

Horizons

John Murray Press

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Fiction Preview 2023



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# Introduction





fter the seismic events of the past two years, 2022 represented a light on the horizon for many. Emerging from a global state of fear and uncertainty, we began bravely to look ahead. As we continue to live through unprecedented and challenging times, the horizon remains a constant beacon in the distance, guiding us forwards, ready to comfort and inspire.

As part of that new horizon, we are thrilled to share an incredible collection of 2023 novels from our talented authors, taking us on journeys that explore the edges of our world and the seams that bind us together. We follow a haunted detective through the dark alleyways and glittering parlours of 1930s Birmingham to discover the secrets of hidden society; journey across an open highway with a group of misfits searching for a place to belong; then wander deep into the woods of New England to find a house that has known countless inhabitants – not all of them human. We sit with a circle of women in a darkened hotel room as they choose to break free from the roles society expects them to play, and instead decide their own fates together; and we stand in 2049 amongst the ruins of an old world, determined to find a better future.

We have asked each of our authors to introduce their novels and share an extract, revealing a glimpse of the worlds they have created. A new horizon lies just ahead, so turn the page and let these stories transport you.



# NEEDLESS ALLEY

## NATALIE MARLOW

I write noir. A cynical, fatalistic genre loaded with lurking shadows and moral ambiguity. In noir, hard men and fatal woman are doomed to endure increasingly violent back-alley nightmares while the neon lights of the main drag blink and flicker. The city itself is a co-protagonist. A hulking web of corruption, there to be interrogated, to be adored. Ever since Hammett and Chandler put pen to paper, these have been the well-worn tropes of the genre.

British noir is as urban and violent as a corner pub. Haunted by calls for 'time gentlemen, please' and the splatter of sawn-off shotguns, British noir shows us more than just the city and its myriad corruptions. It spotlights our beliefs about social class and, more particularly, working-class masculinity. Men from the mean streets; nihilistic, socially alienated men; men whose unflinching brutality is often accompanied by a bleak misogyny. The men whom women fear.

And yet, I love this genre. In noir, I have the freedom to explore the back alleys at midnight; confront the shadows; poke about in our fears of male violence. Then, returning to the safety of the streetlamps, I can refashion the tropes to allow working-class characters, both male and female, broader horizons, scope for redemption, a new life. We need that counterpoint in our reading, not because there's comfort in hope, but because it's where the truth lies.

*Needless Alley* is noir tempered with hope. Although loaded with lurking shadows and moral ambiguity, it is neither cynical nor fatalistic. Yes, William, my flat-footed and neurotic detective, endures an increasingly violent picaresque journey around the cuts and back streets of 1930s Birmingham, but his eyes are fixed firmly on the flickering neon of New Street – the light. William wants money, but he longs for human connection, love and gentleness. And he finds it. His best friend, the beautiful Ronnie, whose eyes are made up like a movie star, has reinvented himself from grubby petty criminal into marvellous, bohemian affectation. Queenie, Clara and Phyll are subject to a pervasive culture of misogyny more damaging than the gendered violence of a traditional noir, and yet they carve out a place for themselves in a world where narrow ideas of femininity and female sexuality are skewed towards the dominance of male desire.

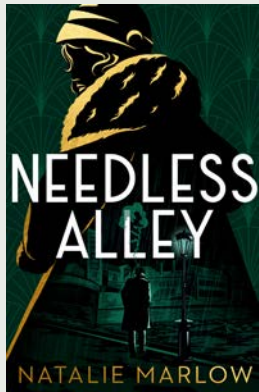
Giving these characters hope is an attempt at psychological realism. I'm from a working-class background, and I know members of my tribe rarely lead lives of quiet desperation. Raucous aspiration is the norm. We shrug off the trauma of poverty, generational or otherwise, to eye up the possibility of human connection, engagement with the world, improvement of our lot. We are adept at grasping momentary pleasures.

The darkest hour is just before the dawn. Where there's life, there's hope. There's light at the end of the tunnel. These are the idioms of the poor. The horizon is the edge of our story. We step over and into the unexplored, and a new story begins.

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BASKERVILLE | 9781399801799 | HB | £14.99 | 19<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2023

 @NATALIEMARLOW2  @NATALIELOVESNOIR



*Birmingham. Sunday, 4 June 1933*

William's footsteps sounded heavy on the bare linoleum. The lighting in the corridor was poor; a single bulb, covered by a pink glass shade, dangled unlit from the ceiling rose. There was a faint smell of disinfectant and a large vase of silk carnations stood dusty on a console table under a mirror advertising Pale Ale. The tinny buzz of a wireless, played behind closed doors, hummed in the background and pricked at William's nerves. Sweat trickled down his collar in rivulets, pooling at the base of his spine, and his camera – prized, weighty, metallic – bagged out his jacket pocket and was awkward against his hip.

Room ten was at the end of the hallway and close to the window. William looked outside. Hurst Street was Sabbath quiet. This part of the city was red with Warwickshire clay, the bricks of the buildings warm with it; drapers, bicycle shops, insurance offices, all with Victorian frontages a touch soiled with soot. An empty tram swayed past, creating clouds of hot dust in its wake, and across the road, modern signage flickered *Ansell's* in electric blue on the hard tan tile of the Cross Keys pub. William glanced at his watch and waited in silence for the minute of the o'clock. This was well-planned, all solid and tactical, but the job gave him the wind up, always. And so his stomach lurched and fell heavy into his bowels as he unlocked the door. The fob swung like a pendulum and he watched it spin until it steadied, and then he entered the room.

Lace curtains trembled against the open casement window like a bird's wing. The couple were perfectly framed. The woman had not been given roses, but gladioli. Their long stems, pink-tipped in bud, were strewn across the counterpane. She was wide-eyed, her pretty, open mouth formed a near perfect 'O'. Lipstick smeared red across her left cheek and, in the late afternoon light, a halo of dust motes danced above her soft pale curls. William heard nothing but the perfect click-whirr of his camera. He wound the film on. On the floor, kneeling in silk knickers, her stockings half-mast on rounded, dimpled thighs, the blonde looked towards William and let out a low, guttural moan. *Click, soft purr of a whirr.* The man stood comic. The dark stuff of his trousers pooled about his ankles. Behind him, on the nightstand, a bottle of good whisky remained half-empty next to an unopened packet of prophylactics. Thigh muscles twitching and flexing, cock softening with shock, the man reached down to stroke his lover's hair, but turned his face away from William's camera. *Click, whirr.*

William dropped the room key and closed the door behind him. The woman, Winnie – yes, Winifred – had not screamed, but William heard her heavy sobs of panic as he descended the back stairs of the hotel. William never ran – experience taught him better – but instead walked at speed through passageways, drab brown and dark cool, towards the tradesman's exit.



# STORIES FROM THE TENANTS DOWNSTAIRS

SIDIK FOFANA



*Stories from the Tenants Downstairs* features eight stories from residents of Bancker Terrace, a fictional high-rise in bustling Harlem, New York. The building is publicly owned, but the neighborhood is changing and the threat of both private ownership and hiked rents is palpable. But I did not want this book to be about the fight against gentrification. I wanted it to be about the character's lives, their personal hopes, fears and aspirations. I wanted readers to hear the characters speak for themselves in stories that have very little to do with the societal struggles hovering over them.

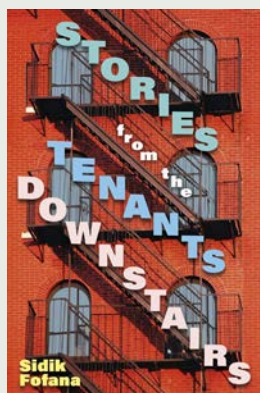
In pursuit of this, I became obsessed with oral narrative, how people talk when they're on the train or the communal laundry room, how they talk when they feel comfortable with the person they are confiding in. This type of storytelling comes from a rich literary tradition that includes writers like Sapphire, Toni Cade Bambara and Alice Walker, among others. These writers have captured a certain vernacular undeniably Black and American. I wanted to tap into this as well. It was important to me that Mimi in 14D should talk naturally about making rent ('The slip gonna come in the mail like it do every month'), that characters should speak as if a tape recorder were flicked on and they were allowed to vent. It was also important that I called upon a cast of characters representing different ages, genders, education levels, and point of views that reflected the diversity of a typical New York City apartment building.

Rendering these voices was a challenge, but ultimately a cathartic exercise in empathy. So went my inspiration: city dwelling under a lamppost, listening to the voices of the residents from the neighborhood, putting them on paper, and presenting them as a statement of their worthiness.

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JOHN MURRAY | 9781529331875 | HB | £16.99 | 19<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2023

 @SIDIKFOFANA



Days left: 10 . . . money you got: \$0 . . . money you need: \$350

The slip is gonna come in the mail like it do every month, with the Lysol and the Save the Children envelope lookin regular as hell. It's gonna have your name, Michelle A. Sutton, on it. And it's gonna say balance. And it's gonna say when the balance due: first of the month.

Read the slip to yourself.

Scream, Shit, then stub your toe on the kitchen table. The man in 14C gonna hit the wall.

Hit the wall back.

Banneker Terrace on 129<sup>th</sup> and Fred Doug ain't pretty, but it's home. Until now, it's been the same since you moved here when you was pregnant with Fortune. One long gray-ass building, twenty-five floors, three hundred suttin apartments. Four elevators that got minds of they own. Laundry full of machines that don't wash clothes right. Bingo room that the old folks hog up and a trash chute that smell like rotten milk.

Little bit of everybody here. Young people with GEDs. Old people with arthritis. Folks with child-support payments, uncles in jail, aunties on crack, cousins in the Bloods, sisters hoein. That's what everybody wanna concentrate on. The shit that be happenin only one percent of the time. Like that boy that got molested and thrown off the roof. Niggas still talk about that like it happened five times a week. Don't nobody wanna talk about the cookouts with beer and wings and aluminum flyin off the grill and you be smellin it and thinkin, Can I get a plate? The summertime when the souped-up Honda Civics bumpin Lil Wayne be vroomin thru the back parkin lot leavin tire marks. The dudes who be shirtless on small bikes tryna get Najee or some other snotnose to run to the store. How you take a foldin chair outside and cornrow people's hair from sunup to sundown for twenty-five dollars a pop and make a killin. Don't nobody wanna discuss that. You didn't come up here for no shoot-ups. You came here to make a good life on your own. You were twenty-five and you couldn't be livin with your mother and sisters in the Abernathy Houses no more. Plus, Swan, Fortune's father, is here.

You gonna go over there and live by yourself? your ma asked.

That's what I said, Ma, didn't I?

Chase after a man that don't want nothin to do with no baby? And how you gonna make for rent?

Imma get a job like responsible people.

I heard that before.

Remember them last words as you study that slip again. Don't try to hold the tears in, because you can't. Go in the bathroom. Rub the snot out your eye.

Fortune gonna barge in as soon as you try to close the door.


How you thuin, Mommy?

Fine, baby.



# THE SNOW HARE

## PAULA LICHTAROWICZ

 *The Snow Hare* began with a scene playing in my mind like a silent movie. A small child runs across a vast brown steppe and slips into the horizon with the setting sun. But who was this girl? Why was she running, and what was beyond the horizon? Was she alone on the steppe – or being observed?

There was a watcher, I realised, a dying woman I came to call Lena, whose final days are haunted by visions of this child, a child she shouts out to, and tries to pursue. This was how the cells divided; I had two characters now, and an embryonic story began to develop.

The horizon – that point where land meets air – is a powerful symbol in fiction. It's the far off place where dreams shimmer mirage-like, as they do for Lena the adolescent wannabe-doctor. At other times it's the near point where real-life restrictions become known. When Lena's ambitions come crashing down in marriage, so too her vision is blinded by blizzards in the mountains; literally and figuratively she can't see the next step in front of her. Later, when she is sent to a logging camp in Siberia, thousands of miles of forest surround the workers' huts; here the horizon takes the form of an endless prison. The constrictions in Lena's life are marked by the boundaries of what she sees.

It's this intersection between external landscape and internal psychology that makes horizons so powerful, I think. When a character stares into the distance dreaming up possibilities, or confronts a closed view and the crushing limitations of their situation, they do it at a key point in dramatic or psychological time. A character's state of *being-in-the-world* meets their state of *feeling-in-the-world*. External world and internal world coalesce. Which is perhaps why, as the novel developed, that first image of the girl running towards the horizon became more than a stylistic leitmotif; I came to see it as a psychodrama playing out on Lena's internal landscape. This simple scene – woman pursuing barefoot child into the setting sun – had become Lena's quest; something she had to resolve before she died. It gave the novel a psychological structure and purpose. I suppose you might say *The Snow Hare* starts and ends with the horizon.

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JOHN MURRAY | 9781529388299 | HB | £14.99 | 2<sup>ND</sup> FEBURARY 2023





'The woman's son was ill,' he says. 'We stayed in the hospital a month. The snow came. My return was delayed a further two weeks waiting to exchange the cart for a sleigh.' He glances at her. 'This is how it goes here.'

Huddled into her coat, only her eyes exposed, Lena is staring at the snow-swept tundra. Her eyes ache from trying to absorb the vastness of the plain that stretches to the horizon. Behind her, the taiga is reduced to a thin black band between white earth and grey sky. She'd not thought the trees could end so soon. Perhaps she'd stopped thinking the forest had any sort of end, or that her body would ever move through open space again. Her lungs don't know what to do with all this air.

'You've no response to make?'

The sky is empty of life but the tundra is not entirely featureless, not if you stare hard enough. Here and there yellow grass stalks poke from the snow, thin as hairs on a feather. When the wind blows the land ripples far into the distance. It's like they've become mites riding on the hide of a mighty beast. The bay mare jogs methodically south. The snow hare may be out there somewhere, belly to the snow, lying low in her winter disguise.

'It's not my business how other women live.'

He looks at her, beside him but separated on the bench by an inch of air. A deerskin hide is draped over his lap which Lena has refused to share. A rifle lies on his knee. 'It's not,' he agrees. 'Regrettably it didn't end well for either of them.' The sun is already descending, a grey stain in the western sky. Lena balls her hands in her mittens and presses her chin into her coat. She thinks about the jewellery she's wrapped in a scarf and tucked into a tear in the lining. She thinks about the bundle behind her on the sleigh, all the things she raced to gather up to sell in the town. This is the third time she has been required to pack as if life depends on it. Has she chosen well?

There's no sign of a village on the horizon. She leans forward and watches the horse's knees moving like pistons through the snow. Their lives are completely dependent on the limbs of this animal.

'We're lucky it's not blizzarding. Sit close to me if you won't take the hide. The most effective way to stay warm is to share body heat.'

Lena laughs, sudden and hard.

He turns and looks at her.

'You're not the first man to tell me that.'

But she doesn't have to say any more. She won't be unpeeled by him, picked over for his entertainment. She inches away, bending over the core of herself, bracing her arms against the wind. The horse jogs on, loose-reined, clumps of ice clinging to its fetlocks. She stares out across the tundra searching for a sign of habitation.



# THE COMPANY

## J.M. VARESE

*The day had been bright and clear when we started out, but as we made our way home, rain squalls had begun drifting in. The heavy, slate-coloured clouds hung low over the melancholy horizon, and I remember looking back over the picture as one turns a final time to bid farewell. Ah – that brooding sky, those deadened colours, those grey wreaths of clouds trailing down the sides of the fantastic hills! The freedom was out there and the air was clear. Our child’s paradise, despite the danger.*

In writing *The Company*, I was interested in presenting that familiar tension one encounters so much in Victorian novels: the opposition between the industrial and the bucolic. Classically, in the novels of writers such as Dickens, Gaskell, Eliot, and others, the suspicion towards the ever-growing and ever-industrializing city tends to be great, while a kind of solace that represents a quieter, healthier life is to be found abundantly out in the country. Fair enough, and it usually makes sense to most readers now, as it did to readers in the 19th century.

But what happens when the peaceful bucolic landscape, the place of undulating hills and vast horizons, is also, potentially, a place of great danger? When one’s childhood moorland playground, filled with mounds of sun-soaked heather and gorse, is also home to misty bogs that can swallow you up whole? As one looks out on such horizons there are two things to see there: the draw of the immense beauty, and the terror of the unknown.

I was keen to put into place the ‘mixing up’ of familiar representations throughout this story of a family made rich by the industrialization of wallpaper. But it wasn’t just the fields and meadows I was trying to complicate; it was also the very house where most of the story takes place. The gothic ‘haunted house’ is typically found out in one of these sublime spaces, where the rules of metropolitan order don’t apply. But the haunted house in *The Company* is in the middle of central London – Marylebone in fact! – which is not supposed to be a scary place, but was a place I wanted to make scary. There was something terrifying to me about a haunted house that hundreds of people walked by every day, unaware of what lurked within. Those horrors that creep around the least expected corners, during the day, with the lights on, hiding in plain view, can be just as terrifying as the demons that stalk at night.

Of course the ghosts in *The Company* – if there are such things – do mostly come out at night. That was a trope too convenient to resist. But in the end, they’re always there – aren’t they?

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BASKERVILLE | 9781399802635 | HB | £14.99 | 16<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2023

 @JMVARESE  @JONMICHAELVARESE





Father began bringing us down to Devon when we were children. The business of the company drew him many times a year. 'Lucy,' he would say to me, 'you must take care to watch out for your brothers. Though John is older and Tom is slight, they are boys and they are bound to be reckless.'

He could be so grave when he gave a warning.

'There are bogs. There are dangers.'

But there were heavens too. The moorland – that heaven – beyond the Devon house was the place that as children we were forever wanting to escape to. We were children. We had freedom. Though I would always have less. And in the patterns of the rocks and hills, I remember the two boys running. Or rather, one is running, and one is falling behind, threading a path through the browning heather. He stops and turns his head. Our eyes meet and we smile. A hill and a boy – the simplest of patterns – and an immense sky that runs deep with no colour.

But that is a fanciful story, and not the one that I must tell. Because our family was the company, and the company was about something different.

We lived in a very fashionable neighbourhood of the city – not far from the Harley Street doctors, whom father often wished had taken up their residence somewhere else. Our house was a corner house, so that we had windows on two sides of some rooms, and that was important because it meant that the light hitting the walls could be extraordinary when the day was good. Father chose the house very carefully because of this. To him, there were two 'houses' to Braithwhite & Company. The counting house, which was down on the Strand, and the other house – the house we lived in. Both were ours.


As children, we of course all lived upstairs in the nurseries, alongside the servants. But some years after father died, John settled into one of the rooms on the first floor. It was father's old study, set towards the back of the house, just below mine, and once John turned of age, that's where we conducted much of the family business. The room's paper was of a dark emerald green, and it contained things shaped like leaves, and leaves shaping themselves into vines, and strange winding serpents that curved into rivers. It had been father's favourite. As a girl I'd seen angel wings somewhere in that dense forest, and John had picked out monkeys and pineapples. There was no telling what might emerge from any of these established relics – the intricate, deceptive patterns that our father's father had made famous.

But where to begin? I think not with a history of Braithwhite & Company, or a discussion of any of the wallpapers that made our triumph and our downfall, but rather with that last correspondence from our company's manager, Mr Luckhurst, and the other fateful letter that followed. That, to me, is where this wretched story begins – when strange stirrings within me, unrecognised at the time, began revealing the horrible course that I would eventually be forced to take.



# CAMP ZERO

## MICHELLE MIN STERLING

 The origin of *Camp Zero* was a ride to northern Alberta on a Greyhound bus to visit my cousin, a pipefitter in the oil patch. This was the peak of the boom years, and the region was teeming with workers, most of them male. I spent my visit walking along the line where the woods and the highway met, the only person on foot. The distant blue of the lake rippled on the horizon. As I read a sign warning of bears, a woman jogged past me with a pit bull. I watched her until she disappeared into the trees and wondered if the dog was a form of protection. But against who? The bears? The oil workers? Or was it merely a companion? I took photos of the buildings I passed: mall, bowling alley, warehouse, gas station, church. These structures became the skeleton of Dominion Lake in *Camp Zero* as I began to imagine an oil town in the future, when extraction no longer animated the region. What would it look like? Who would live there? And could it have a different use?

As I researched details for the novel's settings, I learned of other places, as well: the radar stations built in northern Canada by the US and Canadian Air Forces during the Cold War, and the offshore enclaves of seasteading communities envisioned by libertarians and anarcho-capitalists. These places were reimagined for the speculative settings of the novel but rooted by the details of real life. I wanted to create characters who would arrive in these places, united by their desire to forge a better future, but separated by their access to privilege. In particular, I was drawn to a mother-daughter story as the emotional anchor of the novel, focusing on the relationship between a Korean immigrant mother and her daughter, Rose, who searches to find a place for herself and her mother in a compromised world.

A horizon is a distance you can see, but never touch. Many of the characters in *Camp Zero* keen for their own personal horizon – a place to call home, a person to love, a community to flourish in. But often these horizons are at odds with one another, and at odds with the world. How do we move between these different imaginaries to create a more just life? My hope is that the variety of horizons offered in these pages will clarify into a personal understanding of each reader's vision.

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JOHN MURRAY | 9781399802314 | HB | £14.99 | 30<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2023

 @MICHELLEMINSTERLING



Rose goes to the back of the store, into the storage area where Willow is sorting through unopened boxes of stock. The room reeks of wet cardboard and rot, tinged with the animal scent of the eyeless rodent Willow pulls out of a box of polyester turtle necks.

'Judith banished me back here,' Rose says. Willow laughs and hands her a box cutter. 'Dig in.' Rose starts slicing open boxes while Willow reads the shipping labels aloud, 'Vietnam. Sri Lanka. China.' Willow calls out, 'Have you ever been to China?'

'Never. This is my first time outside the US. Have you?'

Willow shakes her head. 'No. I've never been outside of the region. But I plan to go somewhere after camp.'

'Do you know where?'

'Somewhere hot. I want to feel the heat on my skin.'

Rose stops slicing open a cardboard box. 'Don't say that. People are literally dying from the heat. Do you know how many people want to be in the North?'

'I'm sick of everyone telling me that,' Willow snaps. 'Why can't I decide for myself where I'll go?' (. . .)

Rose keeps working and pulls open a box of high-necked minidresses manufactured in India, shipped to this store during the micro-season before the oil market crashed. She puts the dress in a garbage bag and then looks up when she hears a rustling in the ceiling. A pair of doves are nesting high on a storage shelf. She pauses to appreciate how the birds' heads are each tucked into the other for warmth. And then she sees it, a spray-painted message on the ceiling:

#### WHITE ALICE IS HERE

The name is chilling in its simplicity. *White Alice*. Prim and melancholic, like the name of a girl with glossy hair who rides dressage through the moors of her father's estate.

'What is that?' she asks Willow, and points to the ceiling.

Willow stands and looks up at the ceiling. 'It's still here. After all these years.'

'What is?'

Willow stamps out the cigarette and turns to Rose. 'When I was a kid, White Alice was a story parents told to keep kids from misbehaving. You better watch out or White Alice will come and get you, that kind of thing.'

'If White Alice is a story, then who wrote that?'

'Drunk teens. Oil workers who were pissed they'd lost their jobs. When Dominion Lake emptied out, people would break into this mall and scavenge for supplies. By then, White Alice had become a myth, something people could blame for their problems.'

'Did you believe it?'

'No,' Willow says. 'I was raised to never believe in ghost stories.'



# #PANIC

## LUKE JENNINGS

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It's the present day, and the strands that bind our society are fraying. Our loyalties are uncertain, and often contradictory. If we're lucky we have real-life families, friends and colleagues, but these aren't always the people with whom we share our most intimate truths. We're just as likely, and perhaps more, to confide in a like-minded stranger. Someone utterly remote, known only by a username. Even as we lay ourselves bare, we hide ourselves.

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It's a seductive paradox, raising all sorts of questions about the nature of love, friendship and desire. What is it that you feel for someone whose words wrap themselves around your heart, but whose living gaze you've never met? Online relationships are fragile, frequently imploding. People fade like ghosts. Yet online tribes thrive, endlessly forming and reforming, and for many, living difficult lives in remote and lonely places, they offer a vital sense of kinship, and a glimpse of wider horizons.

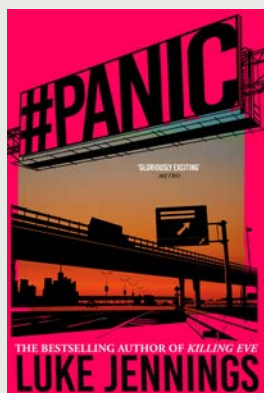
This is the world of my new novel, *#panic*. Jaleesa, Dani, Ilya and Kai are outsiders. Socially, sexually, every which way. They live thousands of miles apart on different continents, but the time they spend in their online group chat has an intimacy and an immediacy that everyday life doesn't match. The four share dreams, desires, and catastrophes. They're all fans of the same futuristic TV series, *City of Night*, and in particular of its lead actress, Alice Temple.

What happens when the lives of these young fans collide? When they're suddenly brought together in real life? How will they react to each other's living, breathing presence? And suppose that they're then thrown together with their heroine, Alice? Placed in deadly danger, and forced on the run with her?

With *#panic*, I wanted to write a coming-of-age novel that addresses our fractured times. A sweaty, scary road movie in which they, my heroes and heroines, learn hard truths about themselves, about each other, and about the true price of contemporary stardom – so alluring in long-shot, so brutal in close-up.

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JOHN MURRAY | 9781529351866 | HB | £16.99 | 27<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2023

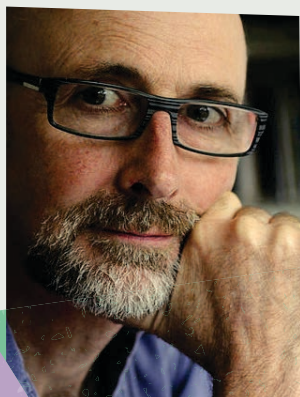


They met, originally, in a *City of Night* fan chat room called ChokeMeAlice. At the time it was the cool, say-anything chat that everyone wanted to join. Then it got weird. There were factions who plotted off-group, insider jokes, and a bullying culture that reminded Jaleesa of high school. The most popular figures' posts were greeted with swoony adoration and blizzards of emoticons, while the less lucky saw their contributions left hanging in the timeline, icily ignored. The one way to be sure of attention was to post new content about *City of Night* and its stars, but this was hard to come by, given the show's strict rationing of insider gossip and images, and most members made do with yearning hopelessly after Alice and Hayley. Jaleesa got on OK with most of the group, but there were some she never trusted. The shit-stirrers, forever dropping bitchy comments or working some fucked-up agenda. And the lurkers, always there, watching and waiting.

Jay, Dani, Ilya and Kai liked what they knew of each other, and decided that they'd had enough of ChokeMeAlice and its intrigues. So they founded #panicStation, soon shortened to #panic, and decided that they were just fine with the idea of keeping the membership to the four of them. Inevitably the other groups called them snobs and elitists, but they didn't care. They trusted each other, although they'd never met, and they still do.

If boxing is Jaleesa's escape, #panic is something more. Online, even if the four of them are just swapping personal stuff, she feels the same as when she's watching *City of Night*. It's as if she's been teleported to another dimension. In Auburn, everything happens with such deathly slowness. Sometimes she steps outside her front door and it's as if time has stopped altogether. The clapboard bungalows and the mobile homes on their brick piers. The highway criss-crossed with ancient repairs, the rusting flatbed trucks in the field, the broken-down grain elevator rising from the buffalo grass on the horizon. Years could pass, and none of this would change.

Talking to the other #panic members, all of them thousands of miles apart, Jaleesa feels a sense of possibility. A sense that if she's brave enough, and imaginative enough, she can break free of the things that press down on her. And she badly needs to break free, because this isn't life, this is a timeloop. When she was a child, she was certain that she was special. She knew, *she just knew*, that life had plans for her, and that one day people would be speaking her name. What the context would be, she had no idea, but she often had visions of her future self being sincerely thanked for some noble, and quite possibly world-saving, action.



# MUSIC IN THE DARK

## SALLY MAGNUSSON

**I**n *Music in the Dark*, the lost horizon is the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century, where people living in the self-sustaining communities known as townships were being cleared from their homes to make way for sheep and other more profitable ways of using the land. Leading the resistance to eviction in the valley of Strathcarron were the women of the Greenyards township. In March 1855 they suffered terrible injuries from the heavy wooden batons of a huge police force, sent in to wipe out women's resistance for good.

The idea for my protagonist, Jamesina Ross, came from the stories of the dozens of women who had to find a new way of living afterwards, often far from home and with deep-seated injuries festering inside their beaten heads. It was also inspired by the experiences of my great-grandmother, Annie McEachern, who was evicted from her home on the isle of Mull in the early 1860s – part of the same, decades-long social convulsion we call the Highland Clearances. After researching my family history for years, I first recounted Annie's story in my 2014 memoir, *Where Memories Go*, and she has excited my imagination ever since. After having to leave Mull at the age of thirteen, she found herself alone in Glasgow, living in poverty. She married, lost three children to the diseases so rife in our cities at the time, then got married again, to a lodger she had taken in to make ends meet.

*Music in the Dark* is set thirty years after the brutality at Strathcarron, when Jamesina Ross is living in a tenement flat near Glasgow. Like my great-grandmother, Jamesina's life is changed by taking in a new lodger. It requires grace and courage to look to the new horizons he is pointing her towards, both as a woman and as the composer of a song she once excelled in performing. I was interested in portraying the way women struggle to overcome their circumstances, the long-term consequences of trauma and the ambivalent sweetness of unlooked-for love in later life.

To some extent Jamesina Ross's faltering steps towards new horizons mirror the experiences of Ásta Thorsteinsdóttir in my debut novel, *The Sealwoman's Gift*, abducted with her family from 17<sup>th</sup> century Iceland and sold into slavery in Algiers, where her mind and heart are gradually opened to other ways of seeing. In my second novel, *The Ninth Child*, Isabel Aird, her horizons stunted by the stifling limitations forced on middle-class Victorian women, has to learn resilience and self-awareness in the wilds of the Trossachs before she can tap into her own potential.

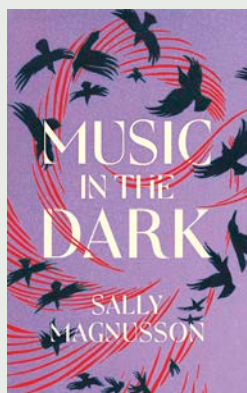
So, yes, the silent women of the past, who are key to so much of my fiction, are all reaching for new horizons. But of course, the larger story of women's progress through the ages is that the horizon is always, in the nature of horizons, frustratingly beyond reach.

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JOHN MURRAY | 9781529345933 | HB | £16.99 | 11<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2023

 @SALLYMAG1





When the knock came last year, she thought it was bairns wanting something for their Halloween. She always had something in for the guisers when they chapped her door, even if it was just the wee ones up the stair hopping around in an old sheet. She liked to reward their thin voices and tell them it was good to know poems, good to sing songs. But not a thing did she have in for them that night.

She was sitting by the kitchen range with her back to the bed, usual position, so she could pretend to herself that Archie was still in it, right there behind her if she only chose to look, sleeping soft and gentle with the fever gone and the tight, violet skin beneath his eyes fair again and smooth. She was feeling angry with herself for not having an apple in the house to give those bairns when she had meant to get a bag of them in that afternoon. She sat on. The bairns would take themselves off soon enough.

But no, the knocking came again. And then again, bolder this time, cheeky besoms. They'd be scuffing her good step. So she took herself off to answer the door.

Slim-built man standing there, dark hair greying in places, neatly dressed if a mite threadbare about the seams. Polite. Introduced himself in an American accent by a name she had not heard in years and years and years.

At first she thought, who's to say it's him? There are Munros all over Scotland and there must be plenty gone overseas as well. Nothing to say that some stray shoemaker at her door with a name anybody could have was going to be one of the Strathcarron boys.

She knew, though. There was a lot that was different, right enough – dear heavens, the moustache – but there was a moment when he did that patting thing to his lip, that flick of a forefinger to one side then the other, that she knew. Scales fell from her eyes, as Mr Aird would say, like Paul, or was it Saul, in Damascus, and what were scales doing there anyway, because it sounded awful sore.

Eye scales  
skin scales  
fish scales  
leaf scales  
music scales  
kettle scales  
tooth scales  
justice scales  
Brodie's scales  
Pinkerton's scales  
MacPhail's scales.

Anyway, she knew who he was. In that moment she knew exactly who he used to be.



# NEON ROSES

## RACHEL DAWSON

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The word 'horizon' conjures the outline of Devon for me, as viewed from the water of Whitmore Bay, Barry. I love to let myself float there, staring at the horizon while ideas flow. On clear days, it looks like you could swim right over.

When I started the writing process for *Neon Roses*, I sat down and sketched out Eluned's character. I included her star sign, her favourite foods, and what landscape she would feel most comfortable in. I felt that Eluned would see herself as someone who was at home on the coast; who would feel confident reading the tides and identifying rocks and shells. After all, Eluned is from Neath Port Talbot. The county has its own beaches and is where you get your first glimpse of the headlands of the Mumbles on the horizon. I was sure that Eluned would share my affinity for the sea.

However, Eluned isn't from the coastal part of the county, but near the top of the Dulais Valley. After visiting, it became clear that, while only sixteen miles from where I grew up, this place has its own character entirely.

This landscape, Eluned's landscape, is so underrated. Cwtched up to the southern border of the Brecon Beacons, the view from the moorland is incredible. I loved sitting in the sun-bleached grass, carefully avoiding the milk thistles (not the sea-holly ubiquitous on the dunes of Swansea Bay) and the sheep poo, trying to identify the silhouettes of peaks like Fan Gyhirych and Hirfynydd. This landscape is marked by Roman roads, Celtic stone crosses and the scars of almost 200 years of heavy industry. That is the horizon that Eluned's mind will always go back to.

Getting to know this area helped me see that the place where Eluned feels most comfortable is in the hills and mountains. Holding on to this gave my characterisation shape. When I evoke Eluned's voice I feel the wind pushing my chest as I reach the top of a mountain, feel the strength in legs toned from steep inclines. I think about how Eluned would feel the urge to go upwards when things are challenging, rather than my own inclination to seek out the water.

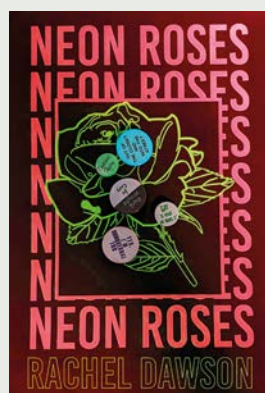
The other horizon shaping Eluned's internal landscape is a political one. Raised in a staunchly socialist home, Eluned has always been aware of political goals. Encountering Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, and June in particular, expands her political consciousness to include the fight for LGBT+ rights.

Growing up in the nineties, it seemed that equality was almost in reach. Like Devon, it seemed swimmable. But now it seems that, like the horizon, progress slips away as you push towards it. This month [October 2022], a trans-exclusionary conference is taking place in Cardiff and the (now former) Prime Minister has been demonising unions, talking about backing 'strivers not the strikers'.

When I first started writing *Neon Roses*, it felt strange and performative to assume June's sense of alienation from society. As editing progressed, it became less of a performance. It's easy to feel despondent. Thankfully, Cardiff has a thriving LGBT+ scene where groups such as Trans Aid Cymru and the Queer Emporium provide mutual aid, friendship and community.

This would be familiar and welcome to Eluned and June, who both hold that working together is the means to help us move towards that horizon.





'I'm Eluned.'

June nods. You'd expect the gays to be chattier. June's steady silence makes her want to fill the space.

'It's tremendous, what you've done for us. We're not too bad off, because I'm earning. My sister was as well, but now she's moved out. Long story. You've been so tidy, sending jumpers. We couldn't have asked for more. Mam said some people are burning shoes to . . .'

June seems shocked into opening her mouth. Silver hoops jingle all the way up her ear as she shakes her head firmly. 'Starving our own people out. Disgusting.'

June's English, but not a Londoner. Her accent is hard to place; it has the same sing-song quality as Eluned's own. Eluned gets another glimpse of her snaggle-tooth before it's shuttered back behind her lips. They must be around the same age.

'Where to are you from?' Eluned asks.

'West Midlands, bab.'

'How come you got involved with LGSM?'

'I saw an advert in *City Limits* magazine. My da, my brothers and my uncles are miners. They might not give a shit about me, but I don't want them to starve.'

'Why wouldn't they give a shit?'

June stands up properly, taking her elbow off the bar for the first time since she started speaking. She's only a dwt. June gestures from her head to her toes. Oh. Yeah. Christ, June is braver than she thought.

Eluned watches the bubbles in her beer rise to the top. June frets at her fingernails, splitting the ends into flakes.

'What else do you do up London?'

June must have some stories. Gigs, clubs, that sort of thing.

'I'm an artist.'

'Tremendous! I love art!'

Eluned was hoping that there would be someone like-minded.

June widens her eyes. 'What sort of stuff do you do?'

Eluned hasn't done anything proper, with paints and cups of murky water, since she was at school. She and Mabs used to work for hours, tiny foil tubes scattered over the kitchen table. All she ever does now is doodle models from the magazines to fill time when the shop is quiet.

'Clothes. People.'

'Good for you,' June says, resting her chin on her palm again. Her elbow splay out along the bar, dangerously close to someone else's pint.

'What about you?' Eluned asks.

'I print, mainly, but I'll give anything a go.' June thumbs at a small brooch on her lapel. 'I made this.'

The brooch is made of small red beads strung on wire, twisted into a lumpy shape like a wishbone with a ball-sack hanging inside of it. Eluned can't work it out. She bends towards June, squints while she tries to work out what she's looking at.

June smirks. 'It's a clit. That's what it looks like underneath. It's a scandal that women are taught that it's a tiny nub, instead of this big, powerful thing.'

'Big and powerful? It's hardly pissing *Knight Rider*.'

June throws back her head and laughs.



# SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

## ROSE WILDING

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I lived in the dark with a monster. We lived in a tidy, three-bedroom new-build with a garden and a drive long enough for both of our cars. The neighbours seemed nice. We didn't know their names but they were polite enough to never phone the police when they heard us screaming at each other, slamming doors, smashing plates. We put our shoes on a rack by the door and I kept the fridge full of the beer he liked, we'd eat with our plates balanced on our knees each night, and he told me *this is it*. I thought he was right. He paid for the bridal suite in a nice hotel for my birthday one year and we had eggs benedict for breakfast the next morning, hungover and happy, and I thought yes, *this is it*. He shone such a bright light on me sometimes that I didn't even realise it was night, and sometimes he'd pretend I didn't exist. He didn't speak to me for days and weeks on end because I'd arrived home from work a few minutes late or because I'd visited my mother. It would get so dark that I'd have to find my way around the house by touch, and I'd say to him *this isn't right, I should move out* and he'd say *you're being silly, this is as good as it gets – if only you'd do this a little better or stop doing that we'd be happy again*. It all got darker and darker, there was no moon and no stars. When I talked about the sun he told me that daylight was a fairy tale and I was wasting my life looking for it.

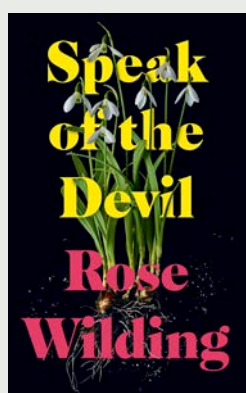
I packed my bags a hundred times. I'd get to the door and he'd change, turn soft, turn on all of the lights inside himself and remind me of the man I met. He didn't seem like a monster in those moments, and I'd unpack the bags and try a bit harder to live in the dark. After three years, I left. Maybe daylight didn't exist, but I'd never find out if I stayed. It took a while for things to get brighter, but they did. I watched the horizon until the sun rose, and the shadows shrank, and I began to live again.

Art is so often conceived in the darkness and born in the light. The first seeds of *Speak of the Devil* were sewn during those years, unbeknownst to me – but I was too busy staying alive to write about it. You can't see what you're writing in the dark – you need the clarity of day, the distance from the monsters.

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BASKERVILLE | 9781399804981 | HB | £14.99 | 22<sup>ND</sup> JUNE 2023

 @ROSE\_WLDNG  @ROSE\_WLDNG



31st December 1999

Fireworks pop and fizzle in the dark sky above the city, hours before the new millennium, and Maureen watches them for a second before she pushes the window open and closes the curtains. Sarah has already lit the candles, and hands her one as she sits back down.

Eight faces are illuminated, ghastly and sunken-eyed in the flickering light. Seven women sit in a semicircle, their bodies pointing towards a kind of altar in the middle of the room. They all look at him, some of them just glancing now and then, some of them staring, unable to avert their gaze. Only one of them knew he would be here; the others are in varying states of horror at the sight of him. Even the one who brought him is horrified, maybe more so than the rest.

A woman called Ana gets up and kneels in front of him. She hasn't prayed for years, not since she was fresh from Brazil, but the words slip out of her mouth as if they have been waiting for her, the Portuguese fast and slick, almost inaudible over the noise of the party below. Sarah lights a cigarette with the flame of her candle.

'I think it's a bit late for that,' she says to Ana, but does not get a response. Sarah leans back in her chair and crosses her knees, looks around at the other women, but no one pays her any attention.

Kaysha Jackson – the journalist – lurches out of her seat and into the ensuite, where they all hear a retch and a splatter. She comes back a few minutes later, pale, splashes of vomit down her jumper. Sarah takes her hand, and their fingers lace together, brown skin and white almost indistinguishable in the sepia gloom.

Josie, who is the youngest, and is pregnant, is crying. Her pallid face is blotchy and swollen.

'Where's the rest of him?' she asks, her voice cracking.

'We don't know, hin,' Maureen says, reaching across to lay a hand on Josie's arm.

'Someone does,' Sarah says, flicking her finished cigarette onto the floor and grinding it into the carpet with her boot. She looks at him again, meeting his eyes. It's been a long time since she saw him, even longer since they were in this room together. He looks different now, and she feels different now. She loved him then.

His hair is longer than it was, and it's standing on end, as if he's been dragged by it. She supposes that he might have been. His face looks thinner than it did, and his nose looks flat and broken, and dried blood is smeared over the bottom half of his face. She imagines how it must have burst from his mouth, maybe as he tried to say one last clever thing. He was always clean-shaven when she knew him, but he has a short beard now, thick around his mouth and chin, petering out down his throat and stopping abruptly where his neck does.

The rest of him is missing.



# PROMISE

## RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS

In *Promise*, Cinthy Kindred, a bookish thirteen-year-old girl, stands on a ledge of wonder and terror, watching the sky and its secret language of stars and storms. Reliant on her obedience and intelligence, she finds herself suddenly trapped in a haunted story full of love and violence, a story which is coming true in all the ways she most fears.

It is 1957. The racial, political, cultural and economic horizons in America are ablaze. In this psychic and brutal shift, Cinthy and her elder sister, Ezra, realise that they have no choice but to leave the comfort of their girlhoods in a remote New England sea village, and become young women. In *Promise*, these two sisters live in a troubled world where the past, present, and future burn together in a single flame.

The novel opens with a sequence of events heralding the end of Cinthy's innocence: a girlish game turns ominous; her family are perpetually harassed by local law enforcement; and her beloved teacher mysteriously drowns. The girls are bewildered, faced with a world that attempts to rob them of their faith and joy, as the notion of what freedom costs soars far above their heads.

Against the prophetic legacy of her family's past, Cinthy must force herself to welcome her own future. What she grasps, finally, is that her love endows her with vulnerability, and a deepened capacity for grace. Cinthy learns to sing beneath the stars with her own voice, trusting that the hope she has given up will return to her again.

Shortly after my mother's death in 2014, I began to write this story. The worlds created in *Promise* allowed me to keep my mother's presence close. I could pose questions to her and to myself that I had not been able to ask when she was alive. As I wrote in solitude during the pandemic, my characters challenged me to go into the wild forests of my inner life, to explore the vast gifts of narrative forms, casting bright nets into memory and imagination. I found that relationships between mothers, daughters, and sisters exist as a luminous site of intimacy and complexity, and discovered the full-throated truths that women accept and receive for the sake of love, beauty, and freedom.

I'm grateful for the profound ways in which my characters articulated their desires and their fears into formidable voices. I am channeling the struggles of so many women, living and dead, who anchor my life. I would like to add *Promise* to the growing ways we attempt to expand our knowledge of love in the face of a difficult world.

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PROMISE | 9781399809818 | HB | £16.99 | 6<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2023

 @RACHELELIZAGRIFFITHS



We are standing in a triangle. Ruby and Ezra face me.

After I watch Ezra remove hers, I hand my underwear to Ruby without looking at her face. Having anyone but Mama touch my panties makes me feel they are touching something they aren't supposed to. I'm both cool and sticky. I shake my hips a little, twisting my body so that the wind can blow against my sides.

Ruby balls our underwear together and shoves the damp lump into the pocket of her dress. She turns her head. Her black bangs look like the visor of a gladiator's helmet knocked askew. Her eyes, deep blue, are darker than the blue sky that somehow feels larger to me now that I've taken off my white cotton underwear.

Ruby sits down on the hot rocks. Ezra sits. I sit.

Ruby stretches her legs into a V, and Ezra does the same, squirming and sliding in the dust until one of her feet touches Ruby's. She jerks her right foot back and forth, irritably, to indicate that I follow.

I push myself back, feeling the skin on my palms scrape against the jagged rock. My legs, too, open into a V. I angle my left foot so that it leans against my sister's foot. I realize my right foot should lean against Ruby's foot. I don't want to touch Ruby's feet. She isn't even wearing shoes.

I duck my head to look over at Ez who is staring at me evenly. I can hear Mama's voice cussing in my mind. Her eyes have rolled so far back she can see out the back of her head. *Hyacinth Kindred, what in the Lord's world do you think you're doing? And if you're thinking about what I would say then maybe you already know that you shouldn't be doing it either because where is the good daughter I raised?*

Mama never says anything like that to Ezra, never asks Ez about thinking, because Ez simply does a thing without thinking in the first place.

'Do it already,' says Ezra. 'It's hot up here.'

With force, I shove the sole of my sandal against Ruby's bare foot, hopeful that it will hurt her.

'I'm not touching no white girl.'

'Shithead,' says Ruby.

'Don't talk to my sister like that,' says Ezra quickly.

'She the one messing everything up.' Heat pools beneath us. I worry whether ants are capable of crawling between my legs and up inside me. I can picture a thin black trail of them marching diligently between my organs, stomping along the slimy roof of my stomach then through the church of my heart and finally up through the tunnel of my throat right into my brain, which I imagine is inlaid with gems, like a cathedral. How many ants could really fit up there in my head? Then I think about peeing ants into the toilet at home and almost begin laughing.



# THE COUPLES

## LAUREN MACKENZIE

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My parents loved to give parties. All the kids would be dumped upstairs with bags of crisps and lemonade while the adults drank and smoked cigarettes and pot downstairs. Later everyone threw the sleeping kids into the car and drove home. In the morning my brothers and I would lick the Brandy Alexander glasses clean. This was middle class Sydney in the 1970s. Affairs were 'in'. A cascade of divorces followed. Of my parents' friends, only one couple is still married today, despite both falling deeply in love with other people. That intrigued me. Was their ability to love someone else less a sign of emotional instability than the opposite: did they have a talent for love, a capacity for intimacy? This question is one of the ideas driving *The Couples*. We don't talk about marriage enough, even to the people we marry. We don't talk about how it's only the beginning, rather than the end of a love story. A second element arose from my own realisation that being a grown-up, let alone behaving like one, has little to do with age. When all else is well, what is life about but who we love and how well we love them?

*The Couples* is set in inner-city Dublin, and begins two years after the financial crash. Three middle-aged couples, juggling bills, jobs and families, go away for a weekend, without the children, to celebrate a 48<sup>th</sup> birthday. It's a night not unlike they had twenty-five years ago, before the kids, before the wonderful futures they imagined for themselves dissolved under the pressure of real life. The first mistake of the night is to believe that the freedom to smoke, drink or take drugs as they wish means that they should do exactly that. A game of truth and dare leads to a proposal to swap partners for the night, and the only rule? No falling in love. What follows is a night some of them can't remember and others can't forget.

I left Sydney soon after I graduated, with a degree in Film and Creative Writing. All I knew was that I wanted to live in Europe and I wanted to be a writer. When I was twenty-five I followed an Irish backpacker home. In Dublin, when I called myself a writer, with little evidence to show for it, no one said, 'but what do you really do, for a living, that is?' And so I stayed. From here, it looks like a plan well executed, but in truth, most of that journey happened because of a multitude of tiny decisions. Living is complex and messy, it takes time to know what to do, and even more time to work out why we do what we do. This is why I write.

After years working in the Irish Film and Television industry, filling a bottom drawer with unproduced screenplays, I wrote a short story about a schoolteacher lusting after a newly divorced dad. Six months later it was published in the *Irish Times*. Oh the joy of seeing work finished and read. This was five years ago.

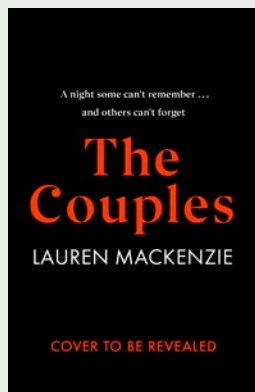
Thankfully, horizons are an illusion, the earth and the sky never meet, and there's always a new one whichever way you turn.

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JOHN MURRAY | 9781399809436 | HB | £16.99 | 6<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2023

 @LULUMACK57





Frank would've remained unconscious for a while longer but for the Labrador's wet nose in his ear. He shoved him off and dragged himself to standing. Fallen leaves and large and small branches littered the lawn. A big wind must have passed over last night, but he had no idea when. He hitched his pants up and discovered his flaccid penis hanging out of his flies and his feet were bare. As he tucked himself back in, he looked for his shoes. The only thing a cursory search unearthed was an empty vodka bottle.

He walked around the side of the house, his bare feet wincing on the sharp gravel, and came up against a bay window. Inside, the high walls of the room were lined with bookshelves, but the occasional tables were swamped with a wide array of empty glasses and liquor bottles. A Persian rug was rolled up and shoved to one side. The sofas and armchairs had been dragged into a tight circle around the black marble fireplace. Shoes and socks and a green velvet jacket lay scattered on the parquet floor.

It looked like a crime scene. Frank recognised nothing and was completely incapable of recalling his part in it. For all he knew a dead body was rolled up in the rug. His heart beat a little faster.

His friends' insistence on celebrating a birthday that was neither here nor there felt like a cruel comment on the fact that at forty-eight, he was neither here nor there. He had a wardrobe of rumpled Oxfam suits and four kids he couldn't afford. The only reason he agreed to the weekend away was because his friends offered to pay. The absence of a cake at dinner confirmed that he was an excuse for a blow out and that was fine by him because he felt the exact same way. He started hard as soon as they arrived. Tequila. Lick. Sip. Suck. He made sure everyone partook. What he consumed after that was anybody's guess. He hoped they all felt as destroyed as he.

When he tried the back door, the wood, swollen from centuries of rain, resisted. He slammed his shoulder into it until it swung open with a bang and hauled himself upstairs to the landing. Another few steps to what he was almost certain was his room. Peeking in, he saw Lizzie sat up in the giant four poster bed in her pyjamas, blonde curls awry, her features blurred with last night's make up.

'Where were you? I texted you! Why didn't you answer me?'

Frank had no idea what she was talking about. All he could think about was the getting of himself to the bed.

'Frank!'

A pillow came out of nowhere and slapped him in the face. It may have been full of feathers, but it felled him like a brick. He collapsed face down beside her.

'Where were you?' She thumped him in his side under the ribs. But apart from a small whoosh of air, there was only silence.



# NORTH WOODS

## DANIEL MASON

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When I first arrived in Western Massachusetts on a year-long fellowship, *North Woods* was but a sketch. I had the vague sense of a novel of succession, a term used in ecology to describe the patterns by which groups of organisms replace one another over time. It is a striking feature of the New England landscape, where it is possible to read the past in the present collection of species, and I was intrigued by the long story one might be able to tell about a single place and the human and non-human lives that pass through it. I had a beginning – an imagined homestead, a crude stone cabin built by a pair of lovers – and the sense of a trajectory of the centuries to come.

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But as I wrote, something else happened. My first chapter, in the heat of June, yielded to a second about a frontier raid, set partly in July, itself leading to an English Major who abandons the battlefield to cultivate an apple he discovers in late August. It was not hard to recognize the pattern – I was writing summer, because it was summer outside my window, and autumn brought apples both to the roadsides and my pages. But it was only as September turned that I fully began to recognize the organizing principle suggested by the woods around me. As my book would pass through the centuries, it would also pass through the seasons of the year, and finish up when I reached June, again.

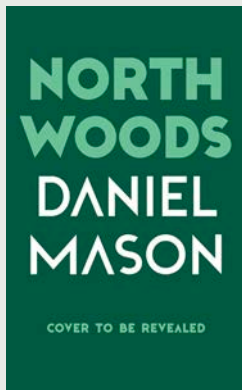
I have always been a slow writer – my last novel took fourteen years – but now it seemed as if Nature had thrown down the gauntlet. In October I would write my October chapters, and if the month turned before I finished, well, I would have to move on, writing with the seasons. And so, as each month came, I closed the chapter on one group of lives, and opened another. Future chapters suggested themselves, but like all horizons, they were uncertain, and often I arrived only to discover something very different. And yet what became apparent was how each successive world depended on the worlds before them. October determined November and November determined December and December January, ecologically and narratively. An apple eaten by a Puritan militiaman would later yield a tree which itself would tempt, divide a family, betray a girl escaping bondage, resurrect a ghost. The nuts hidden by a squirrel would, four chapters and a century later, grow into a forest. A silver ring would sing through the soil to a hobbyist seeking redemption from loneliness and loss.

As spring swept in, across the valley and my pages, I knew the end was approaching. For months, June waited as the final horizon, and yet I didn't know what it would bring, who would appear, what legacy they would inherit. But such, I suppose are all our Junes. Even if we can't escape our past, a joy remains in discovering what the world will yield as we move from one chapter to the next.

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The next morning, he asked to walk her home, to protect her from the wolves and catamounts. She laughed, 'But they've been hunted off.' For she was mostly scared of Mary.

'Not all,' he said.

He winked. She took his arm. But when they were about a quarter mile from the house, she asked to go on alone.

'And when can I see you next?' asked George Carter.

'Oh dear,' she said, for she saw so many complications. But she felt like she was young again. Her skin was alive, as if she had just come from cold water into the sun. 'Look,' she said, 'You have no food. I will bring you dinner this evening.'

'One kiss!'

'Quick!'

As she turned up the road, she had to resist the urge to look back, for she knew that he was standing there, watching. She looked back. 'Go home!' she said. She sensed a swing in her step. For, oh, she was the wanton! After the initial surprise of it, she'd performed quite deftly, and by the third round, that morning, when he'd collapsed in exhaustion, she'd laughed in triumph and pulled him close.

Now, as she approached the house, she felt reality come down upon her. There, somewhere, was Mary. No matter how well she knew her sister, no matter how many times they had fought, there had never been a rupture like this. She didn't know which was stronger: her happiness, her sudden shame, or her anger that Mary could cause her to feel regret instead of joy.

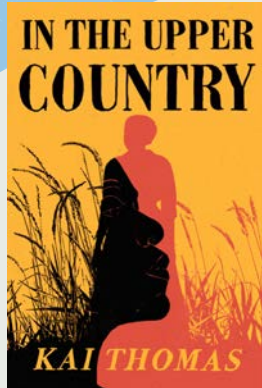
She went through the front door, expecting to find Mary in her rocking chair, but the living room was empty. Nor was she in the kitchen, and upstairs, the bed was neatly made, as if it hadn't been slept in. She was aware of the contrast between the old smell of the house, and the scent of George and sweat and spilled cider on her body. No, the consequences of her actions were greater than she imagined, she could no longer return to life as it was before. And she must tell Mary this, and hope somehow Mary would understand.

It was then that she became aware of a hammering sound coming from the orchard. She went to the window, and pulled back the curtains. It took a moment for her to understand what she was seeing. The apple trees were still there. But all along one row, and halfway up the other, the light was different, like the wool of a sheep partway through its shearing, and at the inflection point, between the fallen trees and those that remained standing, she saw her sister swinging the axe.

With a cry, she ran downstairs and up the field and into the orchard, the carnage all around her, stepping over fallen branches, chipped wood, the air thick with the smell of crushed apples, stunned birds flitting between the branches, crying out as if in outrage. 'Mary!' she cried, 'Mary! No!'



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