled. It is work that is one part "euphoric vandalism" and one part intimate, catastrophe-courting maritime ballet, performed to a soundtrack of Bon Jovi and Belinda Carlisle.

Icebreaking aside, Clare diligently earns his passage. He notes Finland's excellent health and education systems (the latter free up to PhD level), its decision to trial a universal basic income and its outstanding levels of gender equality. In 1906, Finnish women became among the first in the world to achieve universal suffrage and by 2007 more than 41% of the country's MPs were female. However, it is the Finns' character that interests him most, not least their sisu, an untranslatable combination of grit, courage and resilience that is embodied by their national hero, Carl Gustaf Mannerheim.

It was sisu that fuelled the Finns, under Mannerheim's command as they fought off the Soviet invasion of 1939 and sisu that led them to invent Molotov cocktails in the process.

Then there is the national talent for taciturnity. Clare discovers that Finnish silence is a language in itself, but "the greatest Finnish silence of them all" is the one that continues to surround the still-painful subject of the country's 1918 civil war.

For Clare, however, it is the silence arising from the absent voices of his shipmates' wives and children that registers mostly keenly. The job of the captain is to "synthesise and broadcast wellbeing", but Clare confesses that it requires an act of will to stop isolation from spiralling into depression.

Reasons to be cheerful might indeed seem in short supply when you're shattering ice of ever-diminishing extent while devouring staggering amounts of fuel. It comes as a shock to learn that all the ships that crisscross our blue planet produce enough carbon dioxide to make them the seventh most polluting nation on Earth.

The nightmarish future is an all too vivid reality for Clare, a place full "of outraged nature… where the environment is vengefully dominant, forcing us to live like Finnish seafarers – behind glass, monitoring, waiting". At times, there is a palpable sense of anger that alternates with clear-eyed dread: the Met Office has, after all, predicted that the Arctic could be seasonally ice-free in under 30 years. Yet one of Clare's distinctive virtues as a travel writer is that he is never not alive to delight.

Icebreakers never anchor for the indisputably good reason that they would themselves become stuck fast, but Clare has a gift for pinning to the page all that comes his way. His is a joy in framing with such precision and flair that it is the opposite of indulgent, allowing the reader to share in his own marvelling encounters. Otso's orange lifeboats, for example, adorn its huge sides "like tiny water wings"; a passing raven is "like a ragged priest bent on establishing a mission"; a sea eagle "neck thrust forward between enormous wings, is… intent as an assassin". Even the smell of ice is parsed: "a premonition of snow… a pellucid starkness, an absence, clean and clear".

It seems unlikely that the Finnish government could have anticipated the book that their guest has ultimately delivered: nimble, vital, unexpectedly affecting. But it seems equally unlikely that they will have any complaints.

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/07/icebreaker-a-voyage-far-north-horatio-clare-review

**Financial Times, 10 November 2017**

Horatio Clare: Icebreaker: A Voyage far North
The shipping forecast
An account of life on frozen Finnish waters eloquently attests to a changing climate

By Erica Wagner

Frazil is also called grease ice; it is formed by molecules of water freezing on the surface of the sea, forming crystalline lumps. Nilas is a thin crust of ice, created when the sea is still enough to be undisturbed by either wind or waves; it "divides the atmosphere from the water", Horatio Clare writes. Then there is shuga, a rubble of ice balls, frazil and mashed-pancake ice. All these are terms that the men aboard the Finnish icebreaker Otso must know intimately as they steer cargo ships large and small through the treacherous waters of the Bay of Bothnia, the curl of freezing sea that lies between Sweden and Finland. And they are terms that captivate Clare as he sails with Otso, learning the ways of the ship, coming to understand Finland's fascinating culture and history — and seeing for himself the startling changes of a warming planet.

Clare, whose work always strikes an interesting balance between the romantic and the real, knows that his premise is not necessarily promising. It's a press trip, to put it plainly: he was contacted by a fellow at the Finnish embassy in London whose job it is to raise the country's profile in the centenary of its founding. "Would you like to travel on a government icebreaker?" Clare was asked. "I think if you do the journey, something will come of it." But even this honest invitation carries something of the forthright character of the Finns, at least as they are painted here by Clare. And Finland, after all, is a place worth celebrating.

For it is a country with one of the world's great living epic poems, the Kalevala, collected by a physician called Elias Lönnrot in the 19th century and still an inescapable aspect of Finnish life; even the good ship Otso takes her name from the cycle. In 1906 — 11 years before the country gained full independence from Russia — Finnish women became the first in the world to gain unrestricted rights both to vote and stand for parliament. And where the Danes have hygge and the Swedes lagom, the defining quality of the Finns is rather less cosy: sisu denotes "a gritty, courageous and robust refusal to be beaten", as Clare writes, a characteristic that served the nation's people well during a turbulent history.

Sisu comes in handy aboard an icebreaker, too. At 100m long and 40m high, Otso looks like "a sawn-off ferry, her hull planed down, low and rolling, her superstructure bulked up". Her job is to clear channels through which other ships may pass; and if you think global warming will mean the icebreaker is done for, you have another think coming. As the ice melts, ships will travel at higher and higher latitudes, and for the time being they will still need icebreakers to clear the way. So business is booming. The crew of Otso — captain Tem, first officer Ville, second officer Sampo — do highly skilled work, and are well rewarded for it. Clare's portrayal of the divided lives of these men, a "half-life" split between sea and shore, is thoughtful. Women work at sea too, of course: Katri, a cadet, is drawn to what she calls "the dark side" — the engine room.

Icebreaker has many of the pleasures of classic travel writing: a pure sense of visiting another world in the company of an eloquent guide. But this is not a backward-looking book, and its warning for the future is clear. Clare is able to step off his ship on to solid ice, the light "a shattering silver glare" reflecting off the surface — the albedo effect, as it is known. But as there is less and less ice and snow to reflect the sun's radiation back outward, "fast feedback" warming ensues. This is the beginning of the end.

“We stand on diminishing ice, thinking of our children, in the era of not yet, barely daring to guess at how soon,” Clare writes. How soon? The Met Office estimates the Arctic could be seasonally ice-free by the 2040s. It may not be many decades, then, until Clare’s travelogue is a record of a vanished world.

https://www.ft.com/content/70b968fa-c541-11e7-b30e-a7c1c7c13aab

**Wales Arts Review, 13 January 2018**

Horatio Clare: Icebreaker: A Voyage far North

By Adam Somerset

The line between reportage and travel literature is a fine one, but one factor defines the separator. The best of travel writing is layered in subject matter, its authors gliding between biography, geography, history and much else. Pamela Petro’s *The Slow Breath of Stone* (Fourth Estate, 2005) is a quest in Southern France and Jonathan Raban’s *Passage to Juneau* (Pan Macmillan, 1999) is a sea journey along America’s Pacific shore. Both books are united by a layering of thematic density.

So too it is with *Icebreaker* (Chatto Windus, 2017) whose ostensible journey is on a ship of that class in the further Baltic Sea. (Horatio Clare barely mentions a temperature that is higher than minus ten centigrade). *Icebreaker* is also a centenary book. It was not a centenary widely noticed, but 2017 was that of the foundation of an independent Finnish Republic. The base of his book is a report, affectionate and respectful, but objective, of Finns.

Clare’s engagement was sparked by a friend from school days, Pekka Isosomppi, later at the press office of the Finnish Embassy in London. Isosomppi is a name that is distinctive and Clare goes on to depict a people of the same distinctiveness. He starts on land with the sharpest of eyes. In the architecture of Helsinki he discerns strains of Prague and Trieste. He touches lightly on the history: Mannerheim’s declaration of independence from Russia in revolution, the Winter War of 1939-1940 in which the Finns held off Soviet invasion remarkably. Clare greatly likes the modern society of 2017 and its governmental initiatives are compared admirably against those of Britain. As for the individuals they, and their language, are not as we.

The crew members live up to the stereotypes of taciturnity. But they have jokes and stories and the author comes to discriminate among the silences. He observes “relaxed silences, companionable…unhappy, charged and thoughtful silences, even lyrical silences”. At the heart of the companionship he warms to the concept of *“sisu”.* “Sisu” is like “Hiraeth” in being untranslatable but embodies grit, courage, resilience. His wonder at the language picks on a word “kalsarikännit.” Its five syllables mean “to get drunk at home alone in your underwear with no intention of doing anything else”.

Beyond the people is the geography. Clare quotes Coleridge from “Frost at Midnight”. “The frost performs its secret ministry”. It is an “an image of holy work in some middle place between life and thought, between the perceptible and the immanent.” If Raban on the Mississippi is the great literary anatomist of river currents, Clare is his equivalent on ice. First he learns the words that discriminate. A collection of ice boulders is called “shuga”. There is grease ice, or “fazil”, crystalline lumps in the water. When there is neither wind nor wave crystals join to make a thin sheet called “nilas”. Its columns grow downwards into the water, first year-ice that can grow to a metre and a half. At a molecular level this young ice has crystals all oriented in the same direction. That renders it weak and easily broken by an icebreaker’s bow.

By page 140 he has begun to understand what is around him.

*I am beginning to develop a feel for the ice now, as I circle the deck in the freezing dark, listening to it. It is like weather, like rain or mist, in the way it comes upon us according to its own laws. It is like the sea in its tenacity and its restlessness, in the way it moves ship tracks, grapples down buoys, traps stragglers and climbs hulls. It is like rust, like entropy, in the way it sidles aboard, rinds the rails with icicles, patches the decks and stiffens the ropes. But in its reformations and renewals, in its unpredictability and its beauty, ice is all but alive.*

The surroundings on ship and sea elate and exhilarate but good travel writing is multi-hued. *Icebreaker* is overshadowed by a melancholy of lament. Human time is small beside that of geospatial change. Finland itself is rising by ten millimetres a year. The loss of ice with its vast capacity for reflecting the sun’s radiation will expose bare tundra. The release of methane on a vast scale has the potential to trigger a vicious cycle of climatic change. Methane has twenty-three times the warming power of carbon dioxide.

The ship itself is implicated. Were the combined fleets of ships a nation they would be collectively the seventh most polluting country. An icebreaker alone can consume 100 tonnes of fuel a day. For comparative purposes an average Finnish family home might use 1.5 tonnes a year.

But *Icebreaker* has an unfailing quality of prose to match the epic splendour that the author witnesses. Clare steps out onto the Baltic. “While standing on a mountain top grants you the vista of a scoop of space, from valley bottom to cloud level and beyond, standing on the sea under clear air erases depth and height. The sky begins in the snow under your boots. You are simultaneously huge and as tiny as a fleck.”

As for the role of humans ours is the species with the prowess to engineer the vessels to plough the ice and create the channels for trade. But it is a role that is still minor to the gigantism of the Earth. “Now I think of ice as a being” Clare writes “its movements, its agency, the way it determines, yields, thickens, prevents, makes wonderful. I think of ice as Gaia, as world spirit given form and colour. Sea ice can be infinitely studied, tracked and measured, hymned and wondered at; sea ice can be hacked and broken, but sea ice cannot be made by us and cannot be controlled.”

http://www.walesartsreview.org/books-icebreaker-by-horatio-clare/

**Telegraph, 7 January 2014**

Horatio Clare: Down by the Sea in Ships
Philip Hoare on a gripping account of the dysfunctional world of modern shipping

By Philip Hoare

"Land is danger; sea is safety.” Any reader of Horatio Clare’s wonderful new book might well conclude the opposite by the time he or she puts it down. Tossed about by the tempestuous waters of the world’s oceans, Clare’s account of his journeys with the officers and crews of container ships of the Maersk Line is gripping and stomach-churning in equal measure. Boarding the Gerd in Felixstowe, Clare evokes the spirit of Herman Melville as he signs on for his first voyage. Like Ishmael in **Moby-Dick’s opening chapter**, he is land-weary and “accounts it high time to get to sea as soon as I can”. Clare seeks excitement and enlightenment. What he finds is another world.

As the vast ship slips out into the North Sea, its massive superstructure “a world of dark red steel”, Clare meets a floating community of Danish and Indian officers and Filipino crewmen, defined in the strict hierarchy of a container ship by the diminishing scale of their wages the farther down from the bridge they work. Clare is enraged by the fact that Filipinos only earn a fraction of what Western officers and crew get.

Initially, there seems to be none of the age-old romance of the sea here. These block-ended vessels are mere conduits, shunting about the commodities that sustain our modern lives. They are oddly ascetic, hermetic places. Alcohol is banned. At “barbecues” on board, men stand around, not knowing what to do, unable to socialise without a facilitating drink in their hands. Soon they drift back to their separate cabins, to exercise, watch DVDs or, in the case of the overwhelmingly Catholic Filipinos, pray.

These sailors travel the world, but often cannot disembark at the exotic ports they visit, and are essentially disconnected from the oceans. As the Gerd powers on, relentlessly, “it is as if she were a spacecraft, one of many in her vastly high orbit”. As far as we landlubbers are concerned, she and her like might be invisible, for all that she is 360 metres long, bigger than an aircraft carrier.

Contained within this mother ship is a resolutely male world, of diesel-fumed cabins and storm-battered decks; of danger from without, and isolation within. Clare marvels that “women would never live like this!” And yet there is an old-fashioned etiquette on board, “a charming courtesy” as men greet one another formally as they pass, as if to give order to the chaotic element over which they sail. This pride – the scrubbed corridors and laundered overalls – is almost feminine, Clare intimates: “The rules, roles and customs of the sea seem to have erased half the stereotypes of our gender.”

Down to the Sea in Ships brilliantly reveals the lives of those tiny figures you might occasionally glimpse as these leviathanic ships pass by. But it is a way of life that may already be becoming outmoded. “Trade has shrunk since 2008,” one captain tells Clare, “and ships are getting bigger.” A container ship, which can carry 50,000 tons of cargo, is a barometer of global economics: the lower it sits in the water, the better things are.

Clare's writing is fluid, light and eminently readable, but perhaps his greatest asset is his empathy. A deep sense of history haunts his travels, as he scans the endless seas from the eyrie of the bridge. Looking down into the Atlantic's freezing waters, he sees the **victims of Second World War battles**, like ghosts emerging from the waves. In one appalling scene, he writes of men abandoning a torpedoed oil tanker, swimming away from the sinking ship, only for its leaking, burning oil to overtake them, frying them alive.

There are contemporary tragedies here, too. On the Maersk Dubai in 1996, three Romanian stowaways were ordered overboard, ultimately to their deaths, by the ship's Taiwanese officers. A fourth stowaway was found by the Filipino crew, who hid the man for his own protection, feeding him with their rations. Such is the lawlessness of the sea that, despite being charged with first-degree murder, the officers could not be prosecuted for their crimes.

Clare's story shifts from port to port, forever loading and unloading. On its arrival in Canada, the Maersk Pembroke carries: "Indian spices, 25 tonnes of Greek wine, Danish yeast, British malt, Latvian clothing, Estonian chemicals, German tools, 34 tonnes of Belgian chocolate, 24 tonnes of Sri Lankan tea… But why 90 tonnes of Argentinian milk, and why send it via Europe? What is so desirable, in this land of forests, about the 300 tonnes of sawn timber from Germany, and the 80 more from Russia?" The container shipping industry holds a mirror to our consuming selves. It depends "on people's appetites for stuff, on our inability to produce it where it is wanted, and the readiness with which we throw it away".

Clare wonders, too, at the despoliation of the sea itself: the industrialised trawlers that rip up the seabed in search of ever more fish from a diminishing resource; the way we abuse an element because it seems so remote from us. That ignorance even extends to the men who crew these ships. Clare's voyages are a comment on our dysfunctional world. But they are also a testament to the intrepid, unsung sailors to whom we owe so much.

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/10528088/Down-to-the-Sea-in-Ships-by-Horatio-Clare-review.html

**Wales Arts Review, 16 January 2014**

Horatio Clare: Down by the Sea in Ships

Inspired by reading Melville's *Moby Dick* the travel writer Horatio Clare contacted Maersk the Danish shipping-and-everything-else mega-corporation, offering to become their writer-in-residence. They assented and he then undertook two very different voyages on two of their six hundred vessels, heading east on the gargantuan and ultra-modern container ship *Gerd Maersk* towards Suez, Malaysia, China and eventually Los Angeles, and also venturing west across the Atlantic on the smaller and creakier *Pembroke,* bound for Montreal. Which led to this rolling, surging, illuminating, carry-you-with-it-like-a tidal-surge blinking masterpiece of a book, mapping as it does a parallel world which sustains the world we inhabit, literally delivering the goods.

To those who knew Clare's writer's trajectory to date, we might have reasonably expected a further curve upwards, but not, perhaps a trajectory quite so steep or indeed soaring. Albatross soaring.
The author had wanted to go to sea ever since he recited John Masefield in school at the age of ten. Little wonder then that he finds himself in a state of 'suppressed exultation' on the bridge of the first of his great ships, in the company of a captain 'fierce with bulk' preparing to go down to the lonely sea and the sky, in a great machine with a steering wheel smaller than a Mini. And when he says 'great' he means it, as the *Gerd* is most certainly no pedalo, being longer than the largest US aircraft carrier and carrying an amazing variety of cargo, including forty-two tonnes of Chinese umbrellas, benzyl alcohol, frozen shrimp, albacore and cod, parts for space craft and ten tonnes of soap.

Clare's two oceanic journeys offer, quite naturally, the very stuff of adventure. So we have tempestuous storms in mid-Atlantic, typhoons off the Beaufort scale and crossings of pirate waters. But Clare gives us so much more than just a rollicking tale of brine-drenched adventure. He gives us the history of seafaring, which, he avers, might look a bit like a 'borderless painting, a Turner worked over by Ernst, Pollock and Bosch. Flying wind and water are swirled about with breaking ropes. Here ships fight, founder and death-dive; here they are broken-backed. The scene flickers, incarnadine with fire and blood.'

Clare is superb at doing research and then being judicious as he marshals and metes out his material. We find out that Lady Astor suggested merchant seamen be compelled to wear yellow armbands on shore, signalling their potential for carrying venereal disease, and later told Parliament that a colleague suggested that 'he would not expect ferrets to live in such conditions.' We hear about the floating patch of plastic the

size of Texas accreting in the Pacific and the young author tells us about the symbolism of tattoos, from the gold dragon which shows a sailor who has crossed the date line through the leather-back turtle for crossing the equator and the swallow signifying five thousand miles to the blue star etched on the skin for going round the Cape of Good Hope. At other times he teases and disinters meaning from his documents, such as a superb, Geoff Dyer-style examination of a photograph of a survivor of the flaming seas following an Atlantic U-boat attack. The man is covered in oil, 'the left side of his face shines as though moulded into a plastic mask:'

> His eyes are narrowed almost shut and his mouth gasps blackly open, the human equivalent of an oiled seabird. He is not in the ship's sickroom, which suggests he is a low priority case: much worse it taking place out of shot.

The book is full of bright vignettes of crew and companions, not least the ubiquitous sailors from the Philippines. Indeed, Clare suggests, a system quite akin to apartheid exists in the crewing of ships. The Filipinos work hard, love singing karaoke but are paid very little and Maersk – though Clare's sponsors – are not shown in a good light, denying their workers union membership: some terrible things also happen on their ships, not least to stowaways. In addition to his human companions, Clare enjoys the ghostly presence of writers who have similarly gone to sea, from Coleridge through Jerome K. Jerome to Melville. And there those who have sailed the seas before him, in wartime convoys and stalking German submarines, in slave galleys and the piratical vessels of the Barbarossas, plundering the eastern Med.

For the paperback edition a quick trawl through the text could gainfully net typos such as 'passess', 'Algericas', 'Medocino', 'imagaine' and 'tonness'. But those are minor cavils. This is a fine book which helps explain some of the idiocies of capitalism and free trade, with similar goods being exchanged across continents: Philips and Grundig electronics going East while Sony and Hitachi stuff goes the other way. It is also beautifully written, melding oral history with the sort of travel writing that made Clare's earlier *A Single Swallow* work and sing so well. He has elemental material to work with and he works it well. Storms bring out the best in his prose:

> The faces of the waves are chipped with liquid ridges and their backs with flying white. Now and then they explode before we reach them as if a monster is breaching. We are making seventeen knots but the wind is still rising and backing, coming now from the north-north-west. When the ship misses her footing there is a deep boom in her steel chest and a white curled hand of a billion droplets leaps as high as the foremast and caresses back towards us, whistling and falling as tears on the screens. The containers look as if they are on fire under the gusting spray.

At one point in the book Horatio Clare describes a particular darkness which is 'racingly alive'. That phrase applies to pretty much all of this book: it allows us to feel just that, racingly alive. This salty travelogue, with a subject that affects us all, deserves a twenty one-gun salute. And all the flags out. Yes, *all* the flags.

http://www.walesartsreview.org/down-to-the-sea-in-ships-by-horatio-clare/

**North Cornwall Book Festival, 25 October 2014**

Interview: Horatio Clare on Down to the Sea in Ships

By Sorrel Watson

Horatio Clare will not be defined by a particular literary genre. His work spans moving and insightful memoirs of youth, tales of drug addiction and mental health, adventure stories of the highest calibre, and most recently a children's book.

Raised on a sheep farm in the Welsh Black Mountains, Clare was immersed in the wilderness from a very young age. With no telly in the house, he and his brother relied on their imaginations, games and books for entertainment – sparking his appetite for adventure.

His latest book, *Down to the Sea in Ships* – an exploration of the lives of the crew on a 115,000 tonne cargo ship – is the product of such an adventure. Clare spent months onboard, learning about the beauty and power of the sea, loneliness, definitions of masculinity and the dangers and injustices faced by the people involved in this un-regulated and extremely treacherous industry.

So what inspired him to embark on this journey? The author quotes one of the opening lines of Moby Dick: "Whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet… I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can."

The draw of the sea is irresistible for many – and in particular for Clare, who worked as a lifeboat man on the Bristol Channel and Rhone barges in France. So as the writer roamed the streets of Verona "one dark, dank and misty day, lashing out, waiting for the next idea to come" it struck him that the most logical thing to do was head back out to sea.

As with travellers on other monumental voyages, Clare found himself gaining unexpcted insights: the most powerful of which were the new definitions of masculinity he discovered among this almost entirely male-dominated trade. "The crew often proudly described theirs as a man's job," he notes. But for many it also consists of appalling conditions, very low pay and sometimes years at a time away from their families. According to Clare, the phrase "a dollar for loneliness" rang true with the majority of the crew.
"Everybody is judged on what they do, not on what they say. You don't want to rub anybody up and the enemy of harmony is anything out of the ordinary so you get what becomes an ordinary maleness which is very kind, sensitive, considerate and quiet. No swagger, competition or aggression."

As Clare talks of his journey and its most awe-inspiring moments, tales of the ship itself emerge, such as its remarkable engine room that stood eight or nine stories high. It soon becomes clear, however, that what really inspired him was the ocean itself and the activities he witnessed "taking place out of the sight of land."

"I remember speaking to the captain one day and he said: 'People will ask you what it was like and they'll imagine beautiful sunsets over the water but they will never understand.'"
Several of Clare's descriptions get you pretty close. He describes "the moon's broad path" as "Cut with shadows like phantom ships. The air is milky and hot. The sea lies right down, darkest silver blue and alive…". Just one example of how his exquisite imagery transports you to the deck.
We talk about whether his affinity with nature makes it easier for Clare to describe this stream of seascapes without becoming repetitive or cliched.

"If you can get into the right places it becomes tremendously easy or tremendously more easy because you can take dictations from what you're seeing, directly from nature," Clare explains. "The difficulty comes from writing something new and fresh each time"

It is a difficulty he has managed to overcome in this latest work, in which the reader is swept along by a narrative that reflects the ocean in its inspiring unpredictability.

https://northcornwallbookfestival.wordpress.com/2014/10/25/interview-horatio-clare-on-down-to-the-sea-in-ships/

LITERATURHAUSMÜNCHEN

BRITISH COUNCIL UK/DE 2018

nantesbuch
Stiftung Nantesbuch
Kunst und Natur

# British Council Nature Writing Seminar
# Thursday 7 – Saturday 9 June 2018
# Literaturhaus München and Stiftung Nantesbuch

**Nancy Campbell** grew up in Berwickshire, Scotland. She began writing Disko Bay while Writer in Residence in the world's most northerly museum, on the island of Upernavik, Greenland. 'The darkness of the polar winter,' she says 'may come across in the tone of the collection.' Campbell's book 'considers the connections between northern Europe and the Arctic, looking at migrations across the North Sea and the Greenland Sea, as well as the consequences of colonialism and climate change.' While in Upernavik, she also worked on an artist's book How To Say I Love You In Greenlandic: An Arctic Alphabet (winner of the Birgit Skiöld Award).

Campbell is currently the UK Canal Laureate, working in partnership with The Poetry Society and the Canal & River Trust to deliver a literary response to 2,000 miles of waterways. A delicate understanding of balance – ecological, social and visual – underwrites her work as poet.

## Bibliography

2018 The Library of Ice
2017 The Polar Tombola: A Book of Banished Words
2016 Death of a Foster Son
2015 Disko Bay
How To Say 'I Love You' In Greenlandic: An Arctic Alphabet

## Awards

2017 Michael Murphy Memoria Prize shortlist
2016 Forward Prize for Best First Collection shortlist
Birgit Skiöld Award

## The Island Review

Nancy Campbell: Disko Bay

By David Borthwick

David Borthwick introduces a bewitching debut poetry collection

Nancy Campbell's collection is a journey. You hardly know where you are, or when. We're sung into Disko Bay with a poem entitled The Seal People: "I watch four shadows pass the sun./ They are not men, those bearded ones".

Not much later, there is an encounter with the Song of Erlaveersiniooq, A Female Shaman Known as 'The Robber of Men's Intestines'. These songs, stories, ballads, breaths of bardic fragments —

whatever they are — leave and linger all at once the deeper one gets, any precise location or temporal marker persistently playing hide and seek:

> Towards the north of the island
> the hunter lives with his son
> in a shed on stilts with a sunken roof.
> I live one house further on. (Ersulleraappoq / Hide and Seek).

There are hunters who might be ghosts, stormfronts sent in lieu of letters; there are candle-selling undertakers and Danish doctors warning of old men who "drink in darkness instead of singing" (Kitsissut / The Colony). Old knowledge is lost and picked up again. Everything is up for debate: "Where does the Artic end? Asked how far south/ the region reaches, scholars disagree." (Ulerussivoq / The Debate).

And yet this is a real place, however much myth and loss may seek to define it. The almost timeless fisherman "bed risen from, boots pulled on,/ the door opened to the wind" must yet contend with "boasting" quotas: "Men come with clipboards once a year./ They collect and they confer." (Uppertut / The Believers).

More than a thousand kilometres away, on Ruin Island off north-west Greenland, land of the last vestiges of so-called Thule culture, the place has not given up the ghost. Qujaavaarssuk, "the strong man's son who never went hungry" (Hospitality), hunts on — all rumours and weather-lore, advice and endurance until the epilogue in two languages, titled in English, Words Spoken by a Hunter Who Can No Longer Hear the Question. It is an epilogue not for a life but a way of living, the book moving from the margins to the edge, from what clings on to what must be excavated, at once remembrance and warning.

The distance from Ruin Island to Jutland is almost 3,800 kilometres. The most direct route is a curve over Iceland, brushing the Western edge of Norway to settle on its peninsula, a trading hub with colonial ties to Greenland. Here on the edge of Europe are proverbs and riddles: "Wave dragon, wave star, now the pier leads nowhere." There is rumour of ways of life ending, and not only 'traditional' ones: "My lover is wary of water. *The car started to sink so quickly."*(Proverbs of Water).

Traditional tales and veiled threats of changing climate are found mixed richly in Nancy Campbell's collection. Beautiful renditions of the voices of three places make a composite impression of things breaking up: cultures, histories, and climate, all and none of them capable of representing the full picture. In Conversations, from the Jutland section, a voice talks of changes to the landscape and their cumulative effects: "I don't think it is one thing/ I think it is a combination of things/ a combination of everything."

*Disko Bay* is a bewitching collection composed of a range of voices, stories and proverbs where truths submerged below louder aspects of global culture insist on being heard on their own terms, and from places that are central to — not remote from — our thinking about the land on which we stand, and its future.

***Nakuarsuuvoq / The night hunter***

I am a poet. I am writing about Aua, the night hunter
and how his feet compact the snow and leave deep traces
as he passes my door destined for the harbour
where his boat is moored. I never see him. He might be a ghost

but that his feet compact the snow and leave deep traces.
When he is sleeping, as if by agreement I go to the shore
where his boat is moored. He might be a ghost. I never see him
emerge from the long darkness. In the brief daylight,

when he is sleeping, as if by agreement, I go to the shore.
I see drops of blood, and strange soft ochre things
emerge from the long darkness in the brief daylight.
The ice shelf bears the mark of sled and knife

I see drops of blood, and strange soft ochre things.
All through the night none may yawn or wink an eye.
The ice shelf bears the mark of sled and knife.
The shaman tells the village, bound to him by hunger:

'All through the night none may yawn or wink an eye.'
I am a poet. I am writing about Aua, the night hunter
who is bound to the water, as I am bound to him by hunger.
I hear him pass my door, destined for the harbour.

http://theislandreview.com/content/island-books-disko-bay

**Forward Arts Foundation**

In conversation with Nancy Campbell

**FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION**: When did you start writing poetry and what drew you into it?

**NANCY CAMPBELL**: While I welcome the label 'poet', I might stretch its interpretation. After completing an English Literature degree, I worked for several years as a compositor at a traditional letterpress printing workshop, setting metal type by hand. I loved the alchemical nature of the job, from its perverse demands (the compositor has to read backwards and upside-down) to the exacting process of casting type from a molten alloy of lead, tin and antimony. The vats of hot metal and cans of ink seemed to have a poetic of their own. It's not surprising that the proximity to these 'crafts of the book' influenced my approach to poetry and made the presentation of words on paper very important to me. I've been drawn ever since to writers like Ian Hamilton Finlay whose work relies on its visual appearance, and explores not only the borderlines of language but also the material form of its presentation.

In terms of development, although I'd been writing for years, I began sending my work out relatively recently. In Iceland I came across the concept of the 'skúffuskáld' or 'drawer-poet' – a writer who puts their poems in a drawer rather than publishing them. A large percentage of Icelanders write poems, but most write for personal pleasure. For a long time I was content to be a 'skúffuskáld'. I only started publishing my work once it became a requirement – as an output of residencies, for example – and then learnt how satisfying it could be to take the work out of its drawer, and discover the helpful exchange that a wider readership brings.

**FAF**: What does being shortlisted for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection mean for you?

**NC**: I've read some wonderful first collections this year so I know the standard has been high, and I feel very honoured that Disko Bay is on the shortlist. I am also pleased for my publisher's sake: Enitharmon Press has shown confidence in my work, especially in times when publishing a known author might make more economic sense than taking a gamble on a new voice.

**FAF**: Please tell us about the creation of your shortlisted collection, from first words to final book. Which poems in the collection are most important to you?

**NC**: During the winter of 2010 I was Writer in Residence at Upernavik Museum, with a brief to create work responding to the museum and the surrounding landscape. Even though I've spent much of my life in rural environments, this small island on the north-west coast of Greenland felt remote from everything I knew. I created two books as a result of this residency: the abecedarium How To Say 'I Love You' In Greenlandic: An Arctic Alphabet, made primarily for the community I was living in, and poems for English readers back home, which I collected together as Disko Bay.

It was a period of contentment, living in a wooden house by the harbour where I could brew coffee in the mornings and enjoy stretches of writing interspersed by research through conversations with my neighbours. Yet the darkness of the polar winter may come across in the tone of the collection. I was aware of danger: the threat humans posed to each other and to the environment; the mercurial weather and dramatic daily changes to the ice. Greenland is a place where survival has always been a struggle, and now those who live and work on the ice edge struggle in new ways, as climate change affects their lives. Poems such as 'The night hunter' and 'The lesson' are key to the collection: they express my ambivalence as an outsider, a poet questioning her role in the finely balanced small community.

Disko Bay took shape slowly over five years as I completed other residencies in Denmark, Iceland and closer to home, including talking to residents of the flooded town of Rothbury during the Words Across Northumberland residency for Hexham Book Festival in 2013. While the 'Disko Bay' sequence arose from my own experiences in 2010, 'Ruin Island' was written later during a Hawthornden Fellowship. The poem is based on the legend of the hunter Qujaavaarssuk who lived in a distant time when the Arctic was suffering the converse problem to today: too much ice. The last part of the book, 'Jutland', considers the connections between northern Europe and the Arctic, looking at migrations across the North Sea and the Greenland Sea, as well as the consequences of colonialism and climate change.

**FAF**: New question: How do you access poetry?

**NC**: As editor of an independent art magazine, Printmaking Today, I'm fascinated by the rich culture of literary magazines and how they operate. I've discovered many new voices and learnt a great deal from reading Stand (to which I first subscribed as a teenager, after meeting its editor, poet Jon Silkin, at a small press fair in Newcastle); The Rialto; Poetry London; Oxford Poetry; The Interpreter's House and Modern Poetry in Translation (particularly in its new format under the visionary editorship of Sasha Dugdale). When I'm travelling I listen to podcasts. I hoarded 'Poetry Off the Shelf' episodes from the Poetry Foundation to keep me company through the Greenland winter. Back home in Oxford, I'm lucky to be part of a lively and welcoming literary community, attending readings and seminars by excellent poets, from authors who live locally to visiting writers like Nikola Madzirov.

**FAF**: What is next for you as a poet?

**NC**: For three years now I've been kayaking on the Thames and these close encounters with the river through all the seasons (and, increasingly, in flood) will form the core of my next collection. Having flown quite a distance across the Arctic in the last five years, I feel it's time I turn to sustainable transport and look closer to home for my subject matter. 'Think of the long trip home. / Should we have stayed at home, and thought of here?' as Elizabeth Bishop writes in 'Questions of Travel'. So staying at home, and thinking of the Arctic, I'm translating (from the French) a wonderful collection of East-Greenlandic songs recorded by the anthropologist Paul-Emile Victor in the 1930s.
In addition, I'm grateful to have received ACE Grants for the Arts funding to perform The Polar Tombola in several venues this year. The Polar Tombola is an interactive dictionary game that invites audiences to engage with themes of environmental and cultural change through language. I hope the project will raise awareness of an Arctic language, West Greenlandic, which has recently been placed on the UNESCO Atlas of World Languages in Danger, and the broader issue of how languages reflect location. With its letterpress-printed and book-art components, the game revels in the material form that has for so long been a central concern of my work.

http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-arts-foundation-in-conversation-with-nancy-campbell/

**Independent, 14 February 2016**

Nancy Campbell: Why I gave up a life in London to become a writer on a speck of land in Greenland

When Nancy Campbell became writer in residence at a local museum on a speck of land, off a slightly larger one, off the coast of Greenland, she imagined sheer isolation in an ancient fishing community. But what could she, a poet, offer?

By Nancy Campbell

Only a few hours after the tiny plane landed at Upernavik airport, bringing me to this speck of an island off the western coast of Greenland to work as writer in residence at its small museum, I'm losing a game of tennis. The grass court comes courtesy of a Nintendo Wii, and my formidable opponent is five-year-old Tukummeq, a lively child who has honed her game during the winter blizzards. The flat-screen television is almost as wide as the living room windows that look west across Baffin Bay. I guess that somewhere out in the polar night icebergs must be drifting by, calved from glaciers further north. On the windowsill, a two-way radio chatters, issuing reports from Tukummeq's father and uncles, who are fishing out on the ice.

Upernavik means "springtime place". As the name suggests, a nomadic people once came here by boat when the winter ice broke up, to trade and to fish. But I've arrived at a more unseasonal time, in the middle of January. On my first day, I walk through the cold museum, peering into vitrines at the

evidence left by earlier visitors: a whaling ship's barometer and log book, and the highlight of the collection – a copy of the Kingittorsuaq Runestone, engraved by three Norsemen about 800 years ago and left in a cairn on a nearby island. Only the men's names survive: the second half of their message is lost, written in mysterious characters that can't be deciphered, even by rune-reading experts. I wonder what these Viking travellers made of the Upernavik archipelago. Their truncated story is emblematic of the history of Norse settlers in Greenland, none of whom would survive the 15th century, in part because of the cooling climate of the Little Ice Age.

The tragedies of the past do not preoccupy me for long. Sitting at my desk overlooking the harbour, a cup of strong black coffee beside me, I spot the flashlights of fishermen bobbing away from the island across the expanse of shore-fast ice. Grethe, the museum assistant – and Tukummeq's mother – explains that they are on their way to drill through the ice to fish for halibut. The shadowy figures step carefully, pausing often, and test the ice with their chisels before putting any weight on it. They are adept at interpreting patterns and sounds in the ice, which tell them where to step to avoid falling into the freezing water. Each man's understanding of the ice is essential to his survival. "My father's cousin drowned last month," Grethe says, matter-of-factly. "He just disappeared under the ice." I realise why she keeps her radio close at hand.
One of my neighbours explains that the ice is becoming dangerously unpredictable. "You can see changes," Ole tells me sadly. "The sea doesn´t really freeze up until February or March now. And the ice disappears too quickly." The problem doesn't just affect fishermen. For the past few winters there has been insufficient sea ice for dogsleds to leave the island, to travel to distant settlements and traditional hunting grounds. Ole is anxious. His beloved huskies are restless; he knows other hunters have been forced to shoot their dogs, because they were getting no exercise and the men could not afford to feed them. But Ole is an optimist. He brightens at the thought that, one day, he might be able to grow potatoes. Or even a lemon tree.

Despite concerns about the ice, the winter weather is extreme, with temperatures reaching -20°C. The museum is buried up to its roof in snow, and since I am almost the only person using the building, I need to shovel a path through the drifts once a day to check my emails. Inside, the thick walls silence the sound of huskies howling for their ration of frozen meat. I'm also set apart from the daily life of the community, and my visits to the museum grow more infrequent as other activities – organised by the islanders to stave off the gloom of the polar night – lure me away from the deserted rooms, and my ethernet cable.

Upernavik feels remote from my life in London, but it isn't lonely. Greenlanders are distrustful of solitude and welcoming to strangers. Once children were warned to beware of qivitoq – people who had turned their backs on society and gone to live in the wilderness, becoming monstrous beings, half-animal and half-human, with malevolent powers. The meaning of the word has changed now, to reflect a different form of self-exile. Jessie Kleemann, an artist who grew up in Upernavik but now lives in Copenhagen, writes: "In recent years in Greenland, the name is used in a derogatory sense about individuals who, for seemingly incomprehensible reasons, have moved from the smaller towns to Nuuk [the capital] or Copenhagen."

Loyalty to home and family is important, but the temptation to move south to centres of culture and commerce is strong. I wonder whether Tukummeq, the youngest of three children, will find work on the island like her parents, or seek her fortune further afield. Climate change is bringing new opportunities to the Arctic (in the form of mining, such as the Citronen Zinc-Lead Project in the far north of Greenland), but it is also causing economic hardship and lifestyle change. As familiar seasonal routines are disrupted, communities such as Upernavik can feel increasingly claustrophobic. And there are other environmental concerns – women are advised not to breast-feed their children, as toxins in the sea will pass from any fish or seal that they consume into their milk.

This doesn't prevent people eating marine life, a more sustainable option than frozen goods imported from Europe. One evening I join my new friends around the table for a dinner of seal stew. In the compliments being paid to our host, Jonas, on his success with the well-known recipe, someone mentions the islanders' increasing dependence on supermarket ready-meals. I suspect the conversation might have moved on to other topics had I not been present, but Jonas senses an audience, and launches into a self-deprecating story that emphasises how his own life differs from that of his ancestors. He complains of his loss of freedom: the freedom to follow a traditional way of life and to earn a decent livelihood. The ever-present television is tuned to the National Geographic channel; as if on cue, a programme about the Amazon rainforest is playing mutely in the background. Jonas gesticulates at the screen, saying: "People should stop doing these things. Flying. Cutting down trees in Brazil. The ice is vanishing. Soon we cannot live here any more. You must tell people how difficult it is for us."

I don't dare disillusion Jonas by confessing that it isn't ignorance but merely habit that makes me, and so many others, persist in our reckless behaviour. His words cause me a sleepless night, and I rise the next morning with a new approach to my work. I've been writing about historical and mythical figures, taking my cue from the objects in the museum: bloodthirsty, unrepentant Orion, for example, whose constellation shines above my house on clear nights, a cautionary reminder of how unchecked greed can deplete natural resources; and Qujaavaarssuk, the legendary Inuit hunter, strong and hospitable, who lived through a time when the world was endangered by too much ice. How did their experience compare to the lives of Jonas and Ole? I decide to document the present, with all its unsettling changes, as well as revisiting the past, in a series of poems, starting with "The Night Hunter".

Everyone has a clearly defined role in Upernavik: the postman, the doctor, the taxi driver, even – and this was undoubtedly the short straw – the waste-disposal boy. But really, what was the role of the poet? And what has happened to those two archetypal and possibly anachronistic figures, the hunter and the shaman?

Though my skills aren't called upon again after Jonas's outburst, I begin to play a more active part in island affairs. In the interests of research, I attend kaffemiks (a round of coffee and chat that can last for hours), and although I understand little of the discussions I come away with more than just caffeine and iced biscuits. I join in the violent barrel-beating game that is played on Valentine's Day. Inspired by my own childhood reading of Laura Ingalls Wilder's stories of American frontier life, I teach a neighbour's children how to draw edible pictures in snow with boiling maple syrup.

Grethe, through her role at the museum, seemed to embody the thin and permeable divide between past and present on the island. Her way of life is still, in spite of its modernity, a testament to tradition. She's proud to use many of the objects that gather dust in museums further south: her sealskin boots with their detailed needlework, her ulu (a knife used only by women) and stylish hairclips with a decorative lozenge fashioned from sealskin. She is also proud of her language, and begins teaching it to me.

She starts with the "important words", meaning those I will need during my time in Upernavik. "I love you," she says. "Asavakkit. This is the most important!" she adds, smiling. Next I learn that on waking up in the morning I should say "nuannarpunga" rather than "I am full of a delirious joy in being alive". The shock of this new and daunting language makes me reflect on my use of English, and shows me a number of gaps in my vocabulary. Supplementing my sporadic lessons with an old English-Greenlandic dictionary from the museum, I come upon the many words for snow and ice for which the West Greenlandic (Kalaallisut) dialect is famous. I am delighted to learn the words iimisaarpoq ("the sea rises and falls slowly at the foot of the iceberg") and imingnarpoq ("the air is clear, so sounds can be heard from afar"). This wide vocabulary for environmental conditions is of fundamental importance in understanding the Arctic ecology, as Barry Lopez points out in his book Arctic Dreams. Scientists who arrive in Greenland today to study climate change without a grasp of the language may risk being as foolhardy as some early explorers, who rushed to conquer the North Pole without using established Inuit techniques for travel or survival on the ice.

I remembered the fishermen I had watched on my first day at the museum, stepping out so carefully and looking for patterns in the ice. Language is an equally complex structure, which has undergone similar levels of change as Greenlanders adopt global commerce in order to survive. The Unesco Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger has designated West Greenlandic as being "vulnerable" and predicted that the North and East Greenlandic dialects will disappear within a century. People who lose a language lose part of their identity. Even when the loss occurs over a series of generations, it cripples morale and understanding. The Greenlanders' perspective on the planet's future is increasingly relevant, but in what language will it be broadcast?

One day Grethe tells me a myth about the creation of the sun. "Long ago, before death came to the world, there was permanent darkness, and everyone lived too long. Two very old people were arguing.

'If only we had more light,' one said. 'Then people could travel further, find better food.'
'But once there is light in the world,' the other said, 'death will follow.'
'I'd rather live only a short time, and die where there's a light.'
'I'd rather live forever in the dark,' retorted her friend."
It sounds like the kind of circuitous discussion that often characterises the climate-change debate: two equally problematic alternatives followed by analysis of potential sacrifices and rewards.
"Well, what happened?" I ask.

“Oh, the first one stole the fire and ran away really fast. She rose up into the sky. And then she became the sun.”

“But where did the fire come from?” I persist.
“From the ice. In those days the water was burning.”

As the light returns, I watch the icebergs, which each day drift slightly further south and crumble a little further into the water. These changes are scarcely perceptible, just enough to suggest, disquietingly, that they might be animate beings. The sun, which has been below the horizon since November, will soon be visible, and the islanders are preparing to welcome it. The projected date for the ceremony is 6 February but the planet is taking its time. In fact, it’s a few days late. You can’t have a sun party without the sun. At last, on a day so misty it’s hard to tell whether there’s a sun or not, Grethe calls me: “Come over to the school. Now.”

Tukummeq’s class are forming a crocodile when I arrive. She gives me a yellow paper disc surrounded by crooked rays, clearly her own construction, to pin to my coat. We climb the zigzag streets to the highest point of Upernavik. The children began singing, quietly and uncertainly, prompted by the grown-ups. The song is an old-fashioned plea to the sun to shine kindly on their land. It elaborates on all the good things that the warm spring weather will bring. Over the mountains, I see a gold disc quiver for a second, before it is lost in the mist again.

Since my return from Upernavik I’ve been translating some East Greenlandic songs collected by the French anthropologist Paul-Émile Victor in the 1930s. These songs were performed at feasts and flyting [insult] matches, accompanied by drumming and dancing. Some were used in shamanic rituals to cast spells or cure illness. They were not written down, but passed down as part of a rich oral tradition. Singers often introduce a song by expressing their determination to tell the truth in the face of difficulties, their attempt to find the right words: saying imaartiinngilanga nipaartiinngilanga or “I will not be silent, I will not be quiet.” Perhaps the role of the poet is to carry on singing.

**The Night Hunter**

I am a poet. I am writing about Aua, the night hunter
and how his feet compact the snow and leave deep traces
as he passes my door destined for the harbour
where his boat is moored. I never see him. He might be a ghost
but that his feet compact the snow and leave deep traces.
When he is sleeping, as if by agreement, I go to the shore
where his boat is moored. He might be a ghost. I never see him
emerge from the long darkness. In the brief daylight,
when he is sleeping, as if by agreement, I go to the shore.
I see drops of blood, and strange soft ochre things
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The ice shelf bears the mark of sled and knife –
I see drops of blood, and strange soft ochre things.
All through the night none may yawn or wink an eye.
The ice shelf bears the mark of sled and knife.
The shaman tells the village, bound to him by hunger:
“All through the night none may yawn or wink an eye.”
I am a poet. I am writing about Aua, the night hunter
who is bound to the water, as I am bound to him by hunger.
I hear him pass my door, destined for the harbour.

http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/nancy-campbell-why-i-gave-up-a-life-in-london-to-become-a-writer-on-a-speck-of-land-in-greenland-a6873511.html

**Huffington Post, 22 March 2017**

The Polar Tombola

As the UK tour of *The Polar Tombola* draws to a close, Nancy Campbell reports on this exciting project which aims to encourage awareness of endangered Arctic languages

By Nancy Campbell

'This is the first time I've looked in a dictionary since my A-levels,' confided a middle-aged man, eagerly flicking through the yellowing pages of an 100-year-old Greenlandic-English dictionary. The dictionary was at London's Southbank Centre, part of participatory live literature project *The Polar Tombola*.

When we hear about change in the Arctic, it's more often related to climate than culture. But globalisation is causing rapid changes in the region - since the 1800s, 21 indigenous Arctic languages have become extinct, and more are being added to the list year by year. West Greenlandic is one of those vulnerable languages, according to UNESCO's *Atlas of World Languages in Danger.*

As an environmentalist I began to wonder how future scientists will study the Arctic ecosystem without access to the knowledge of generations enshrined in the region's languages. As a poet, I wonder what happens to an individual's experience of words when their language begins to disappear.

Hence *The Polar Tombola* - a game of chance, like the Italian Christmas raffle from which it draws it name. Players are encouraged to pick out a Greenlandic word and learn its meaning, then leave behind a word of their own. 'If you had to lose a word from your own language,' I ask, 'what would it be?' The question brings home a sense of what language loss is, one word at a time.

But it's a big commitment to vow never to use a word again and some people decide not to play along. One issue has come up again and again in conversations with players: censorship. 'I'm not giving away a word,' some people say. 'I don't have enough as it is.' Others are only too glad to give up words that have negative connotations - whether these are commonly understood (in the case of 'war' and 'hate') or distinctly personal ('compass'). Both reactions make it clear that the surrender of a word is a potent act. There is no going back: each renunciation is a binding contract, as the player's signature on the card attests.

At the end of each performance I carefully gather up all the cards on which words have been written: *The Polar Tombola* now has Danish, Dutch, Farsi, Icelandic, Korean and Spanish words, as well as many English ones. There are political epithets, meaningless verbal ticks and Latin scientific names. All these words will be safely stored away in the archive, and a selection have been published in the new anthology *The Polar Tombola: A Book of Banished Words*alongside new texts on language loss commissioned from poets including Vahni Capildeo, Will Eaves and Richard Price.

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nancy-campbell/the-polar-tombola_b_15521974.html

**Climate Cultures, 13 April 2017**

The Polar Tombola

As the UK tour of The Polar Tombola draws to a close, ClimateCultures member Nancy Campbell reports on this Arts Council funded project, which aims to encourage awareness of endangered Arctic languages – and the environment recorded in their specialist vocabularies

By Nancy Campbell

When we hear about change in the Arctic, it's more often related to climate than culture. But globalized culture and business is causing rapid changes in the region. Since the 1800s, 21 indigenous Arctic languages have become extinct, and more are being added to the list year by year.

The importance of these languages is recognized by people across the Arctic region and the wider world.

Once, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) relied on information from peer-reviewed scientific studies, and has largely excluded traditional knowledge (TK) as a source of information for its reports. But now there's a growing recognition from scientists that traditional knowledge can provide insights – and indeed that it's particularly useful in "remote" locations where there are no other means of observation. This knowledge, passed on down the generations, is enshrined in the language. As an environmentalist reading about these issues, I began to wonder how future scientists will study the Arctic ecosystem without access to specialist Arctic vocabularies. As a poet, I wondered what happens to an individual's experience of words when their language begins to disappear.

My own experience in the Arctic was enriched by learning Kalaallisut, and many of my projects (books such as How to Say I Love You in Greenlandic: An Arctic Alphabet) pay tribute to what the language has taught me.

A game of words

I decided to develop a way of spreading the word about endangered languages that took the issue outside the book into performance. Many Arctic nations have an oral rather than written tradition and the transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next lies at the heart of cultural practice. Performances of creative works of verbal art are increasingly endangered. It seemed an anomaly to address such issues on the printed page.

Hence The Polar Tombola – a game of chance, like the Italian Christmas raffle from which it draws it name. At events around the UK, from London's Southbank Centre to the Polar Museum in Cambridge, from Liverpool's World Museum to the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, I invited passers-by to pick a card from a vast snowball containing word-cards letterpress-printed with West Greenlandic terms. I had chosen words that related to the environment, such as "kagdleq" (thunder), "karnalak" (reindeer which is shedding its hairs), and "ikiarôrpoq" (the sun or moon shines through the clouds).

To learn the meaning of the word on their card, the player has to consult a Greenlandic-English dictionary from 1926. Browsing a printed dictionary is a relatively rare experience these days, and most players seem to enjoy it, so I encourage them to take their time, stopping to consider any words that intrigue them before reaching their goal. In the process, they acquire at least one word of Greenlandic, and an appreciation of the wider culture too.

Then comes the twist: each player is encouraged to leave a word behind. "If you had to lose a word from your own language," I ask, "what would it be?" The question brings home a sense of empathy for language loss, one word at a time.

It's a big commitment to vow never to use a word again and some people decide not to play along. One issue has come up again and again in conversations with players: censorship. "I'm not giving away a word," some people say. "I don't have enough as it is." Others are only too glad to give up words that have negative connotations – whether these are commonly understood (in the case of "war" and "hate") or distinctly personal ("compass"). Both reactions make it clear that the surrender of a word is a potent act. There is no going back: each renunciation is a binding contract, as the player's signature on the card attests. One player, the artist Steve Perfect, receives the Greenlandic word "kaggsuk" (bits of ice drifting in the sea) and decides to give up "ice cube". He later tells me he's been introducing bartenders around London to Greenlandic.

While such an interpretation might suggest a light-hearted approach to the linguistic challenges facing the polar regions, I was glad to see such enthusiastic public engagement. Since many people don't even know where Greenland is before they playThe Polar Tombola, it was necessarily a crash course in culture and language. I found that players were captivated by their brief interaction with the Greenlandic dictionary, astonished by the detailed and perceptive vocabulary for environmental conditions, and eager to learn more.

Back to books

At the end of the final performance at the Arnolfini in Bristol I carefully gathered up all the cards on which words had been written: Danish, Dutch, Farsi, Icelandic, Korean and Spanish words, as well as many English ones. There were political epithets, meaningless verbal ticks and Latin scientific names. A selection of these words have been published as an anthology The Polar Tombola: A Book of Banished Words, alongside new texts on language loss commissioned from contemporary writers including Vahni Capildeo, Will Eaves and Richard Price.

In A Book of Banished Words some writers use the commission to explore issues of linguistic politics closer to home: writer and musician Phil Owen chooses to ditch the word “dissever”, once used in an 1847 English report used to suppress the Welsh language in schools. Others take the commission into scientific territory: Nasim Marie Jafry eradicates the word “Coxsackie”, but not before exploring how this Algonquin term meaning “the hoot of an owl” mutated over time, becoming the name of a small US town, and then of a life-changing virus.

Language is important not only to the Arctic, but to all of us.

https://climatecultures.net/endangered-worlds/the-polar-tombola/

LITERATURHAUS MÜNCHEN

BRITISH COUNCIL UK/DE 2018

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# British Council Nature Writing Seminar
# Thursday 7 – Saturday 9 June 2018
# Literaturhaus München and Stiftung Nantesbuch

**Robert Macfarlane** is well-known as a writer about place, nature and people. He studied at Pembroke College, Cambridge and at Magdalen College, Oxford, and is currently a Fellow in English at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

He is the author of a number of prize-winning and bestselling books about 'landscape and the human heart', including *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), which examines the development of our attitudes to mountains and how they fire our imaginations; *The Wild Places* (2007), which explores the remaining wild places of Britain and Ireland, and our continuing need for 'wildness', and *The Old Ways* (2012), about walking, paths and memory-making. His books have won many awards worldwide. He is often grouped with a number of recent British authors who have provoked a new critical and popular interest in the literature of landscape and nature. *Landmarks* (2015) is 'a field guide to the literature of nature', making a case for the importance of 'strong style and single words to shape our sense of place'.

His most recent book, *The Lost Words: A Spell Book*, with the artist Jackie Morris, has sparked a grass-roots campaign to re-wild and re-green childhood in Britain and beyond, with tens of thousands of copies of the book being gifted by individuals and campaigns to primary schools throughout the UK. His books have been translated into many languages and widely adapted for film, radio, television and performance. In 2017 he wrote the script for *Mountain* – a film adapting his first book, directed by Jennifer Peedom and starring Willem Dafoe – which premiered at the Sydney Opera House before screening worldwide. Also in 2017 he was given the EM Forster Award For Literature by the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

He has written many essays for publications including the *Guardian*, the *New Yorker* and *Granta*, on subjects including 'The Anthropocene' and 'The English Eerie'.

In the autumn of 2018 he will publish *Ness*, with the artist Stanley Donwood, a 'medieval mystery play for the Anthropocene' that imagines 'what happens when land comes alive'.

In the spring of 2019 he will publish *Underland*, a major exploration of underworlds, darkness and legacy in the Anthropocene, that has been six years in the writing.

## Bibliography

2017 The Lost Words (with Jackie Morris)
2017 The Gifts of Reading
2015 Landmarks
2013 Holloway (with Dan Richards and Stanley Donwood)
2012 The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot
2007 The Wild Places
2003 Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination

## Awards

2017 EM Forster Award For Literature (American Academy of Arts and Letters)
2017 Hay Festival Book of the Year Award (The Lost Words)
2015 Samuel Johnson Prize shortlist (Landmarks)
2014 Premio ITAS Award (The Old Ways; Italy)
2013 Dolman Best Travel Book Award (The Old Ways)

2013 Samuel Johnson Prize shortlist (The Old Ways)
2009 Orion Book Award (The Wild Places; North America)
2008 Banff Mountain Festival Grand Prize (The Wild Places; North America)
2008 Independent Booksellers' Book of the Year Prize (The Wild Places)
2008 Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year Award (The Wild Places)
2007 Boardman Tasker Memorial Prize (The Wild Places)
2006 John Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize (shortlist; The Wild Places)
2004 Somerset Maugham Award (Mountains of the Mind)
2004 Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award (Mountains of the Mind)
2003 Guardian First Book Award (Mountains of the Mind)

**Guardian, 2 October 2017**

Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris – The Lost Words: A Spell Book
A book combining meticulous wordcraft with exquisite illustrations deftly restores language describing the natural world to the children's lexicon

By Katharine Norbury

In 2007, the new edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* introduced new words such as "broadband" while others, describing the natural world, disappeared. The dictionary's guidelines require that it reflect "the current frequency of words in daily language of children". However, the philosopher AJ Ayer introduced a generation to the notion that unless we have a word for something, we are unable to conceive of it, and that there is a direct relationship between our imagination, our ability to have ideas about things, and our vocabulary. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a groundswell of opposition to the word cull began to grow and, in 2015, the debate reached a tipping point when an open letter to the *OJD*, coordinated by the naturalist Laurence Rose, was signed by artists and writers including Margaret Atwood, Sara Maitland, Michael Morpurgo and Andrew Motion along with the brilliant illustrator Jackie Morris and the hugely acclaimed wordsmith, word collector, and defender of the natural world, Robert Macfarlane. "There is a shocking, proven connection between the decline in natural play and the decline in children's wellbeing," the letter said. A heated debate in the national press ensued, both for and against the lost words, and the collaboration between Morris and Macfarlane was born.

*The Lost Words* makes no mention of the dictionary and Macfarlane deftly insults the *OJD* with a taste of its own medicine by ignoring it. Instead, in a book of spells rather than poems, exquisitely illustrated by Morris, Macfarlane gently, firmly and meticulously restores the missing words. Acorn, blackberry, bluebell, conker and "perhaps the one that cut the deepest" for Morris, "kingfisher", are lovingly returned to future generations of children. It is a big, sumptuous, heavy book. A proportion of the profits will go to Action for Conservation, a charity that works with "disadvantaged and socially excluded children" and is "dedicated to inspiring young people to take action for the natural world". Hamish Hamilton has no current plans for a paperback, and I think this is a shame, because a lighter, cheaper edition that could be tucked under a little one's arm and afforded by the school library will cross the social divide just by being there.

The acrostic spell-poems are designed to be read out loud. It is a book for adults and children, for adults to read with children. The spells carry the spirit of their subject in their structure. Take the brilliant "Magpie Manifesto: / Argue Every Toss! / Gossip, Bicker, Yak and Snicker All Day Long!" Not only are the word and the bird restored and celebrated, but the spirit and nature and the clatter of the magpie are conserved within its lines.

*The Lost Words* is a beautiful book and, in terms of ideas, an important one. I once asked a magician what he considered to be the defining characteristic of his art. "Directing the gaze", he said. Re-enchantment, re-engagement and conservation of the natural world are ultimately only going to be possible if we retain the language with which to make it happen.

**New Statesman, 7 November 2017**

Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris: The Lost Words
*The Lost Words* makes the most familiar things shiny and interesting once more

Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris bring together enchanting and accessible poems and artwork.

By Frank Cottrell-Boyce

Last Christmas my parents ended up in separate hospitals. I spent the festive weeks driving a relentless triangle between them and home. I was fast becoming a car component.

Painfully early on New Year's Day I was trudging over the footbridge that linked the deserted multi-storey to the high-dependency unit, when the dawn chorus kicked in. In some dark corner below me, blackbirds were rolling out their melodies. On the wires overhead, the fax-machine racket of the starlings began.

I could try to describe the feeling I got from that moment: connection, maybe, or context. But the only important word at the time was "better". I felt better. Something I'd lost was being given back to me. Not just the sense of the nearness of the natural world, but a stream of memories of my primary school nature table, my pile of I-Spy books, morning walks with my parents when they were young and well. *The Lost Words* is a breathtaking book that sets out to replicate that moment of giving back. It has its origins in Robert Macfarlane's reaction to the news that the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* had dropped words such as "bluebell" and "buttercup" in favour of "broadband" and "bullet point". As he put it, blackberry had given way to BlackBerry.

Another Macfarlane masterpiece, *Landmarks*, is a hoard of names for things you might not notice if you could not name. I honestly have no idea how I ever lived without smeuse – a path worn through undergrowth by the habitual passage of mammals. Caochan is the Gallic name for a moorland stream that is hidden from view by vegetation.

If we can't name things, we don't notice them. Words help us see. So it's appropriate that Jackie Morris has created something that you could spend all day looking at. It's beautifully complex. Goldfinches flutter through all its pages because the collective term for goldfinches is a charm, and Macfarlane's poems are mostly charms. This is the kind of complexity that can enthral a child as much as an adult. Each subject is introduced by a flock of letters thrown across the page, with the name hidden among them. You can puzzle it out before turning over to the acrostic poem, sequenced alphabetically from "Acorn" to "Wren". I watch my youngest lean over each huge page as if he could dive into its landscape (which you can, because there's an exhibition of the original paintings at Compton Verney in Warwickshire).

At the proposal stage this book must have looked financially suicidal: expensive and niche. In fact it's a huge success, not just commercially but emotionally. One woman has set up a crowdfunder page to help get a copy into every primary school in Scotland. People have posted videos of their children chanting the spells from treetops, and reported the magical effect of reading it to relatives with dementia.

The roots of the success of this apparently very old-fashioned work – essentially a picture book about the English countryside – lie in the Twitter feeds of its creators. Macfarlane has been tweeting lost words to a rapidly growing audience for a year and Morris has been sharing sketches and notes on her feed. If you've been following them then the book has the slightly magical feel of something very digital and momentary incarnating itself as something you can touch and smell and give as a gift.

For all the gold and glamour of Morris's art, the view of nature offered is refreshingly accessible. Yes there are otters and hares – creatures you have to go looking for – but some of her most enchanting plates celebrate the mundane: starlings, magpies, things you might encounter on a hospital footbridge. Macfarlane's excavation of lost words from rural communities and ancient languages has a comic twin in *The Meaning of Liff*, John Lloyd and Douglas Adams's inspired made-up lexicon of feelings and objects for which there should be words. One of its most useful coinages is "Glassel (n): A seaside pebble which was shiny and interesting when wet, and which is now a lump of rock." *The Lost Words* has the reverse effect. It makes you look again at things that have become so familiar as to be invisible and to make them once more "shiny and interesting". It is utterly deglasseling.

**Guardian, 8 March 2015**

Robert Macfarlane: Landmarks
Robert Macfarlane finds poetry in the peatlands

This joyous meditation on land and language is a love letter to the British Isles

By Kirsty Gunn

“When we try to pluck out anything by itself, we find it hitched to the whole world,” wrote the great Scottish naturalist John Muir – a perfect description of Robert Macfarlane’s new book. For how on Earth might one ever describe *Landmarks* without bringing in the whole gorgeous history of the literature from which it emanates?

This, precisely, is Macfarlane’s point. “This is a book about the power of language,” he writes on page one. “It is a field guide to literature I love, and it is a word hoard of the astonishing lexis for landscape that exists in the comparison of islands, rivers, strands, fells, lochs, cities, towns, corries, hedgerows, fields and edgelands uneasily known as the British Isles.”

That word “astonishing” is a clue. For a sense of mystery, what Macfarlane describes as “un-knowing”, along with the precise names for things, is leaching away from our contemporary experience of nature and needs to be revived if we value our relationship to it. “This is not to suggest that we need adopt either a literal animism or a systematic superstition; only that by instrumentalising nature, linguistically and operationally, we have largely stunned the earth out of wonder,” he writes in his opening chapter. Here, he makes a study of a land mass many see as having nothing in it, the peatlands of Lewis, and a site – like so many of the empty places in the Highlands and Islands – under threat of massive wind turbine development. That remote hills and peatland are given over so thoughtlessly to the colonisation of these huge structures is precisely because the land is not seen to have any value – “linguistically and operationally”. Brindled Moor, on Lewis, is saved in part by a “peat glossary” that has been compiled by local inhabitants led by Finlay MacLeod, who have gathered up the myriad names and descriptions for all the places and phenomena enclosed by the moor. They are the superb authors of the phrase “counter-desecration phrasebook” that Macfarlane uses as the title of his first chapter. So we discover words such as feith – a watercourse running through peat, the form of which resembles veins or sinews; bugha – a green, bow-shaped area of moor grass formed by the winding of a stream; and rionnach maoim – shadows cast on the moorland by clouds moving across the sky on a bright and windy day – lighting up a place that is suddenly not empty or meaningless at all. “‘Those who wish to explain to politicians and others why landscape should be nurtured… face a daunting task where the necessary concepts and vocabulary are not to hand,’ wrote Finlay in a public essay,” Macfarlane quotes. “What is required is a new nomenclature of landscape and how we relate to it.” This is the tone of Landmarks – generous, sensitive, yielding always to the words of others even while Macfarlane’s own exquisite feel for language and its inferences carry us along. In so many ways this is not a book by or about Macfarlane at all, but more of a space of a thing (if by “thing” we mean the original idea of “thynge – a narrative not fully known”, as Macfarlane writes), a common ground, a sort of “gift” text that both gives back to the writers who have inspired him and passes on to the reader a wealth of unknown or forgotten or lesser-known books in an endlessly widening cycle of acknowledgment and amplification.

So each chapter gifts its tone and music to the writer who first inspired it: “The Living Mountain” rings with the words of the Cairngorms walker Nan Shepherd and her own book by that title; “Hunting Life” takes flight with the keen-eyed observations of JA Baker, author of *The Peregrine*; “North Minded” crystallises the writing of Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams* and Peter Davidson’s *The Idea of North* in its cool, distilled sentences and contemplation of what Davidson calls “the moment, lost and yet preserved for ever”.

Is there another book – fiction or nonfiction – so generous in its nature that has in its very structure the matrices of other writing and study and poetry fixed intricately into its threads and lines like webs within webs or currents within streams within rivers within seas? *Landmarks* may be single-minded in its pursuit of the exact, the particular, but in its articulation it sounds a chord of voices – of communities, writers, literatures – that may include the reader’s own.

This comes from the idea of placing at the end of every section a swathe of words cut and lifted from dictionaries and phrase books, from common usage, idiolect, slang and poetry. Words for stones and rubble, chucky, clitter, and fedspar; for ice, pipkrares and shuckle; for hill and gully and livestock and branches and leaves and weathers and, in “Ways of Walking”, for a certain kind of mud – muxy rout

and slunk. These glossaries are both summaries and a way ahead, where words are like “migrant birds, arriving from distant places… or strangers let into the home”, that they may enliven us with their meanings and stories and give back so much that has been culled. “The same year I first saw the peat glossary, a new edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* was published,” Macfarlane warns us. “Deletions included acorn, adder, pasture and willow… the natural displaced by the indoor and the virtual. For blackberry read Blackberry.”

That is where we come in, with the last glossary left blank for us to write, and indicates how *Landmarks* might be an ongoing project, a workbook of sorts that is endlessly added to and adumbrated; that it might teach us to be illative – its words bringing places and sensations alive in our using of them. “To sing the world back into being”, as Macfarlane puts it, “that static things”, as Nan Shepherd wrote, “may be caught in the very act of becoming”.

**The Observer, 10 June 2012**

*The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot by Robert Macfarlane – review*
Robert Macfarlane's exploration of our ties to the land's ancient pathways is a tour de force

By William Dalrymple

Travel writing – an individual telling a story about a journey through a landscape – is one of the world's most primal forms of literature. Tales of travel take us back to man's deepest literary roots, to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the wanderings of the Pandava brothers in the Mahabharata. Like epic poetry, but unlike the novel, the travel book has appeared spontaneously in almost all the world's classical and medieval cultures, from the journeys of Hsuan Tsang in India and Basho in Japan, through the topographies of Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo, to the Celtic monks venturing westwards on their immram wonder-journeys.

Recently it has become almost a cliché to predict the extinction of travel writing in the age of the internet and Google Earth. And yet this ancient form stubbornly refuses to die. For every piece predicting its demise there is another announcing the arrival of some new talent: in the past few years, writers as diverse as Pankaj Mishra, William Fiennes, Suketu Mehta, Rory Stewart and Peter Hessler have all produced masterworks that show the continuing vitality of the travel book, as well as its ability to reinvent itself for each successive generation. But of all these, there is one in particular who has shown how utterly beautiful a brilliantly written travel book can still be. That writer is Robert Macfarlane.

Macfarlane, a young English don at Cambridge, produced his first book in 2003: *Mountains of the Mind* was a genre-defying look at man's fixation with mountains. It won immediate acclaim and a cabinetful of awards. But it was Macfarlane's second, the rich and lyrical *The Wild Places*, that first showed how far he was capable of out-writing almost any other prose stylist of his generation.

*The Wild Places* is, as its title suggests, a search for the feral in modern Britain; but it is as much an exploration of the interior of Macfarlane's mind as it is of the wilder reaches of the British landscape. The tangled path it weaves through history and memory, literature and landscape, high-flown prose and earthy observation rises to a bravura climax in its final chapter. Here Macfarlane concludes that "the wild prefaced us, and it will outlive us. Human cultures will pass, given time, of which there is sufficiency. The ivy will snake and unrig our flats and terraces, as it scattered the Roman villas. The sand will drift into our business parks, as it drifted into the brochs of the iron age. Our roads will lapse into the land."

Now, after five years of work, Macfarlane has produced a sort-of sequel. *The Old Ways* is in some ways a continuation of its predecessors, being also about the connections between man and landscape. While in *The Wild Places* the chapters are arranged by topography – Beechwood, Island, Valley, Saltmarsh and Tor – in *The Old Ways* we have geological textures: Chalk, Silt, Peat, Roots and Flint. In other ways, however, Macfarlane inverts the concluding proposition of *The Wild Places*. For in *The Old Ways* the roads are shown to be almost indestructible, as if existing in geological rather than in human time, binding man to his past.

Macfarlane's search in this book is for the ancient routes that criss-cross the landscape – mainly in Britain, but with occasional forays to more exotic spots. So we meander with Macfarlane not just along the old tracks of the Icknield Way and the Ridgeway, but also, more fleetingly, on "a branch line of the most famous pilgrimage route of them all, the Camino de Santiago" and on Buddhist trails in the

eastern Himalayas, exploring the links between topography and belief. The subtitle of the book is "A Journey on Foot", but in reality it is not one journey, but many, and not all are on foot: some of the best passages are about the old seapaths and ocean roads linking the islands of the Outer Hebrides with Norway, Iceland and Orkney. Like the pathways that weave the countryside together, there is no central spine to this book. Instead it is held together by a tight matrix of ideas about "the compact between walking and writing", and how roads bind us to the land, and to our past.

The poet and walker Edward Thomas (1878-1917) is a constant presence. It was his book on the Icknield Way that first led Macfarlane to his theme, and Macfarlane is fascinated by Thomas's idea of how an ancient road can be part of a ghost world "secretly sharing the landscape with the living" where you can connect with the thoughts, feelings and stories of previous walkers along the same footpaths: "walking as seance". He writes how "in the dusk of the Holloways, these pasts felt excitingly alive and co-existent – as if time had somehow pleated back on itself". Like Thomas, he is in love with the notion "that history issues from geography in the same way that water issues from a spring".

Bruce Chatwin is another clear influence and, like Chatwin, Macfarlane believes that walking is both therapeutic and inspirational. Yet his recklessly poetic and sometimes almost mystical speculations are always firmly rooted in the precision of his observation and reporting and irrigated by the wide variety of different interests he brings to his books. As an English don, he is profoundly literate, and here he brings the full weight of his erudition to the table. In different places in this book he quotes a dazzling range of obscure poets and novelists as well as great galaxies of writers on walking, wildlife and landscape.

Macfarlane can also tell a good story, and is companionable and funny: unlike many nature writers, he likes people, and his landscapes are filled not just with animals, stones and plants, but the countrymen – sailors, botanists, poets, archaeologists and crofters – who inhabit these remote places. Some he seeks out for their knowledge, others for their stories. One he admires for "his ability to read landscapes back into being, and to hold multiple eras of history in plain sight".

Above all, perhaps, Macfarlane brings to his books his love and knowledge of the natural world, and so cross-fertilises the rich till of his travel writing with the loam of another very English tradition of observational literature: nature writing. He knows his plants and his flowers and can tell the "screech of a barn owl" from "the furry hoot of a tawny". He is poetic and lyrical in his approach to the natural world, but can also be precise and scientific: while in *The Wild Places* we were given the best one paragraph explanation I have read of why leaves turn brilliant colours in the autumn, here there is a lucid description of why the eyes of certain animals reflect light in the dark – with each species giving off a slightly different shift in colour.

With this mastery of both travel and nature writing he brings together into confluence two great streams of British nonfiction. There are echoes here of Roger Deakin, Ted Hughes and WG Sebald, and, more faintly, of their American counterparts, Peter Matthiessen and Barry Lopez. But Macfarlane seems to have learned especially from the careful observation and incandescent prose of one of his heroes, JA Baker, the anonymous Essex librarian who wrote one of the great classics of 20th-century nature writing, *The Peregrine*, a book that Macfarlane has championed and for whose US edition he wrote a fine introduction.

Like Baker, Macfarlane is read above all for the beauty of his prose and his wonderfully innovative and inventive way with language. Like Baker's peregrines, he stoops with unerring accuracy on his prey – the perfect image, the most elusive metaphor – and he can write exquisitely about anywhere, even Royston. This book is as perfect as his now classic *The Wild Places*. Maybe it is even better than that. Either way, in Macfarlane, British travel writing has a formidable new champion.

LITERATURHAUS MÜNCHEN

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# British Council Nature Writing Seminar
# Thursday 7 – Saturday 9 June 2018
# Literaturhaus München and Stiftung Nantesbuch

**Sarah Hall** was born in Cumbria.

She took a degree in English and Art History at Aberystwyth University, and began to take writing seriously from the age of twenty, first as a poet, several of her poems appearing in poetry magazines, then as a fiction-writer. She took an M Litt in Creative Writing at St Andrew's University and stayed on for a year afterwards to teach on the undergraduate Creative Writing programme.

Her first novel, *Haweswater*, was published in 2002. It is set in the 1930s, focuses on one family - the Lightburns - and is a rural tragedy about the disintegration of a community of Cumbrian hill-framers, due to the building of a reservoir. It won several awards, including the 2003 Commonwealth Writers Prize (Overall Winner, Best First Book).

Her second book, *The Electric Michelangelo* (2004), set in the turn-of-the-century seaside resorts of Morecambe Bay and Coney Island, was shortlisted for the 2004 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book).

*The Carhullan Army* (2007), won the 2007 John Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize and was shortlisted for the 2008 Arthur C Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction.

Her fourth novel, *How to Paint a Dead Man* (2009), was published 2009 and was longlisted for the Man Booker prize and won the Portico Prize for Fiction 2010.

Her first collection of short stories, *The Beautiful Indifference* (2011), won the Portico Prize for Fiction 2012 and the Edge Hill short story prize. Her second collection of short stories, *Madame Zero* (2017), was published in 2017. The lead story 'Mrs Fox' won the BBC National Shorts Story Award in 2013.

Sarah Hall is an Honorary Fellow of Aberystwyth University and the University of Cumbria, and a fellow of the Civitella Ranieri Foundation. She is also a member of the Royal Society of Literature.

## Bibliography

2017 Madame Zero
2015 The Wolf Border
2013 Mrs Fox
2011 The Beautiful Indifference
2009 How to Paint a Dead Man
2007 The Carhullan Army
2004 The Electric Michelangelo
2002 Haweswater

## Awards

2013 BBC National Short Story Award
2013 Granta 'Best of Young British Novelists'
2010 Portico Prize
2008 Arthur C Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction
2007 James Tiptree, Jr. Award
2007 John Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize
2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book)
2004 Man Booker Prize for Fiction
2003 Betty Trask Award
2003 Commonwealth Writers Prize (Overall Winner, Best First Book)
2003 Lakeland Book of the Year Award (Ron Sands Prize)

**Independent, 5 July 2017**

Sarah Hall: Madame Zero

A stunning new collection
The haunting new collection of short stories from an author twice nominated for the Man Booker Prize

By Lucy Scholes

"Mrs Fox", the story that opens *Madame Zero*, Sarah Hall's stunning new collection, won the prestigious BBC National Short Story Award in 2013 – the same year Hall was named one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists.

It's an arresting, eerie tale in which a woman metamorphoses into a vixen in front of her husband's eyes – "Something is wrong with her face. The bones have been re-carved. Her lips are thin and her nose is a dark blade. Teeth small and yellow. The lashes of her hazel eyes have thickened and her brows are drawn together, an expression he has never seen, a look that is almost craven ... She is leaning forward putting her hands down, lifting her bottom. She has stepped out of her laced boots and is walking away. Now she is running again, on all fours, lower to the earth, sleeker, fleeter. She is running and becoming smaller, running and becoming smaller, running in the light of the reddening sun, the red of her hair and her coat falling, the red of her fur and her body loosening. Running."
This scene is a perfect example of Hall's visceral, elemental writing, but it's also indicative of the central theme that runs through the collection: transformation.

In "Case Study 2" a half-feral, neglected child is rescued from a mountainside commune, social services' attempt to rehabilitate him monitored by a therapist who becomes more closely involved with her patient than is strictly professional. In *Luxury Hour* a new mother finds herself momentarily denying the existence of her child when she's brought face to face with an ex-lover, the erotic trumping the maternal.

"Goodnight Nobody" is an uneasy coming-of-age story in which we meet an 11-year-old girl who's had to grow up too quickly. Meanwhile, in "Evie" – the story with which the collection draws to a close, and a more than worthy bookend companion for "Mrs Fox" – a previously mild-mannered wife finds herself unmoored by a tumult of wild desires and extravagant appetites: "She'd become a baroque version of herself, a decadent."

There are also depictions of a world distorted, snapshots of dystopias. A regressive government bill in "Theatre 6" sees foetal care prioritised over that of the mother's life. Civilisation has all but collapsed in *Later, His Ghost*, the country under assault from squalls that have destroyed buildings and infrastructure. One of the few survivors combs the ruins looking for a complete copy of *The Tempest*, Prospero's "calm seas, auspicious gales" speech offering much needed solace. Then, in *One in Four* the "storm" is of a different kind, a pandemic – "Tents outside the hospitals, chaos, people drowning in their own fluid" – a glimpse of a deadly plague through the eyes of a man responsible for the mass manufacture of an ineffective vaccine, now asking for forgiveness.

Twice nominated for the Booker Prize for her novels *The Electric Michelangelo* and *How To Paint A Dead Man*, Hall is as bold with her pen as her character Evie is with her newfound sensuality: there's nothing furtive about these brilliant stories. Each one is a leap into a dark, mysterious void that ultimately reveals glittering terrors therein.

http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/madame-zero-sarah-hall-faber-a7824601.html

**Sunday Herald, 30 June 2017**

Sarah Hall: Madame Zero

Extraordinary

By Alastair Mabbott

She's been Booker-nominated for her novels, and this is Sarah Hall's second collection of short stories, following up 2011's acclaimed The Beautiful Indifference. The nine stories gathered together here showcase her versatility, and the ease with which she can delineate both interior and external landscapes – as in Wilderness, when a Yorkshire woman who has moved to South Africa to be with her boyfriend realises that he's a dead loss after all, and experiences vertigo in more than one sense on a perilous railway viaduct.

The opening story, Mrs Fox, already the winner of 2013's BBC National Short Story Award, is a classic piece of magical realism. Told from the point of view of a confused and distressed husband, it shows his wife metamorphosising into a fox before his eyes, and his ultimately doomed attempts to incorporate her, in her new form, into their old domestic surroundings.

That's not the only story that lingers in the memory long afterwards. Even in a collection that maintains a very high standard, some inevitably stand out more than others, such as Case Study 2, a report on a 12-year-old boy who has no experience of the world outside the commune in which he was raised, and is put into the care of the social services when it's discovered that his health is suffering. His skewed idea of himself as an individual, his persistent use of the collective nouns we and us, are such a challenge to his care worker that she finds her ability to cope with the job slipping.

Later, His Ghost presents a form of climate change we haven't seen before: a world constantly buffeted by winds so fierce that 90mph gales are considered mild weather, and anyone brave enough to go outside is in danger from flying debris. Hall's narrator fights his way through abandoned and half-destroyed houses looking for a very specific Christmas present.

All her narrators are distinct and well-defined, from the young girl Jem, whose mother works in a hospital mortuary and who is trying to come to terms with the mauling of a baby by a dog in her street, to the surgeon in Theatre 6, who has to deal with a pregnant woman whose baby can't be saved, which, under the political strictures of the time, is a "hot potato" medical staff would prefer to avoid.

The undercurrents of sensuality implicit in Hall's prose finally swell into a powerful eroticism in the concluding story, Evie, in which the only hope for a stale marriage appears to be the wife's surrender to the deepest and darkest urgings of her libido. Her husband, narrating, is conflicted, persuaded to go along with her wishes despite his misgivings about the potential consequences and his own guilty enjoyment.

Hall distinguishes herself across an extraordinary range of stories, in full command of a protean style which adapts itself easily to each situation and narrator. Her prose, which can seem both understated and lushly evocative at the same time, haunts and sometimes unsettles.

http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/15371848.__39_Extraordinary__39____Review__Madame_Zero__by_Sarah_Hall/

**The Cardiff Review, 7 November 2017**

Sarah Hall: Madame Zero
What We're Reading: Madame Zero

By John Lavin

I've been a great admirer of the Cumbrian author Sarah Hall's writing ever since her first short story collection, *The Beautiful Indifference* was published six years ago. From the opening paragraph, in which Manda Slessor relates how "she'd beaten two girls outside the Cranemaker's Arms in Carlisle", it was immediately apparent that here was a writer with new and interesting things to say. Furthermore, here was a Cumbrian writer with no desire to pander to the Lake District Tourism Board: for Hall—I have to say, somewhat alarmingly—the region was "burnt-farm, red-river, raping territory".

That opening story, "Butcher's Perfume", remains one of the most original short stories I've read this decade. Written with a keen ear for Cumbrian dialect, it recounts a schoolgirl's friendship with the daughter (the aforementioned Manda) of a notorious local family, "known for prison sentences… [and] fertility at every age". Hall leads us to a denouement whereupon the girl chances upon an imprisoned, bound horse that appears to have been consistently tortured. Not knowing what to do, she tells her friend's brother and unwittingly unleashes the fierce retribution of the Slessor family upon the perpetrator. The world of *The Beautiful Indifference* is one in which primal inclinations are never far from the surface, waiting to be acted upon.

In Hall's new collection, *Madame Zero*, the focus has mostly moved away from Cumbria, but primal instincts remain very much under the microscope. The book takes its title from a case study about 'a woman with an identity disorder who believed she did not exist' and although this is referred to directly in the opening, 'Mrs Fox', it is important to note that Hall has stated that the 'title... work[s] for me across all the stories'.

Important because the stories in *Madame Zero* are defined by their author's ambition and questioning intellect, coupled with a sensibility that is evidently drawn towards the ambiguities and transgressions that mainstream society prefers to keep at arm's length. Lazy critics may seek to label her a feminist writer, or an erotic or dystopian one but while these categories are significant to Hall's work, she is very evidently a writer fundamentally opposed to classifications and constrictions.

Hall studied art at university and there is a touch of the painter about some of the more intuitive aspects of *Madame Zero*—a particularly memorable example being "the long dark vee of birds" that close the terrifying "Theatre 6" (in which the sanctity of the foetus has taken complete precedent over the well-being of the mother). Surreal imagery is regularly buffeted by the gritty realities at the heart of Hall's stories; blurring the lines between the two and making the reader reappraise their perspectives. As with the work of David Lynch, you feel that Hall is confident enough in her own sensibility to include things which don't make ordinary logical sense if they make intuitive artistic sense.

The collection is bookended by two justly lauded—and thematically linked—short stories. The aforementioned "Mrs Fox", which won the BBC National Short Story Prize and "Evie", shortlisted for the Sunday Times Short Story Award. Hall has described her stories as having something of the 'fever dream' about them and this is certainly true of these pieces, both of which discuss female sexuality – and as a consequence male attitudes towards it – while giving, as Hall herself would have it, the reader 'a huge wallop, one you don't see on the surface'.

In "Evie" we are introduced to Alex who for years dated women he thought would be exciting because of their names or style of clothing. However:

> They were never as interesting or free-spirited as their names suggested. He'd expected vivacity and petulance, oblique intelligence... inspiring something torrid in him, lust leaning towards deviancy; someone who would cancel out the desire to upgrade.

That coolly devastating "desire to upgrade" tells its own story about Alex; and his best friend Richard feels finally impelled to inform him that he is being "ridiculous" and looking for "a fantasy woman." Chastened by these encounters and by his friend's disapprobation, he decides to change tack and marry Evie, who he thinks of as "pleasant":

> he had never really loved his wife... [but] had become fonder of her over the years. She did nice things for him—making him sandwiches to take to work, buying replacement toothbrushes...

Until one day when a strange change comes over Evie. A previously fastidious person, she becomes a voracious consumer of sugary foods, alcohol, pornography and sex—requesting that Alex mimic the behaviour of the males in the pornography they now regularly watch together. Alex, of course, is delighted that:

> She didn't want foreplay or romance. She wanted candid and carnal exchange.

Evie becomes obsessed with the idea of a threesome and makes inappropriate advances to men in the office, before finally convincing Alex to invite Richard around. The ensuing, nightlong pornographic encounter leaves Evie literally foaming at the mouth and very nearly dead. At the hospital, it transpires that the change in Evie's desires is the result of meningioma, a slow growing tumour on the brain. She has, in other words, become her husband's ideal "fantasy" woman only because she has developed a life-threatening, mind altering disease.

"Mrs Fox", meanwhile, is one of the most strikingly accomplished "The Metamorphosis"-style stories that I've read this side of Kafka himself. Hall describes the transformation of a woman into a fox with matter-of-fact élan, paying great attention to descriptive detail, so that the reader is able to suspend their disbelief in a way that they might not do with a fairytale or work of genre fiction. Again the work is self-evidently concerned with female sexuality but the male character is a great deal more likeable, and indeed almost the polar opposite of Alex.

"That he loved his wife is unquestionable", the story begins and indeed this most devoted of husbands never fails to love his wife in her new incarnation, not discounting the little cubs she bears, that he hopes are his. There is quite a demand for suspension of disbelief in this story but such is Hall's skill as a writer and as an intuitive artist, that the reader feels richly rewarded for getting lost inside the 'fever dream' with her. And who, indeed, would not suspend their disbelief for a writer with closing sentences as beautiful as the one that finds Mrs Fox's husband at the window, gazing out at his "unbelonging wife"?:

> To watch her run into the edgelands, breasting the ferns and scorching the fields, to see her disappear into the void—no—how could life mean anything without his unbelonging wife?

http://www.cardiffreview.com/single-post/2017/11/01/What-Were-Reading-Madame-Zero

**Chicago Tribune, 11 June 2015**

Sarah Hall: The Wolf Border

By Nick Romeo

Early in Sarah Hall's new novel, "The Wolf Border," a zoologist admires the stark and bloody death of a wolf in the wild. The animal is the alpha male of his pack, but he's also getting old. After engaging a younger challenger in a status fight, he doesn't survive the neck bites he sustains.

While visiting her aging mother in a nursing home, the zoologist considers the deaths of wolves instructive: "(H)umanity's demise, she thinks, is dreadful. We eke it out, limp on, medicate, become expensively compromised." A swift bite to the neck might be preferable.

The zoologist heroine of Hall's novel is Rachel Caine, a woman in her late 30s who manages projects that reintroduce wolves to remote areas of wilderness. The book opens with Rachel running a wolf restoration team on the Nez Perce reservation in northern Idaho. Soon, however, an eccentric proposition lures her back to the remote Cumbria region of northwest England where she grew up. A charming and insanely wealthy earl named Thomas Pennington plans to release a breeding pair of wolves into a massive nature reserve on his rural estate, and he wants Rachel to direct the operation. Unsure whether she'll be humoring the lavish whims of a bored aristocrat or actually assisting an innovative conservationist, Rachel accepts the job.

Cumbria is dense with farms and livestock, and she immediately encounters the hysterical fears of local landowners. Rachel receives countless emails and letters from "paranoid west Lakeland smallholders foreseeing escape and slaughter on an almost gothic scale." Even when physically contained, wolves lurk as a deep anxiety in the human mind, ghostly kindlers of ancient fears. The wolves in Hall's novel are dual beings: simultaneously intangible creatures of our imagination and embodied predators of surpassing grace and skill.

Wolves seem to spur certain novelists to flights of high lyricism. Cormac McCarthy describes the running of a female wolf in "The Crossing" like this: "Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight …. Where she ran the cries of the coyotes clapped shut as if a door had closed upon them and all was fear and marvel." Hall never strikes quite such a rapturous tone, but her prose is often gorgeous and suggestive. Wolves occasion some of the novel's finest writing. She describes a wolf as "that creature of the outer darkness," and "the god of all dogs." Their eyes are "eerie bulbs of light," and the gaze of a male is "a cold austerity … a rarity." Wolves lifting their noses to the wind are "reading the air."

The word "reading" is a particularly lovely choice, one that hints at the mentally complex work of wolves processing their scent environments. The power and subtlety of non-verbal intelligence is a major theme in the novel. Wolves are "analysts" who "comprehend" motion. Just as the language of human cognition maps onto wolves, the scientific diction of zoology also embraces human domains. The earl, for instance, "resides at the apex, above all trophic levels." This is a psychologically plausible way for someone like Rachel, habituated to the world of wolves, to perceive a wealthy man. But it's also a subtle tactic that Hall uses to gesture toward the latent animal appetites driving human life. "The Wolf Border" tracks Rachel through romantic and familial entanglements, childbirth and a series of dramatic events surrounding the wolf project in Cumbria. The plotting and characterization are crisp and effective, but perhaps the greatest pleasure is her prose.

Nabokov once said of Tolstoy's style that he "unwraps the verbal parcel for its inner sense, he peels the apple of the phrase, he tries to say it one way, then a better way, he gropes …." Hall also gropes her way toward increasingly rich meanings.

"The snow begins to melt and the ice beneath reveals itself like broken glass, the weapons in a Saxon hoard, instruments of havoc." Modern English earls might be to Saxon warriors what dogs are to wolves, but something older and fiercer lies beneath the surface of both creatures.

http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/books/ct-prj-wolf-border-sarah-hall-20150611-story.html

**Independent, 26 March 2015**

Sarah Hall: The Wolf Border

A mysterious, gripping dance with wolves

Hall's fifth book is a lyrical, beautiful and curiously uplifting novel about body politics and the body politic

The stars of Sarah Hall's fifth novel are not her flawed, credible cast of characters but the wolves suggested by her title. Defined "as much by their absence as their iconography," their fleeting appearances and sudden vanishing acts drive The Wolf Border's plot, affect every character and indeed entire nations. By the end, they even embody this lyrical, beautiful and curiously uplifting novel about body politics and the body politic.

Wolves were potent symbols long before Hall's story of re-wilding them in the Cumbrian countryside, but in her hands they inhabit liminal spaces in which wilderness and civilisation, wildness and the desire to settle down, meet and mingle. Just as often in The Wolf Border, wolves transgress the boundary between reality and the imagination, haunting Hall's central character, Rachel Caine. When she is woken by their howls in the night, Rachel notes, "there is no need to imagine, no need to dream. They reign outside the mind."

Rachel is a wolf expert in self-elected exile in Idaho, avoiding an emotionally exhausting mother (Binny), a stepbrother, Lawrence, who fled them both as a teenager and a country that has faded from

her mind. Not one to commit to anything save the lupine, Rachel brandishes sex to attract men and keep them at arm's length. What tempts her home is a job reintroducing the first wild wolves into Britain in 350 years. Rachel finally yields when the combative Binny dies, opening up the necessary emotional terrain.

In this way, Hall parallels the wolves' gradual reintegration into England with Rachel's own: in one of her dreams, a wolf is an "echo, a mirror". As the animals graduate from quarantine to enclosed wilderness, Rachel reconnects with the damaged Lawrence, begins a tentative, if fleshly relationship with the local vet and negotiates the political minefield surrounding her employer, Lord Pennington, an aristocratic Boris Johnson impersonator with slightly more taste: "Once in situ, she knows [the wolves] will divide the country, just as they will quarter the imagination."

The novel's big politics – a slightly alternative reality with £1 notes and a newly-independent Scotland – are perhaps less engrossing than Rachel's fraught emotional homecoming. Pregnant after a one-night stand, Rachel is taught new lessons in routine and unruliness by her baby son Charles. Hall writes vividly about the boredom and pleasures of motherhood, and the strangely precarious security it brings.

Such joyous fragility characterises The Wolf Border itself, which weighs sense and sensuality, order and chaos, with sumptuous grace. Hall writes gorgeously about small moments: "Long silhouettes that drool from bushes and trees", otters' fur that "snugs the water".

But her plot too is gripping, propelled by some intriguing mysteries, a couple of conspiracies and a pulse-racing set-piece in which Rachel juggles baby, wolves, brother and vocation. Figuratively, of course.

http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-wolf-border-by-sarah-hall-book-review-a-mysterious-gripping-dance-with-wolves-10135394.html#commentsDiv

**Guardian, 25 March 2015**

Sarah Hall: 'I love writing about sex, the civil veneer stripped off'

The books interview: the author of The Electric Michelangelo talks about her new book, The Wolf Border, how motherhood has affected her work and why avoiding politics in fiction is juvenile

By Sarah Crown

Want to know what it takes for a literary author to become a household name? Ask Hilary Mantel. Never mind the three decades-worth of praise and prizes she garnered for her pre-*Wolf Hall* output, it wasn't until she tackled the Tudors that she made the step-change. These days, of course, she's Dame Hilary, universally revered – but not so very long ago she was writing in relative obscurity, vigorously championed by her supporters, but little known by the wider public.

Four novels and one short-story collection into her career, Sarah Hall finds herself in a similar position. On the back of her fifth novel, out this month, her publisher, Faber, lists her achievements in bold. "Winner", it declares, simply: "Commonwealth Writers' Prize. BBC National Short Story Award. Portico Prize for Fiction. John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. EM Forster Award." It's an exceptional record for a novelist only just entering her 40s – and that's without her inclusion in the Granta list of best young British novelists and her numerous short- and longlistings: for the Man Booker (twice), the Impac, the Frank O'Connor prize, the Arthur C Clarke award. But despite the laurels, the eulogies ("the best British writer around right now", according to Foyles's Jonathan Ruppin) and glowing comparisons to the likes of Raymond Carver and Alice Munro, the odd sense lingers of Hall as a well-kept secret. If you're currently revelling in your membership of the initiate, however, be warned: her new novel looks set to blow the lid off. "Honestly," says Hall, "I think it's the best thing I've done. Everything I've learned about writing over the years, it's in this book."

*The Wolf Border* is set in Cumbria, on the fictional estate of Annerdale – the largest private estate in a country that is, as the central character Rachel observes with lightly jaundiced eye, "particularly owned". A Cumbrian native, Rachel has been living a nomadic existence overseas, setting up camp wherever her zoological work took her. Now home is calling. Her once indomitable mother is dying by degrees, and Annerdale's cavalier earl wants her help in furthering his precious scheme to reintroduce

the grey wolf to England. Fans of Hall's fiction will spot the signature notes: the northern setting, the civic engagement, the dynamic, faceted female lead. But there is also a sense that she has moved up a gear; the canvas is broader and the plot appreciably thicker than in her earlier works. Questions of inheritance, national and familial, echo back and forth across a novel in which the political and personal meet and mingle. The wolves themselves, meanwhile, furnish both metaphysical resonance and profound, physical reality: fairytale monsters, flesh-and-blood predators, they ghost through the pages like shadows; rarely seen but deeply felt.

Hall's first encounter with wolves came when she was a child, at Lowther Wildlife Park. The park has long since closed, but it crops up under an alias in The Wolf Border; Hall, like Rachel, was raised in Cumbria, and it soon becomes clear that the novel is threaded with autobiography. As well as a shared geography, Hall gives her main character her own alma mater, Aberystwyth, and has her spend time on an Idaho reservation that Hall visited in her 20s.

We are talking in the living room of Hall's house in Norwich on a bright day in early spring; publicity for *The Wolf Border* has been cut to fit around the schedule of her seven-month-old daughter, who is currently being promenaded around the local park by Hall's partner. The state of motherhood provides the novel with its emotional core; Hall wrestles intently with the questions it raises, and describes the bodily ordeal of pregnancy and birth in such visceral detail that I took it for granted that this, too, was drawn directly from life. But it turns out she wasn't pregnant when she began the book; in a rare case of life mirroring art, that came later.

"It was the thing I was most worried about," she says now. "Motherhood's such a personal thing, a fugue state; I didn't know if, not having been through it, I could pull it off. Then, when I'd finished the first draft, I did get pregnant." She laughs. "I finished the copy-editing two weeks before the baby came – horrendously uncomfortable, lying on the bed with the computer balanced – so I was able to check through the pregnancy stuff, but not what came after."

Hall was born in 1974, just within the boundaries of the Lake District national park, in a "tiny hamlet, near the village of Bampton, which is near the bigger village of Shap, which is on the A6". The sense her description gives of her birthplace as the still centre from which the wider world spins out is reflected in her work. Although it is years now since she headed down the A6, in her fiction, she is continually drawn back to this remote, well-written corner of the north-west. She puts its pull down to a "combination of intimacy and unknowability. When people think of the Lake District they think of Wordsworth and the other Romantic-with-a-capital-R writers, but I always saw it as a great setting for adventure. In my third novel, *The Carhullan Army*" – a near-future dystopia set in a Britain of limited resources and repressive, military-style law – "fanatics go up into the mountains and use them to their advantage. In *The Wolf Border*, there are political debates about what the national park is for. I like the act of rewriting the Lakes: of pushing back against history and trying to decide what the modern way is."

The presence of Cumbria in each of Hall's novels means she is often spoken of as a "northern" writer. She is wry about the label ("the further away from the capital you are, the more exotic you seem"), but quick to point out that "we're a small country: what affects the north affects the rest. In *The Wolf Border*, the Earl sits in the House of Lords and has his finger on the nation's pulse. You can feel the vectors of power." On the place of politics in her work, she is emphatic. "I don't see that books can be written without political context – not if they're relevant and ambitious. Our lives are politically wound. There seems to be such fear in this country of saying that outright about literature, as if it makes for lesser work, as if you're writing a reductive manifesto. But to avoid politics seems somehow juvenile."

A northern writer Hall may be, but it wasn't until she put some serious distance between herself and her birthplace that she found herself writing about it. While studying for an MA at St Andrews she met an American law student whom she went on to marry; though the marriage was shortlived, its legacy was substantial: a move to the US proved the catalyst she needed to embark on novel-writing. The pair fetched up in the small town of Lexington, Virginia, after her husband was awarded a scholarship to a nearby law school. It was, she says, "kind of a brilliant place, but very southern and Christian: a serious culture shock. I walked dogs for this mad lady who had a loaded civil war cannon on her porch, pointed at the house of a neighbour she hated". Uprooted, with time on her hands, she began writing the book that would become *Haweswater*, her version of the real-life story of the drowned village of Mardale. "It was like burying myself in the soil of the valley, not to sound too vampiric about it," she says. "I was brought up three miles from the reservoir: there were people in my village who'd lived in Mardale; our church choir used to sing at the annual memorial service. The story was right

there, but I needed to go away to write it. You can't see all of a place until you look at it from a distance."

If *Haweswater* is inward-looking, a close-up study of an isolated community drawn in wintry greys and browns, Hall's second Booker-shortlisted novel, *The Electric Michelangelo*, the story of a tattoo artist who sets up shop on Coney Island amid the freak shows and fairground rides, is, by contrast, an explosion outwards; fireworks on the fourth of July. Writing it was, she says, "an act of exuberance. I was thrilled to find that I was allowed to be a writer, so I threw everything at it: language, rhyming sentences, non-existent plot." Funnily enough, she says, "they love it in France. It riffs on concepts – pages and pages about what it means to get tattooed – and they like that. Here, it's like, 'Where's the plot?' Ideally, I guess, you strike a balance, but there's no balance in that book. I look at it now and think, what were the Booker judges thinking? Rowan Pelling was on the panel; she was editing The Erotic Review at the time, and it's full of sex, maybe that was it. Most novels avoid sex like the plague, but I love writing about it."

Really? Why?

"I like extreme situations: people pushed out of their comfort zones; the civil veneer stripped off. Sex does that." Also, she says, "it's a challenge. You have to get the language right when writing about sex: if you want it to live on the page, you have to consider your choice of expression, the power of an image, the sound of a word. It gets down to the absolute essence of writing."

The same is true, she believes, of short stories. Her first collection, *The Beautiful Indifference*, came out in 2011 to rapturous reviews; the form proved the perfect vehicle for Hall's particular brand of brawny artistry. Val McDermid said of the taut, brutal opening story, "Butcher's Perfume", that it exemplified "the power of fiction to get to the grim heart of things". With short stories, Hall says, "you're required to fit much more in. It's the world-on-the-head-of-a-pin thing. It was excellent discipline for me, the baggy, sloppy novelist, to think about form and plot."

Now, in *The Wolf Border*, she is reaping the benefits. This is a mature novel, coming at a transitional point in Hall's own life. And just as the landscape of her childhood infuses her work to date, so she is excited about the way in which the shift in her personal landscape might affect her fiction. "Children make you vulnerable: it's like having a wound that anyone can pour salt in. But as a novelist, that's a plus: you're aiming for direct empathy with the world. And in terms of the practicalities, it's just something I'll manage, because I love writing. It's a question not of if, but of how."

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/28/sarah-hall-books-interview-the-wolf-border

**The Sunday Times, Short Story Award, 7 December 2017**

"Some internal revolution is needed": an interview with the author Sarah Hall

The award-winning author Sarah Hall on the irresistible wildness at the heat of her latest collection of short stories, being a judge on the Man Booker Prize and how being a single mother can change the course of a woman's writing

Interview by Sophie Haydock

**Your intense and luminous second collection, Madame Zero, was published in July. Where did the inspiration for those short stories come from?**
The stories are really quite varied, so the inspirations are quite varied, too. But generally, I think, large things going on in my life – illness, the birth of a child, and the loss of a mother – form the psychological and maybe even the philosophical basis. The idea of human change is very important throughout, redefinition and adaptability, and the drama, conflict and meaning in our lives that comes from all that.

**The lead story, Mrs Fox, won the BBC National Short Story Award in 2013 and was inspired by a 1922 novella by David Garnett called Lady into Fox. When did you read Garnett's story and what about it first captured your imagination? Why do you think it's been so well received?**
I read the novella after I had written my version. I simply knew the plot points of the original, some of

which sounded so strange and intriguing, but I knew nothing of the style or anything else. The thing that really interested me was the idea of a husband who attempts to adapt to his wife's new condition after transfiguration, who accepts the fox children, etc. We are so used to women adapting to the lives and experiences of men, and the reversal to me seemed fascinating. But also that interplay between the wild and the civilized worlds for me is irresistible. A woman going feral!

I've never really used an existing framing device before and I used it very loosely for my story, and made certain big changes, but in a way, it perhaps took the pressure off the draft plotting. I don't think I've worked so freely and so focused before – the story just seemed to arrive steadily, sentence by sentence. I hope it works on mythical and metaphoric levels, so there is wide access, as well as being very particular in the description, so the story's "reality" convinces. A lot of people have written to me to say that in their lives something similar has happened – a loved one has proved to be unknowable, has changed, whether it was down to illness, a disappearance, or some kind of psychological episode. So I think Mrs Fox perhaps just echoes and symbolises the mutability of relationship dynamics and the challenge we all face.

**Do you have a favourite story in this collection or your first one, The Beautiful Indifference – one that means the most to you – and why?**
There are stories in both collections that I think have achieved a level of good balanced short-story-ness, pace and metaphysics – they include Mrs Fox, Evie, Vuotjärvi, The Nightlong River. I also have affection for some of the others, which hasn't to do with structure, but is more about content or character, more about knowing the emotional hinterland of their production – Case Study 2, Goodnight Nobody, She Murdered Mortal He.

**You were a judge on this year's Man Booker Prize. What was that experience like? Have there been any unexpected consequences of reading so many novels and delving so deeply and intensely into other worlds?**
It was exhausting, thrilling, virtually impossible, and a complete honour. Unexpected consequences are surprising adoration of my fellow judges, increased pleasure in reading short stories and poetry, fondness for the high-speed tuna sandwich, gratitude that we live in a country where there are organisations who heartily back literature.

**Has being a literary judge changed how you approach your own writing?**
I've judged a lot of prizes now. It does make you consider your own writing – it becomes in a way another layer of formulative and editing awareness, too. After a while you begin to recognise common weaknesses, trends, where mediocrity lies and why, as well as noting those works that seem unique, urgent, unusual, powerful. The whole business is a little like trying to figure out alchemy, but certain aspects rise up in a clear way.

**You've written about the challenges of being a single mother and a writer. What more could be done to support female writers who have children?**
Crèches at literary festivals, better support for the accommodation of families during writing residencies, lower point scale and more flexibility for teaching positions, increased paternity leave, funding bodies, tax deductions on childcare. This isn't just about writers, it's about general hindrances within society, or, if not problems, then problems yet to be solved. Those child-bearing and rearing years can prove tough on careers. Helpful solutions can come within families, but I have seen very many cases where that was not possible and great women writers have fallen back, and sometimes fallen away from writing and publishing. It's heart-breaking.

**Do you think there's a level playing field for male and female authors? Is there anything more that can be done in a bid for equality – blind judging, for example?**
The playing field is not level, but it's not level in ways that go beyond male and female. Looking at the statistics, perhaps a prize for best female protagonist would help – that doesn't limit the gender of the authors writing, but it certainly begins to present woman characters as universal. Blind judging helps, gender balanced judging panels help, panels with experts help, challenging male readers helps, but things need to go deeper, throughout the publishing industry. Prizes are just the outer layer; I think some internal revolution is needed. What is being written by women? What are publishers publishing by women and what are they not? What ideas do we have about female and male readers, presentation of ideas, and the marketplace? How is the critical sector letting us down? What are the gender expectations and biases?

Controversial as this sounds, something more liberating needs to travel deeper still, into the minds and hearts, the confidence and egos of female writers (and perhaps male writers, in another way). I have taught writing for a number of years. Very often, I've felt women need to feel they have permission to write, and might not be tackling topics that seem "difficult" or "important" or "expert". But once they are encouraged, once they get going… wow.

**Who have been the most influential short story writers for you? Is there one story that stopped you in your tracks, or that you keep returning to, or do you have a preferred author of short stories that you follow obsessively?**
Here's a list of some of my favourites, in no particular order – Flannery O' Connor, Angela Carter, Tessa Hadley, James Salter, Junot Diaz, George Saunders. At the moment I am reading a collection of work in translation, by the Turkish writer Sait Faik Abasıyanık. Amazing. The short story has traditions all over the world and I want to travel in those directions more.

http://shortstoryaward.co.uk/articles/view/168