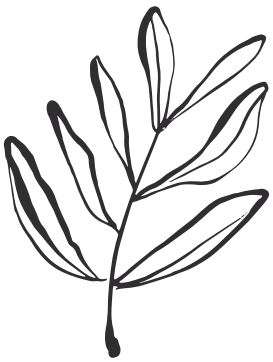
NEW ROOTS

JOHN MURRAY PRESS
FICTION 2020 PREVIEW



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ROOTS

We are incredibly proud to be presenting John Murray Press's fiction list for Spring 2020 – a hugely diverse range of novels from a wonderfully talented group of authors.

These stories span time: from a supervolcanic eruption in 1815 leading to the extraordinary 'Year Without Summer' around the world in 1816, to Nazi occupied Paris and through to Manchester in the 1950s and the Bangladesh War of Independence in the 1970s, to a contemporary border town in Northern Ireland.

Each of our authors transports their reader, peeling back time and place, and introduces us to a varied cast of characters. And for many of these characters there has been an upheaval, of forgotten or buried roots, of unearthing both personal or wider unknown histories – both deeply researched and pulled from their own family histories often passed down through generations.

To celebrate these novels with such varied and fascinating roots at their hearts, we've asked each author to share the roots of their book as well as an extract, to give you an idea of the range and of how they came to write these stories. This is our new roots fiction list and we can't wait for you to read them.

All the Water in the World

Karen Raney

All the Water in the World began with thoughts I had while looking at a lake. The voice became Eve's. As I felt my way toward who this woman was and what had happened to her, Maddy emerged as a distinct character. I found I was able to speak through both Maddy and Eve, and the two-voice structure became central to the story. I was once a teenage girl. I am now the mother of a teenage girl. And I have a close friend who went through the experience of having a seriously ill child. These were the wellsprings of the novel.

I am fascinated by the way young people both accommodate and resist their parents' world. Maddy's illness is an intensifier; her world is opening up just as it is in danger of closing down. She has to find ways of taking control and pulling away from her mother at a time when she is increasingly dependent on her. For Eve, the crisis re-shapes every relationship in her life.

My method is to begin with something that intrigues or troubles me and to see where it goes. Characters, events and their meanings are discovered in the act of writing and re-writing. Once the inhabitants of this book and the basic storyline were in place, I started to think in a more focused way about structure, plot and alternative scenarios. But the story was on the move right up until the end. It's a strange process where, as the writer, I am the one guiding and shaping the thing, and at the same time it's as though I'm on the sidelines, watching. I think of a developing narrative as a kind of gravitational field that pulls in ideas that might serve and enrich it. Over time, climate change, family secrets, religion and the consolations of art became part of Maddy and Eve's story.

Although I am in the position of Eve as a mother, it was Maddy's voice that came more easily to me. I felt most free when writing Maddy. With Eve, I was concerned not to make her voice too close to my own, and on the other hand to make her plausible, as I've never been through what Eve goes through, and much of her character and her life are alien to me. In hindsight, I can see that all the characters are blends of people I know, relationships I've had, or wish I'd had, or could have had, and partial or ideal or hypothetical versions of myself. The creation of fictional character draws upon deep parts of the personality, half-known memories, fears, observations, possibilities and longings, which is why it's so hard to understand and so exciting.

I write fiction to find something out. For example, I am curious about how independence and closeness are managed in parent-child relationships that are basically sound rather than dysfunctional. What goes on between Maddy and Eve is, in part, my effort to understand that. Likewise, because I'm close to someone who was in a predicament similar to Maddy and Eve's, I was driven to try to understand it from both points of view.

To write this novel, I drew on my experience and fears as a mother, but I never equated Maddy with my own daughter. I saw them as entirely separate people. I could never have written the book otherwise. In the same way, my friend's situation gave me the courage to write about something I had not experienced, as well as the drive to understand it, but the story is not my friend's story and I never perceived it as such. But the point is that a story that is written to find something out will be surprising and revealing to the author and so, it is hoped, to readers.

I find myself drawn to shorter forms of fiction, in which visual imagery is often a prime vehicle for content. This may have something to do with the fact that I am a painter. A short story, like a painting, has a definite shape that can be taken in more or less at once; the relationship of its parts is visible. But even in the long form of a novel, I tend to write with images. And art always slips in as part of my subject matter. In *All the Water in the World*, Eve works in an art gallery, some scenes are set at the Tate Modern in London, and Maddy draws, makes a film, and loves classical music. Through art, Maddy finds she can be her most private self while also being seen and known. Along with the relationships that sustain her, this ends up being the source of Maddy's hope.

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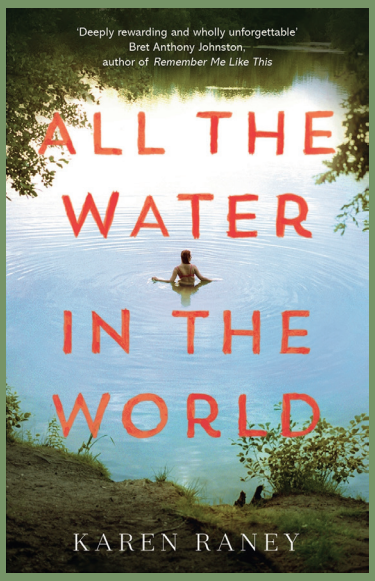

All the Water in the World

Karen Raney

A lake is a black hole for sound. The wind, the crack of a hammer, the cries of birds and children weave a rim of noise around the water, making its silence more profound. When a turtle or a fish breaks the surface, the sound appears to come from within. Maddy, who is a natural philosopher, would want to know whether it really is sound, or just the possibility of sound, that issues from such breaches. I mention Maddy because to have a child is to have a twofold mind. No thought or action belongs to me alone. This holds true more than ever now.

Every morning that summer I made my way to the dock, moving my cup of coffee up and down to prevent a spill. Some days when I arrived, the mist was a thick white lid. Some days it was lifting to expose the pan of still water.

When I reached the shore, the day I met our neighbour, the mist had already cleared. The colours were intense, almost unbearably so: sap green, white gold, blue of every kind. The dock wobbled underfoot as I stepped down, making me aware of both the mass and the instability of water. I set my cup on the low table at the end and brushed the dew off the two Adirondack chairs, whose green surface was bubbled and flaking.

Standing to face the lake, I indulged in a moment of play, as though I were on a stage with the curtain closed behind me. I swung my arms. I did fifty jumping jacks. I mimed a person singing or shouting, until I felt myself to be rising, clothed in feathers and scales, a creature that forgets everything and lives by its wits.

I sat and sipped my coffee. Before me, the pine trees pointed up and their reflections pointed down, just as convincing as the real ones, and I allowed myself a few moments to believe in this second world.

At the far shore, something puckered the glassy surface. A kayak, paddling purposefully in my direction. There was plenty of time to retreat, but I stayed put. Must be the newcomers who were rebuilding the house across the way.

The kayak advanced toward me, dragging the shattered reflection along behind it. The occupant was a woman of about my age. She coasted alongside

the dock, smiling openly. The paddle across her knees was dripping from both ends. I sat above her on the dock and waited.

'Is everything okay? You were waving. I thought maybe you needed help.'

'I was doing yoga,' I said, touched but annoyed to hear the word help spoken so casually.

The stranger's intense blue eyes passed over me. I don't think she believed me for a minute. 'I'm Norma. Your new neighbour.' She gestured with her paddle, scattering drops. 'We 're doing things to the place before moving in. I hope it hasn't been too much of a nuisance. The noise, I mean.'

I shook my head. When I said nothing, she raised her paddle as if to lever the kayak backward. That was when I surprised myself by inviting her to join me on the dock. By the time she had tied up her boat, wiped her hands on her shorts, and sat down, I was already regretting my invitation. Our chairs were awkwardly close, but I could hardly adjust their position now. Nor could I finish drinking my coffee in front of her, or give in to the solitary pleasure of holding the mug between my hands and inhaling the steam. There was nothing to do but gaze together lakeward. Chitchat was in order. Better to get it over with.

Any pause I filled with a question. Was she native to Pennsylvania or a transplant? How had they come to buy the lot? Did her husband 's practice give him much time with the boys? I learned about Tanner's loopy business partner and Ben's tantrums. I studied Norma's face as she recounted her children's foibles in tones of high bemusement, as if motherhood were a hilarious accident that had happened to her while she'd been looking the other way.

She stopped talking and frowned into the sun. Under the freckles her skin shone as if lit from within. I felt a longing for the easy company of women. I smiled at her when she turned, and she reached out and put her hand under mine, making me jump.

'Classy,' she said. Purple this week, with diagonal white stripes. I snatched my hand back. What on earth was she doing here? How much did she know?

'I do it for Maddy,' I said.

'Who is Maddy?'

Searching for Sylvie Lee

Jean Kwok

When we moved from Hong Kong to Brooklyn, New York, my older brother Kwan and I lost our parents – not to death but to immigration – and so we meant more to each other than ever. Our Ma and Pa had transformed, now more lost and confused than we were, and as the youngest of seven siblings, quicker to learn English than our elders, Kwan and I were charged with guiding our parents through a complex new culture and language we could barely navigate ourselves.

There are few photos of us from that time because we could not afford a camera, but one stands out in my memory. I was five years old, toothless and exuberant, sitting at fifteen-year-old Kwan's feet with a bowl of rice and chopsticks in my hands. I would not learn to use a knife and fork until I was a teenager. At the time, I was unaware of the gaping plaster falling from the ceiling beyond the scope of the picture, or the rats lurking within the walls. I did not know that when the painful, bitter winter arrived – so much colder than anything imaginable in tropical Hong Kong – that the windows would be covered with a layer of ice inside because we did not have central heating. Already growing into a handsome man, Kwan's expression was thoughtful, one hand resting protectively on my shoulder. He had already started working at the clothing factory in Chinatown after school.

I, too, would soon take the subway to that sweatshop with Pa to help the family as much as I could. Hours later, covered with sweat and fabric dust, Ma and Pa would take me home as Kwan and my other brothers went on to their second jobs waiting tables until deep into the night. In the morning, we would stumble to school, having done our homework during breaks at the factory or on the subway, and begin our long days all over again.

Kwan was, however, brilliant. He painstakingly crafted a way out of that cycle of grime and exhaustion, and in so doing, led the way for my escape as well. One night, I woke upon the mattress on the floor where I slept. Kwan had returned from his restaurant job and laid a small, wrapped brown package next to me. It was a present. We were paid one cent per garment at the factory, so I did not receive many gifts. To this day, I am amazed that he did not give me a toy or a piece of candy, but something that would change my life. It was a blank diary and he said, 'Whatever you write in this, will belong to you.'

From that moment on, I began to write: about my confusion in this country, my loneliness as an awkward, homely Chinese girl amidst my Nike-wearing, fork-wielding classmates – and, after Kwan was accepted into MIT and left for college, about how much I missed him. He had blasted out of our public school system and taken his rightful place as a glittering star in the sky.

I lived for the moments when his orbit brought him home, always bringing me gifts– thick red MIT sweatshirts, books about Einstein and quantum theory, a computer to take the place of the manual typewriter I used, contact lenses to replace the thick glasses I desperately needed but never wore out of vanity.

Then, in November of 2009, Kwan disappeared. I had moved to the Netherlands to be with the man who would become my husband and received a panicked phone call from my family. Kwan had not come home for Thanksgiving. He was the most responsible person we knew. An invisible hand clutched my heart. Something must be wrong.

I quickly took over the search, contacting his work and friends, and discovered he had gone to Texas to purchase a small plane. Flying was his passion and he had clocked more than 1,600 hours of flight experience. I hacked into his email and finally found the right airport. Kwan had taken off . . . then the plane had vanished.

I pictured my brother with a broken leg, dying of thirst beside his plane. I broke down, sobbing to strangers, the police, politicians, cell and credit card companies, the FAA, anyone who might help us find him. We narrowed the search area to a hundred-square-mile expanse of mountains. My family raced there, driving around aimlessly, calling his name into the woods. A week after Kwan disappeared, the Air Force and search-and-rescue teams found his body. His plane had nicked a tree and he had died upon impact.

Searching for Sylvie Lee was born from my love for my tragic, brilliant brother. Even though I know he is gone, my heart will never stop searching for him.

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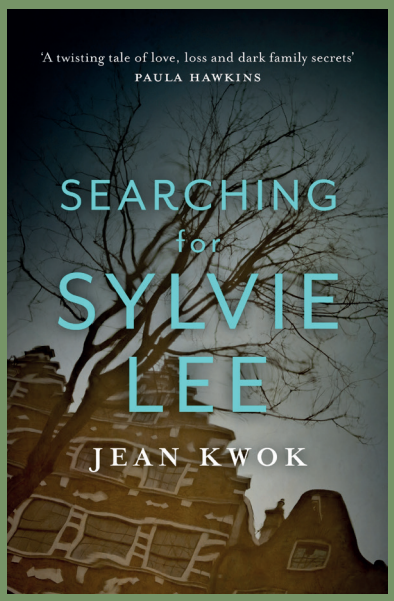

Searching for Sylvie Lee

Jean Kwok

Amy

I quickly put on my glasses and hurry to the dry cleaners where Ma works. The faint smell of steam and chemicals engulfs me as I push open the door. I find Ma standing behind the long counter, talking in her broken English to a well-dressed woman with sleek, honey-blond hair.

"We were quite horrified to find one of the buttons loose after we picked this up," the customer says, pushing a man's pin-striped shirt toward Ma.

"So sorry." Ma's small face looks wan and pale against her black clothing, her eyes puffy from crying. "I fix."

The woman taps a manicured nail against the countertop. Her tone is both irritated and condescending, as if she's speaking to a child who has misbehaved. "It's not really the quality we expect, especially after your prices went up."

"So sorry," Ma repeats.

I glare at the woman's bony back. I want to tell her that the owner hiked up the prices. Ma had nothing to do with it. She's never even gotten a raise in the long years she's worked here – standing on her feet all day, lifting heavy bundles of clothing, steaming, ironing, and mending. But I keep my mouth shut. I wait until the customer finishes berating Ma and leaves.

A smile lights up Ma's face, despite her grief, when she sees me. Even though I can understand some Chinese, I never learned to speak it well, so Ma always talks to me in English. "Amy, why you here?"

I had resolved not to worry her but find myself grabbing her wrist, crumpling her thin polyester blouse. "Cousin Lukas just called. He says Sylvie flew home this past weekend, but she's not picking up her phone."

"Ay yah." Ma covers her mouth with her other hand. Her large dark eyes show too much white. "She not tell us she coming home. She must be okay. Just a mistake. You call ah-Jim?"

"I tried all the way here but he's not answering. There haven't been any plane crashes or anything, right?"

"Of course not! What you saying!" Ma brushes her forehead three times with her delicate left hand to ward off the evil of the words I just uttered. She stares at me until I lean in so she can do the same to me. We're almost exactly the same height and when I catch sight of our reflections in the store mirror, I'm reminded of how much we look alike – except that I wear thick glasses and can't compare to the photos of Ma in her youth. She had been the loveliest girl in our village in Guangdong. Now in her fifties, her skin is still fine with only a light etching of lines, a silky cream that sets off her warm eyes, and there's something gentle yet wild in her gaze, like a deer in the woods. "You go to their place. See what happening. Use the key, in dry ginger jar at home."

"I have my own key. Sylvie gave it to me before she left. But are you sure, Ma?" I cringe at the thought of entering Sylvie's house without permission. My mind races: What if Jim's there? What's happening to us? What could have happened to Sylvie?

"Sure, sure," she says. "You go now. Quick."

Ma

I was as ignorant as the frog at the bottom of the well when I let Sylvie return to Holland. How many times must I surrender my daughter to that land of wind and fog and loss? She already spent the first nine years of her life there – and then, one moon ago, when she heard my ma, her grandma, was facing death, she rushed to book her ticket for Amsterdam. Sylvie was but a leaf, withering from homesickness, fluttering downward to return to the roots of its own tree.

I was so busy with Mrs. Hawkins, whose fair skin hid ugly features, that I did not notice when Amy entered the dry cleaners. My poor younger girl, her face stunned with fear, chewing on her chapped lips without realizing. I did not want to reveal my soul-burdens to her, especially since she was wearing her eye lenses for once. Her heart knows enough as it is.

I sat down to sew tighter the button Mrs. Hawkins complained about. I had shown it to Mr. Hawkins when he picked up the shirt and he had said it was not a problem. But he must be more than sixty years old and Mrs. Hawkins closer to forty. He is an old cow eating young grass, and so he must pay the price for his pleasure. As I worked, my mind wandered back to the blackest time in my life. It was more than thirty years ago, when I gave my six-moon-old Sylvie to grandma to be raised in Holland. The worst thing about it was that I knew what I was doing. I had no excuse.

The Year Without Summer

Guinevere Glasfurd

The Year Without Summer is the story of the Tambora eruption and the calamitous year that followed in 1816. The novel is told from the point of view of six characters, including Mary Shelley, who crafts the first pages of *Frankenstein* that year, and the artist, John Constable, struggling to establish himself as a professional artist. It is the story of an eruption few had heard of; of lives pushed to the brink as the seasons suddenly failed.

Tambora, on Sumbawa island, remains the largest volcanic eruption of modern times. A 'super colossal' explosion, it measured 7 on the Volcanic Explosivity Index; by contrast, the Krakatoa eruption of 1883 was a 6. Twelve thousand people are thought to have been killed and between 80,000 and 100,000 died of starvation or disease across the region in the following weeks. Tambora is believed to have stood at 13,000 feet. Some 4,000 feet were lost from the summit, leaving a crater approximately four miles across and 3,000 feet deep.

Tambora's impact beyond its devastating local effects was not understood at the time; it took more than a year for reports of what had happened to reach Britain. Thanks to research of volcanologists such as Clive Oppenheimer and climatologists such as Hubert Lamb, we now know that the effects of the Tambora eruption were profound and far-reaching and led to sudden cooling across the northern hemisphere, crop failures, famine and social unrest. Summer temperatures across western and central Europe were around 2–4°C cooler than average in 1816. Snow fell in June and August; weeks of incessant rain seemed to foretell the end of times. But whereas large parts of Europe suffered floods, North America experienced a sustained period of drought and wildfires. In the longer term, the Tambora eruption is credited with social change through the nineteenth century and with the pressure for political reform.

In a nod to *Frankenstein*, the novel opens in 1815 with a series of letters written by ship's surgeon Henry Hogg to his wife. But whereas letters bookend *Frankenstein*, Henry's story is cut short and his last letter home is snatched away by the wind.

I based Henry's story on an account of the Tambora eruption by the captain of the Benares. He had set sail, expecting to encounter pirates, but instead found himself sailing into the immediate aftermath of the eruption, for which he was wholly unprepared. Sumbawa was then under British rule and governed by Stamford Raffles. His response to the eruption was to request reports from across the territory. It was not until four months later, in August 1815, after reports of famine on Sumbawa, that Raffles sent a relief vessel with rice, a response that has been described as 'pitifully inadequate'.

Five characters tell the story of the eruption's aftermath in 1816: Mary Shelley; John Constable; farm labourer Sarah Hobbs; Hope Peter, a soldier returned from the Napoleonic wars, and Charles Whitlock, a Wesleyan preacher in Vermont. At first, their lives seem utterly unconnected, but as the effects of the eruption bear down, and events gather pace, none is left untouched. As desperation sets in, rebellion is in the air.

We live at a time of climate crisis. Although the Tambora eruption was a natural event and its impact limited to a handful of years, it provides clear example of the devastating effects of climate breakdown. The poor were hit hardest, creating large numbers of famine refugees and dislocating many more.

1816 was a year of flood and fire, of popular protest and revolutionary struggle, of Constable's art and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. A famine year, when protectionist policies were enacted to protect landed wealth and benefit those never at risk of going hungry. It was a year dominated by strikingly similar concerns about national debt, poor relief (welfare) and protectionism as those in austerity ravaged Britain and in Trump's America.

Historical fiction often presses history into the service of the present and the story of Tambora is not just a story of then, it is a story of now. But in writing this novel, I was also interested in how fiction might be used to interrogate the past. How should we understand Constable's art, Mary Shelley's writing and what might the novel reveal about their lived experience of that year, and their response to it, at a time of undeniable crisis?

Writing *The Year Without Summer* took me to the heart of what it means to be a writer and to question what fiction is for at a time of man made climate change when we are living through the sixth mass extinction event.

Where should fiction take us? Towards comfort? Towards hope? What use that? What is a story for, if not to propel us? To provide, above all, urgent impetus to act?

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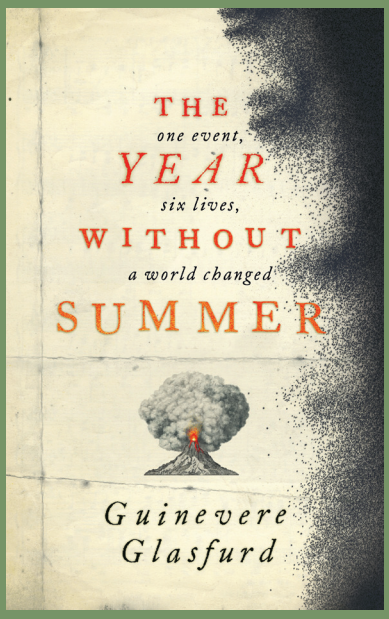

The Year Without Summer

Guinevere Glasfurd

Henry, 1815

18 April our year of the Lord, 1815

Dearest, dearest Emmalina,

Forgive my silence, but I have been unwell, a consequence, I think, of ash having found its way into our drinking water. My blisters, I am relieved to say, are improved.

My darling, I wish I had never seen this day for I am struggling to find the words that can adequately express it. Daylight is returned but, oh, for the darkness we had five days ago in favour of what I can now see.

We have arrived off Bima on Sumbawa, which we believe almost certainly is the source of the 'cannons' that disturbed our peace in Makassar. This island, once a green gem, is now a hellish scene, to rival any produced by Breughel. The mountain Tomboro, sometimes called Tambora, is gone. Gone! But where? If I had not climbed it last year, when I was the guest of the Rajah here, I would scarce believe it were possible. I knew of the volcano beneath it, but had no reason to suspect an eruption. I am yet to find the Rajah among the few survivors we have met. I hope he lives. I will venture out tomorrow to find him.

But I am ahead of myself. Let me tell you first of our awful approach. We sighted Sumbawa yesterday. Then, still some distance off, the sea became sluggish, thickened with ash in a grey soup. I was below deck, assessing our water supply to determine what portion was spoiled, when I heard a cry go up from above.

I popped my head through the hatch, but it was impossible to make out what was being said. A sailor held out his arm, and pointed, then flapped up and down in a most peculiar manner. Already, he had a small crowd around him and they were similarly vexed. I heaved myself up through the hatch and elbowed my way through the commotion. I took the spyglass from one of them and looked.

That wasn't water ahead, but stone: a sea, made entirely of stone! But stone that undulated gently.

Bump, bump, bump went several pieces as they knocked into the hull. The bosun, hearing it, took a net and scooped up a small amount. He turned what he had out on deck and we stared as though at strange, dead specimens from the deep. I poked at one with my foot then reached down to pick it up. Stone, now cinder, and pocked like a sponge. The stone had no weight – so that was why it floated. The bosun ventured it was pumice.

Pumice? Of course. I went to the port side and looked over. Pumice in every direction, the sea thick with it and as far as I could see. Although we had a good wind behind us, the ship had slowed and struggled to make way. It must have been many feet thick to slow us like that.

And that, my dearest, is how the sea becomes a mountain and the mountain becomes a sea. There are riddles everywhere, it seems . . .

*****

What godforsaken place this? Land, certainly, but not of the living and utterly devoid of life. Neither tree nor plant of any description could he see. Neither mammal, bird, beetle nor fly. Such stillness. No leaves for the wind to move through; no branch from which a bird might sing. Was this the end of the world and they the only ones in it?

Sarah, 1816

If I'd know'd it were wrong, I'd never have done it.

Weren't anything much anyhow.

Mairster Benton had sent me away from his farm that morning with nothing and it was then that I catch'd up with Tessie and I guessed he'd sent her away too.

'Mornin',' I said in greeting, as is only polite and she's my elder by four years.

'Mornin',' she said back, not looking at me, as if I were the slummocky one though she had the same lack of shoes on as me.

'Where are you oft to?' I asked, polite as I could, enquiring. Her striding on, head in the air, as though making for Norwich.

I asked her again and tugged on her sleeve to get her to say.

'Never you mind, Sarah Hobbs,' she said and shook my hand free.

'Did he not have work for you then either?'

'What's that?'

'Mairster Benton.' Of course, Mairster Benton. Who else did she think I meant?

'He's a bastid,' she said. 'If I were a man, I'd take up a gun an' I'd shoot him, I would.'

'Who?'

'Mairster Benton, that's who.'

Now that we were on swearing terms together, we carried on our way in better cheer having decided we'd go on to Park Farm after all and ask after work there.

We'd gone no more than halfway down the track when I stopped and pulled out what I'd had in my pocket all the while. Tessie's eyes opened up wide when she saw it.

A penknife. Handsome carved, with initials too. I turned it over in my hand and pulled out the blade.

'That's never yours . . .'

'It's Mairster Benton's.' Pride swelled my voice; I'd fluffed out fatter than a dandelion clock.

She looked at me full agog. 'How did you come by it? Did you steal it?'

I pretended not to hear. One puff of wind would have shivered me all away. Truth was, he'd dropp'd it without noticing and I'd covered it with my foot and whipped it up quick when he looked the other way.

'Finders keepers,' I said and skipped ahead. Weren't much use other than for whittling that I could see, but he weren't having it back.

And that about served him right.

Big Girl, Small Town

Michelle Gallen

When I started to write this novel (over ten years ago) the 100th anniversary of the partition of Ireland by Britain seemed far away. The idea of Britain voting to leave the EU was absurd. And the likelihood of a return of the 'hard border' between Britain and Ireland, and the prospect of violence, terrifying.

I grew up in a small town as full of gossip and intrigue, love and hate, as any small town anywhere in the world. But I was born in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, a few miles from the border between what I was told was the 'Free' State and the 'United' Kingdom. I attended school in the most bombed small town in Europe after WWII. Our local area had the highest unemployment rate anywhere in the industrially developed world.

One of my earliest memories is of being driven to school after a bomb. I was about four years old, and I remember looking out the window of the car I was in, shocked by the transformation of our scruffy wee town into a series of shattered shops and houses. The air was thick with the smell of smoke and dust. I looked up at a void where a three-storey building had stood, struck by the way the light now fell on my face, because the building was gone. I think from an early age, I had a terrible sense that things could change – suddenly and violently – in minutes.

Being born in Northern Ireland meant I was never part of Generation X. Instead, I was a Child of the Troubles. We had iconic photos immortalising our parents protesting, resisting and rioting. Cameras captured our generation as kids, playing alongside soldiers with guns in ruined housing estates. We were familiar with uniforms, balaclavas, burnt out cars, murder scenes and flowers – both on and off camera.

I was a teenager before I realised how unusual it was to grow up with armed soldiers patrolling your streets and fields. Our community was under close British military surveillance – the detail on the confidential maps they drew of our local area even included the names of our dogs. We grew up watching the Brits watch us watch them, and then we watched ourselves on TV. Despite this rigorous surveillance, and despite the media reports on atrocities and the TV programmes exposing murders, collaboration, and cover ups, I felt that the normal experiences of our community – our hopes and our dreams, our struggles and our joys – were largely invisible not just to the British public, but also to most people in the Republic of Ireland.

When I started writing *Big Girl, Small Town*, the 'ceasefire babies' were hurtling towards their teens. I was living in a loyalist enclave in Belfast and working for the BBC on an Irish language website – a combination that was unimaginable during the Troubles. This period of 'peace' had been sold to us as the real deal – not just another lull in the violent campaigns that have happened on and off since the partition of Ireland.

But I experienced a disconnect between the official narrative regarding the outcome of the Ceasefire and Good Friday Agreement – described by recently murdered journalist Lyra McKee as 'the spoils of peace' – and the violence, paralysis, lack of hope and anger I saw around me. The initial rush of hope and the appetite for change after the Ceasefire had coagulated into a bubbling stew of sectarianism and violence that wasn't quite bad enough to be newsworthy. Islamic extremists hogged the headlines while we blundered around in the murky business of conflict resolution and healing. I – and other Children of the Troubles – floundered without a label to describe what we were now, grown ups, living in a ceasefire, missing the only attention we were ever sure of – being observed by the military and the press.

My writing has always been rooted in the area in which I'd grown up: my short stories featured the residents of a small town caught in the stranglehold of a contentious border. My first novel naturally dived deeper into this world, exploring the lasting impact not just of the Troubles, but partition and the subsequent border campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s.

Big Girl, Small Town features a family who live right on the international frontier between the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom. Their fortunes have been defined by the partition of Ireland in 1920: the violent border campaigns and the Troubles have all left their mark. The protagonist, Majella, is an undiagnosed autistic woman. She's both an intimate local and a perpetual outsider, and the reader is invited to see this deeply-divided community through her eyes. Several men in the family are directly involved in violent political acts but through Majella, we see the Troubles – and 'peace' – from a female perspective. *Big Girl, Small Town* shines a light on the human consequences of partition. It tells stories from the dark heart of a deeply-divided community, revealing the humour, grief and resilience of a proudly ungovernable tribe stuck on the very edge of Britain and Ireland.

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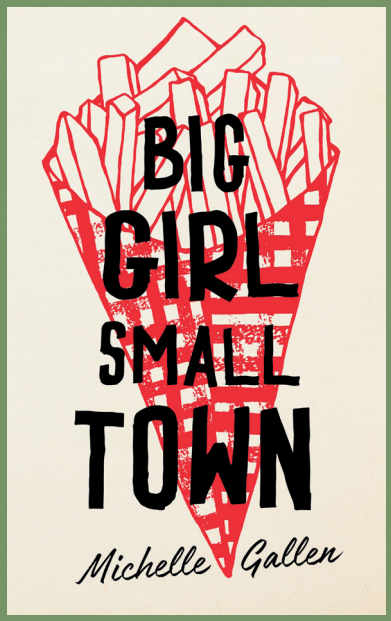

Big Girl, Small Town

Michelle Gallen

5.05 p.m.
Item 18.1: Periods: PMS

Majella's hairpins were sticking into her. No matter what she did, she couldn't sort them out. It was fucking her off. She knew by the all-over body aches and the itching and scratching feeling she had under her skin that her period was due. Marty was in foul form too, having had a row with Philomena. This was not Majella's problem and she hoped Marty would not make it her problem. The buzzer sounded and Red Onions walked into the chipper, his pasty freckled face streaked with dirt from work. Majella hadn't seen him since he'd found his da dead on the settee, and knew she should say something to him. She paused for what she knew was too long, searching for the right words. Then she spoke.

– What canna get chew? Red Onions took a long look at the fluorescent menu board above Majella's head, then turned his grey eyes towards her.

– Big sausage supper and a can a Coke, please.

– Coming up.

She wrote the order on her wee notebook, ripped the page out and spiked it onto the board, even though she could tell Marty'd heard the order as it came in, and already had the food bubbling in the fryer. Red Onions sat down on the window seat, put his toolbox at his feet, and rested his head in his hands. Majella watched him comb his fingers slowly through his glowing ginger hair. He looked tired. Majella hadn't seen him for a week. She'd taken six days off work (with no pay) for her granny's wake and funeral. After that Red Onions had his da's wake and funeral to attend to. Majella hated wakes. She spent three days trapped in her aunt Marie's house greeting an unending stream of people who'd come to have a look at the corpse laid out in the only bedroom. It had been a big wake, almost as big as Brendy Hagan's after he'd been blown up by the Loyalists because his photo'd been in the paper for distributing shamrocks before Mass on Paddy's Day. Wakes for people killed in explosions usually featured closed coffins, but because the hospital staff did

such a great job of patching Brendy back together during the seven days he'd survived after the explosion, the town had the novelty of a half-open coffin at his wake. Everyone with the faintest connection to the family dropped in for a gawk at Brendy's sewn-up face. Majella had been dragged along by her ma, who had pushed her into the crowded house. Majella spent the whole hour in a horror of embarrassment, crammed into close range with neighbours, people from school and strangers. It unnerved Majella to see they'd put Brendy in a full-size coffin, even though he'd lost both his legs. After she'd found a place to stand and been given a cup of tea, she'd stood there wondering if they'd refrigerated his legs when he'd first been brought into the hospital, in case he'd die and could be buried complete, or if they'd incinerated them when it became clear there wasn't enough to sew back on.

Majella didn't get wakes. Everyone at her granny's wake had blethered on about the brilliant tradition of wakes and how they were a power of good for the bereaved and how wakes kept the community together and how if it wasn't for wakes and funerals sure they'd hardly ever see each other any more because of the way the telly keeps everyone indoors.

The wake didn't feel like a power of good to Majella, who was obliged by tradition to tramp around her Auntie Marie's damp wee house for hours offering a tray full of scones and sandwiches to a load of wet-eyed oul fellas who kept telling her what a great dancer her granny'd been in her day. Everyone told Majella what she already knew – that no one deserved that end: no one. Hour after hour Majella carried the tray, and all she could think was, I'm still at it – still serving food up to the greedy fuckers. She stared out over Red Onions' head to the Diamond, where Agnes Ferguson was bent over coughing while her son packed up her stall in the fading light.

12.00 p.m.
Item 12.9: Conversation: Opinions

– It's not a bit wonder that monkeys ate their weans. Majella's forehead creased in a frown. She was standing at the fryer with her head facing the wall, listening to Ruairí Kelly, who Marty said had never been the same since he got the Sky subscription and discovered the Discovery Channel.

– Ah don't blame them at all. Ah think there might be something in it.

Since then, Ruairí had become harder to listen to. Majella remembered the evening he'd spent a good ten minutes in the chipper explaining to the girl he was with that a certain species of octopus had a detachable penis, which could swim for up to two miles on the hunt for a female octopus (who apparently weren't happy to let their fannies swim off unaccompanied into the deep blue yonder and had instead evolved to give birth to hundreds of baby octopi simultaneously, in an explosive birth that caused their immediate death). Majella never saw Ruairí and the girl together after that, which was less mysterious than the evolutionary path the octopus family had taken.

– Ah mean, when ye think about it, when ye know what's ahead a ye, would ye really want tae bring another wee being in tae this life here, tae go through what ye've been trying tae get through?

– Och, ah dunno Ruairí. Ruairí was talking with Proinsias Ó Néill. Majella had been to school with Proinsias when he was just plain oul Franci O'Neill, or Franci the Feel as he'd been called after their fourth-year school trip to the Jet Centre in Coleraine when Franci was seen down the back of the bus with Fionnuala Quinn, his hands rummaging around underneath her pink shellsuit. Majella hadn't been keen on pink shellsuits before then, and went right off them

after that. In time, Franci had joined Sinn Féin, changed his name and started saying Gee A Ditch every time he met anyone. Majella's Irish had never got beyond learning the Hail Mary, Our Father and the lyrics of the national anthem, which Master MacMickering had bate into them at primary school during his intermittent sober phases.

– What are ye sayin? Are ye sayin that it's all been worth it and sure isn't it all grand and let me have a shower a weans coz my life's been a fucken bed a roses?

– Och now Ruairí . . . But Ruairí started up again, leaving Proinsias staring at the ground. Marty was at the counter, listening. Majella watched him as he shifted from foot to foot, frowning, feeling one of his man diddies. After a few more seconds he waded in.

– Houl on a minute now, Ruairí. Houl on. Ah'm a da now, ann no harm tae ye, but ah think what yer sayin's pure shite.

Ruairí turned around to face Marty, both eyebrows squashed together in confrontation. – Do ye now? Marty shifted his position behind the counter and kept going.

– Now, ah'm not saying this life's been a doss for me. Ah've had me hard times ann me good times like every other fucker. But what ah am saying is that ye have weans coz you kinda hope there's gonna be something better for them. That they'll maybe get the chance tae make a better fist of it than you got. Ye can only hope like. Proinsias nodded in agreement.

– Aye. You're right enough there, Marty, you're right enough. Ruairí screwed up his face in disgust. – Marty, I bet ye had weans coz ye got yer Mrs knocked up one night when youse were both pished or ye gave in so she'd quit nyamming at ye about babbies. Ah well ann truly doubt that ye both sat down ann thought the process through.

Ruairi paused and looked at Marty, who said nothing.

– So what's yer three wee girls gonna come to? Far as ah can fucken see in this town, they've got the choice of harvesting chicken guts until they go on the sick, or getting knocked up ann lying around the town on benefits, taking shite off of whatever fella's still there. If they're lucky, they'll fuck off to Dublin or England ann you'll see them maybe once or twice'd a year, ann they'll be embarrassed tae see the cut of ye ann mortified at yer accent. Ah'm telling ye, Marty, the best fucken approach is tae make like a monkey and eat yer children when they'r still tender.

There was a bit of silence in the chipper after that. Then Marty spoke.

– What the fuck were you sucking the night, sir? Red diesel?

Proinsias burst out laughing. Then Marty started to laugh. Ruairí was left standing there frowning as Majella came over with their order.

– Salt ann vinegar on yer chips?

The Ninth Child

Sally Magnusson

What is it about folklore? Since starting to write novels a few years ago, I keep being drawn to the disruptive, slightly subversive quality that the supernatural can bring to a historically realistic narrative.

In my first novel, *The Sealwoman's Gift*, the imaginative universe of my captured Icelandic protagonist came to life in the character of the elfman, key to that book's theme of the universal need for stories to make sense of life.

The roots of *The Ninth Child* also lie in a dual interest in folklore (this time of the Celtic variety) and the largely hidden experiences of women in the past. Last time I found my woman in seventeenth century Iceland; for this novel I turned to nineteenth century Scotland.

The social issue that seized my imagination here was the effect of childlessness on women in the Victorian era (the middle-class ones anyway), who were permitted virtually no reputable role but motherhood. From this emerged my protagonist Isabel Aird, thrown adrift by repeated miscarriages.

The legend that gripped me just as forcibly was the story of a genuine seventeenth century church minister, Rev. Robert Kirke, who had lived at Aberfoyle, gateway to the Trossachs. In real life he became notorious for taking too close an interest in his parishioners' beliefs about the faery realm – so much so, it was believed, that while out walking near his home he was snatched away to faery himself as a punishment.

I've long been intrigued, and indefinably terrified, by this story. What would happen, I thought, if the Robert Kirke of local legend were to return from his underground prison nearly two centuries later when rock and earth were being exploded to make a tunnel for the great Victorian waterworks? What if that return were dependent on a deadly bargain? What if that bargain brought him into the life of a well-bred city woman with a weight of grief on her and not enough to do?

The Trossachs, a gorgeous area of lochs and hills not far from where I live, felt like the ideal place to set a novel exploring these two levels of reality. In the nineteenth century the great waterworks project at Loch Katrine (which still supplies much of Glasgow's water) represented the height of industrial progress; but it was being built in a landscape littered with ancient Gaelic place-names – Fairy Knoll, Fairy Fortress, Dog Loch and dozens of others – which belong to an earlier age and to older, uncanny traditions. Loch Ness is not the only serene Scottish loch to be troubled from below.

That collision of ancient with modern, folklore with historical reality, became the framework within which I could examine a number of fascinating issues: not only the trivialised lives of so many Victorian women, but the dangerous work of the unregarded navvies who built so much of Britain's infrastructure, the beginnings of public health in tackling diseases like cholera, the human impact of the Highland Clearances.

Through Isabel and Kirke and their worlds I also hoped to tease out what is universal and timeless in the human condition, for good and ill. I was prepared for faery itself to be a challenge in a book also dealing with social reality. My solution was to make it less a place than a state of mind, one that would resonate with our own solipsistic, anonymously vicious society, bringing hints of the twenty first century alongside the nineteenth and the seventeenth.

With Robert Kirke's tortured interior monologue and Isabel Aird's experience narrated in the third person, I had two distinct voices. But I also needed someone to bridge these figures from separate worlds and provide the reader with a perspective (though not necessarily an infallible one) on both. Cue Kirsty McEchern, channelling the experience of my own Highland great-grandmother, but speaking in the Lowland idioms of my working-class mother. In Kirsty we have a woman who has grown up with the old beliefs, but as a far-travelled navvy's wife is also at the painful end of industrial modernising.

Along with the novel's main characters I had fun weaving in others from history with a connection to the waterworks project, the fight against cholera and the championing of socially useful roles for women. Victoria and Albert, who opened the waterworks in 1859, were a particular joy to explore.

And finally there was the landscape. I walked the shores of Loch Chon, the Dog Loch, and imagined it changing before Isabel's eyes as the tunnel took shape and mountains of detritus turned the tree-girt slopes into a wasteland. But it's ambiguous too, this landscape. Like Robert Kirke, like life itself. In the depths of the lovely loch lies horror; the lethally jagged thistle becomes soft and fluffy in another season.

Perhaps that thought was at the root of the whole thing.

Two Roads
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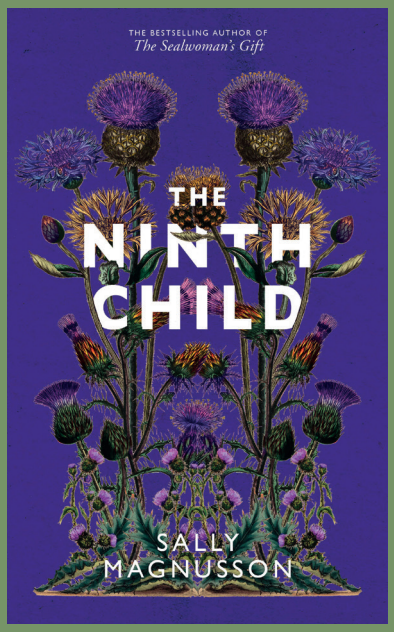

The Ninth Child

Sally Magnusson

Alexander should have warned her. Explosions, Issy, he might have said. Puddles, he could have mentioned. Grass of a less manicured variety than the Botanic Gardens, pronounced absence of paths wider than your dress – a hint would have been helpful.

Had he warned her? This morning's compliment on the strawberry bonnet had been, on reflection, a shade less than sincere, but no, nothing had been said. She would have paid attention to that much.

Isabel sank majestically on to a hummock of grass, which is the only way a descent from the upright can be accomplished in a crinoline, and looked around. There were men everywhere: navvies distinguishable by their gay neckerchiefs and hobnail boots sauntering about with armfuls of ironmongery or leading the most enormous horses along the shore; gentlemen guests whooping themselves hoarse around a vast Corporation of Glasgow banner, each boom accompanied by a frenzied waving of hats. By now Alexander would probably be hollering right along with them.

As the only lady for miles and certainly the only woman braving the wilds today in a hooped lilac gown and a bonnet nodding with silken fruit, Isabel had been attracting so much attention that she barely noticed the other figure staring at her from a clump of bright trees. She might not have registered him at all – black coat, something white at the neck, no hat of any kind – if she had not been so struck by the man's eyes, which burned through the faint gunpowder haze with a peculiar energy.

'Hungry' is how she would describe the look afterwards.

'Poor fellow,' her husband would murmur. 'We need to find him work.' Alexander was not easily engaged with a metaphor.

The man was quickly gone, and Isabel, hot and disgruntled in her billow of skirts, had no more inkling of peril than a twinge of anxiety for her strawberries. There was certainly nothing to alert her that here on the banks of hidden Loch Chon was a beginning. Or that this sunny May morning would ever remain for her a kind of ending, too.

*****

Robert

Out.
Out.
I am out.
The earth erupting in thunder and fire. Out.
Smoke drifting across the heavens. Out.
A lady attired in a fine gown and egregiously silly bonnet. Aye, I hear you. I see her.
Robert Kirke is out o' faery – and one glance is enough.

*****

Kirsty

Just start at the beginning, ye say. Tell it your own way, Kirsty McEchern, and forget who's listening. But see, beginnings, endings – it's not always so easy to know which is which. Life's a circular sort of thing most o' the time and so's a story. Those of us at the heart o' this one would likely all tell ye differently where it began, and as for where it ended, well, is it even finished yet? That's what I ask myself sometimes.

It's a long while since I've spoken about Robert Kirke, but maybe it's time. Maybe it's time right enough. I'm the one who knew Isabel Aird best in those years, unless you're counting her husband and there were times I wasna so sure you should. And I'm the one who warned her. 'Mrs Aird,' says I, 'be careful. I've got a feeling about this man.'

I get these feelings. When you grow up in the Highlands and Islands with Gaelic your first tongue, you come away with an instinct for things that are that bit beyond what you might call the natural, though to us it's all one. You see what canna exactly be seen in the names our ancestors gave to the hills and the hollows and the brown peat moors and the ancient mounds of the sìthichean – that's fairies to you. English never quite catches the idea of any of it. Nor, to be honest with you, did Isabel Aird.

You have to remember she was a Lowlander, born and bred in a city. What did she know about matters that Highlanders drink in with their mothers' milk? She thought they were no more than a quaint thing to read about in those fancy books that brought tourists to ooh and aah at the landscape o' the Trossachs. There she came all innocent, with her parasol a-twirl and a background that had bred her useless. Broken inside, though.

Awful broken. A woman like that has no defences.

Hashim & Family

Shahnaz Ahsan

I come from a family of storytellers. While other children we knew had a bedtime story read to them, my sisters and I would listen to my father's 'kitchas' – stories – each night before going to sleep. A retired professor of Bengali literature, my father also writes poems. I was a teenager when I realised the sacrifice my father made in moving to Britain so early in his academic career – there is little demand for Bengali poetry here. Instead, my father wrote for us – his three daughters – rhymes in Bengali to help us learn the language. My mother also wrote – secretly. I found a red notebook when I was about eight that had the beginnings of a story she had written. It was set in Bangladesh during the 1971 Independence War and was told from the perspective of a little girl. When I got to the end of the few handwritten pages, I was hooked. I desperately wanted to know what happened next, but my mum never finished it. I'm still pleading with her to.

These are my 'roots' – a family that always told and shared stories. The subjects varied but we always came back to the same favourites: my parents' respective childhoods – my mother's in Manchester in the 70s, my father's in East Pakistan in the 50s; their experiences of the war; my grandma's tales of moving to England as a young bride; my mum's tales of running away from skinheads when walking home from school. Their stories became my stories too, part of the foundation on which I placed myself. I saw, and still see myself as a product of their collective experience; the latest iteration of my family's entanglement with migration, identity and nationalism.

Last year I was going through a box of my old things at my parents' home. Rifling through a stack of school reports, I found a series of 'self-reflections' I had written at the request of my teacher. Aged eight, I confessed: *"I like writing stories and poems. When I grow up I want to be an author. I think my grammer is good aswell as spelling."* The following year I had graduated from pencil to fountain pen. The blue ink attests: *"I aim to have a book published. I like writing and reading but I don't like handwriting."* Evidence, then, that I had always felt the pull to write.

For me, there was no question about what my subject would be. I have always found my family to be my biggest inspiration. Every family history is crammed full of stories – the mundane, the fantastical, the brushes with danger, the victory of survival. My family's history was as rich as any other, and as I got older, I could not understand why stories like these were not found in books, when they were among the most captivating I had ever heard. My older sister and I used to try and sit inconspicuously in the corners at family gatherings, eager to absorb the stories of the grown-ups – sometimes ghostly, sometimes scandalous, sometimes unbelievable, but *ours*. Enthralled, we stayed necessarily quiet to avoid being noticed and thrown out of the room in the event that the story was considered too adult for our ears.

There were stories of war and danger – like the time when my maternal grandfather talked his way out of arrest during the 1971 Independence War by promising to bring cardigans from Marks & Spencer to the Pakistani soldier who detained him, if he were released. The soldier agreed so my grandfather rushed to his family home and, true to his word, fetched the M&S cardigan that his mother was wearing, promising that he would send her hundreds more when he returned to Britain if she let him have this one. There were stories of hauntings and visitations from relatives who had passed onto the other side. There were stories where reality seemed even weirder than the supernatural, like the tale of my paternal grandfather's birth. His mother had died at her parents' home during childbirth. Determined that their child should be raised in his father's ancestral home, my great-grandfather carried his infant son in his arms, through miles of dark, treacherous forests where they were attacked by wild monkeys, until they reached home.

Hashim & Family is a work of fiction, but it is inspired by stories such as these. The historical events described in the book all happened, and I felt a great deal of responsibility to present these as accurately as I could. In 2016, while I was researching the book, I visited Bangladesh. *Why do you want to know this?* my uncle asked me during one conversation about the war, both of us upset. He had been a young teacher at the time, newly married and recently appointed headmaster of the local school. In tears, he recounted how he had to go into school early each day to clean up the blood in the classrooms that had been shed during army interrogations that took place at night. War was ravaging his homeland, but he still had to teach. Life had to continue.

This is why I write, and why I wrote *Hashim & Family*. It is the story of my roots, but more than that, it is a story of continuity and change, of family ties, of migration and a connection to home.

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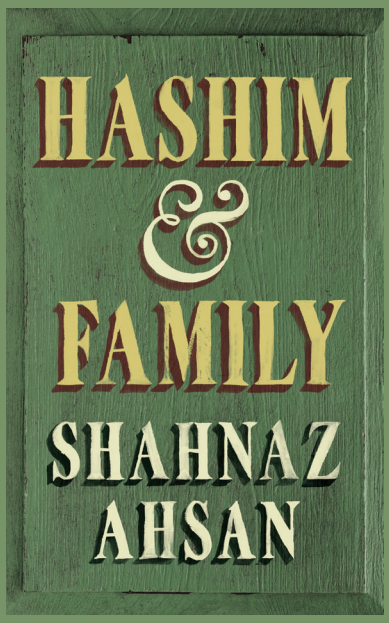


Hashim & Family

Shahnaz Ahsan

Hashim pulled his blazer tightly around his chest and fastened the silver buttons with numbed fingers. He couldn't tell whether it was the icy wind making him clumsy or the fact that the buttonholes were sewn up too tightly, but as he tried to force the last shiny fastening into its hole, it fell away from the jacket into his hand. Hashim inwardly cursed the slick-tongued salesman who had persuaded him to spend the last of his savings on this ugly, overpriced three-piece suit.

'It will make you stand out the minute you step off that plane,' the tailor had purred. 'It's the latest cut, and the cloth is even better than the stuff that comes out of those English mills. Besides, it's a necessity. Nobody goes abroad without a suit.'

The last bit at least was true, he conceded. Everyone knew that one required a crisp suit and a starched collar if one was intending to head bilath. Abroad. England. A tie was donned for the pre-departure farewell, but soon loosened and pocketed once the journey was under way and the handshakes and salams with neighbours and friends, well-wishers and nay-sayers alike, who all flocked to the village station to wave the train off, were over. And so here he was, standing outside Manchester Central railway station waiting for Rofikul in the freezing cold with a blazer that was tight on his shoulders, slightly too short in the sleeve, and already falling to pieces in his hands. The plane had landed at Heathrow in the early hours of that morning, and Hashim had somehow managed to navigate his way to Manchester, a city he knew nothing about other than the fact that it was where his cousin lived.

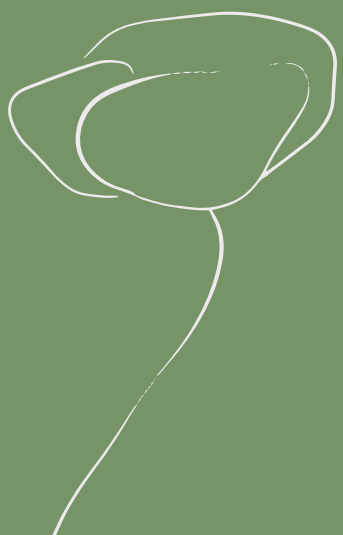
Rofikul had been living and working there for the last few years. He had been one of the first to go abroad. But then, he'd always been the pioneer. Unlike Hashim, he had attended three years of college in the city before dropping out in order to pursue his chances abroad. He was the one who had got Hashim's paperwork in order, sent money for the flight, and made the whole process seem so straightforward and so manageable that Hashim wondered why all the other young men in the village weren't setting off on the same adventure he was. It

had been almost ten years since Hashim had seen his cousin and he worried whether it would still be the same as it had been when they were teenagers spending their summers together at their grandparents' home. In any case, Rofikul had a place where Hashim could live, and, more importantly, the promise of a job.

'There are three phrases you need to know to get by in England,' Rofikul had written in his last letter. 'These are "thank you" and "sorry", closely followed by "please", in order of importance. Make sure to use these liberally if you want to get by as smoothly as possible.'

Hashim's first task of purchasing a train ticket for his journey northwards had involved ample declarations of all three phrases to the surly man at the ticket booth who had printed out the little cards on a creaking old machine before handing them to Hashim.

'Platform 11, you've got twelve minutes. Don't be late, train won't wait.' The official gestured to the platform with a nod of his head. Hashim desperately wanted to ask him so many questions: was it true that it rained all the time in the city he was going to? Where could he get something to eat? Was it always this busy here? But his command of English existed largely in theory rather than in practice. And so Hashim nodded a thank you and hurriedly boarded the train that chugged along the length of the country, leading him to the city he had tied his fortunes to. He had no intention of staying in England more than five years. Enough time to make money, send it back home, have a house built there and live comfortably. That was the plan. Well. As his wife would tell him years later – plans change.



We Germans

Alexander Starritt

I recently had my first child and it's made me think that it's not very important that I'm an individual. Instead it feels like a clock is ticking through the centuries and each tick is a generation: me today, my parents one tick back, my grandchildren two ticks forward.

And my grandparents, who I loved and spent every summer with, seem to belong ever more fully to the past. They were German and lived in the warm, rural, slightly soporific southwest of the country, near the city of Heidelberg. I had a whole German life – I spoke German first, I read German literature at university and I lived in Berlin and Hamburg afterwards. But with my grandparents' deaths and the sale of the house I grew up in, the connection has been lost. All of that is receding into the past.

I wanted to get down on paper some of the things I remember and think about all of that, before it was lost completely. Essentially in response to a kind of slow, ambiguous grief.

In writing this book that impulse came together with another, less personal one. I grew up and live in the UK, a culture fixated on the Second World War and Nazism, yet almost totally ignorant about Germany. This fixation is in decline, but it remains a culture where the Second World War is so important that watching war movies – *The Great Escape*, *The Dam Busters*, *A Bridge Too Far* – is a beloved part of Christmas.

Being of course hyper alert to this phenomenon, I've watched a big shift in attitudes towards Germany over the past thirty years. You can see it in the difference between two football tournaments. In Euro '96, when England played Germany, the *Mirror* ran a front page with a picture of Paul Gascoigne in a Second World War helmet, under the headline "Achtung! Surrender: For you Fritz, ze Euro 96 Championship is over".

In the background, things were changing slowly, as people who had personally suffered and grieved as a result of the war gradually died off, and Berlin became a magnet for hipsters. More and more British people ended up going there on holiday. And then, Germany's hosting of the World Cup in 2006 truly was a cultural turning point, both for the Germans – who flew flags for the first time since the war – and for the British, who went to Germany en masse and discovered that the Germans and Brits are actually cousins.

Because as well as being half-German, I'm half-British. I've seen innumerable British films, books, plays, magazine articles and TV series about the moral questions raised by the war – good Germans and bad Germans, heroes and villains and those 'just following orders'. But what I've always felt is that, with a very few exceptions, those moral questions are handled very crudely. Although a part of British culture is strongly drawn to that era, it is rarely able to get satisfying answers because most British people simply don't know enough about Germany to provide anything beyond the clichéd and superficial.

And I think there's also a deeper reason. In my view, the moral questions about personal responsibility for the horrors of Nazism exert such fascination because the Christian tradition we've inherited is unable to really get a grasp on them. The Christian tradition talks about good and evil – but those concepts are only a good fit for a tiny minority of those involved, the heroes and the sadists.

The vast majority inhabited some other moral space, not culpable enough to be prosecuted for anything, but certainly not absolved of the contributions they made to what was perpetrated. To me, the best way of getting a hold on it is not with 'good and evil', guilt or innocence, but with the idea of shame. You can't really be guilty of things you weren't in control of, but you can be ashamed of them. Oedipus didn't know it was his mother he was sleeping with, but that didn't stop it from being abhorrent.

You may say that these are not new ideas: that, after all, Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* was published in 1886. And you'd be right.

But even though almost no one goes to church, we still transpose Christian patterns of thought onto whatever we look at. Because that's where almost all our thinking comes from. So I wanted to tie the framework of 'good and evil' into a knot from each it was unable to escape, to demonstrate that it was unable to provide an answer to the starkest moral questions of our era, and then to open the door to something that goes beyond it.

John Murray
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We Germans

Alexander Starritt

What I personally remember is that in the black pre-morning of our opening act of war, with our high-pitched, sleepless exhilaration and the earth-shaking ratsch-bumm, ratsch-bumm of our first real barrage, as we hurried nervously through our training routines of loading and firing, launching our shells into the warm summer night and watching the fires spring up a few seconds later in Soviet Poland, we each had enough bread and sausage and tubes of squirtable cheese in our backpacks to last about a week.

I remember thinking, this is good, it must mean the war's going to be quick. That's what the High Command thought too. But of course it wasn't quick, and we were soon hungry. It is humanly possible to lift shells or march all day on a couple of mess tins' worth of Wassersuppe. We did it and so did the Russians. It wasn't long before some of the partisans were eating grass.

But the hunger, it felt like it was eating us – a furious spirit trapped inside our bodies like black smoke. And to appease it we foraged. The farmers, peasants really, destitute and often barefoot, some of the most elderly ones were probably the children of serfs, would naturally pretend they didn't have anything.

We played these grim games of hide and seek with the old women. The men were all dead or trying to kill us, the young women in hiding, so the only people left were groups of mothers and grandmothers, tough matkas with weather-thickened skin, broad cheekbones, missing teeth and sweat-stained headscarves.

They'd bury big earthenware jars of pickles in their gardens. We'd take bayonets and crowbars and ram them into the ground until we hit something. They'd watch in silence, trying not to react when we got warmer. They'd wrap an arm round the dirty children holding onto their legs or peeping out from behind them. When we hit a trove, they'd look shattered. I suppose they knew what it meant for them. And if we didn't find anything, we'd start setting things on fire till they told us.

Even though I was a green young man, a teenager, and my mother and grandmothers didn't look much like these women, I was ashamed. But I'd never been in a war before and I told myself, this is war, this is how wars are fought. Yesterday I killed half a dozen Ukrainians with a professionally aimed shell; today I am foraging. This is why everyone agrees wars are terrible. And taking things from people who don't want to give them up is what war is.

But it put an inconspicuous red mark against those days. Later on, when I flicked back through them, I began to see a shameful pattern in the way we were conducting the campaign. I started to realise that we did not hold the high ground. Far from it.

I would never have had to think about this if, through whatever vagaries of paperwork, I'd been assigned to the West. No one planned to starve the populations of Lyon or Bordeaux. But out of simple hunger, rather than malice, we caused very great suffering. And because I was sometimes starving, too, I understood what we were doing to these Soviet women and their children when we took their food.

I think about those women sometimes. I go downstairs to the Greek's, where the portions are too big for me, and half the gyros and the gravy-soaked pommes gets thrown away, and I think of them. It sometimes feels as if they're standing there in some shadow of the restaurant, still watching me from the sidelines. If the postal service could carry things through time and not just space, I'd be able to send them more food than they'd ever seen. And I would.

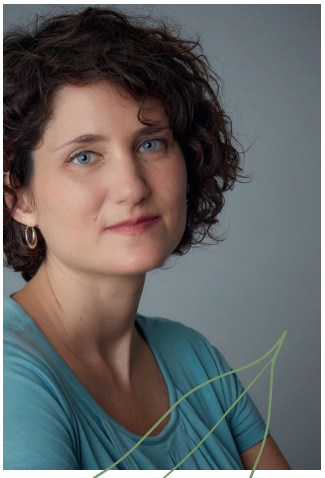
I don't think I'm a better man now than I was then – more generous, say – nor even really a different man; I was the same man in different times. If I'd been sent West instead of East, if I'd been born in a different year, I'd be innocent of these things. I wasn't in the High Command. I didn't make the plans for how the Army would be fed. It doesn't seem right to me that I should be blamed for it. And yet, and yet, while the plan may have been Beck's or Keitel's, or whoever's, it was me who held the crowbar.

Only a very few of us were stronger than our times. Not me. A handful who somehow knew to act beyond themselves, even then, and who have streets named after them now. The rest of us put on the uniforms, dug up the jars of pickles, carried them away and ate them. It's hard to separate the circumstances from the man.

But it isn't as straightforward as saying that I was at the mercy of mine. Just because the times I was living in placed me in those gardens, hungry, with a crowbar in my hand, that doesn't mean I didn't act, or didn't eat.

When I ask myself whether we were all immoral, or whether having done wrong makes us evil men, I think that we were blemished by the consequences of what other people decided. But no one ever has complete responsibility for his own moral balance. And the unforgiving truth, the severe, ancient truth, is that you can be culpable for something that you weren't in control of.

And me, personally? That's what I've been trying to answer.



The Group

Lara Feigel

To marry or not marry? To be a faithful wife or a wayward one? To have children or not have children? To be guilty about the decisions we've made or failed to make, or to accept who we are and the pain we've caused to our friends and lovers? To allow ourselves to feel angry with the people who've hurt us? How and when do we make the choices that shape our lives?

In my new book – my first novel – I examine these questions by looking intimately at a set of five university friends as they turn forty. Two are married, one is divorcing at the same time as having a baby, one is having an affair with a married man and another is gay and about to have a baby with a friend. There are secrets here, in danger of being revealed, and there are waves of disturbance when an older man they're all close to is accused of sexual assault. All these women consider themselves feminists, and bond in criticising men, but they are also committed to respecting and empathising with the particular men they love.

The idea for this novel was in the background when I was writing my last book, *Free Woman*, a memoir where I explore the life and work of Doris Lessing. This book began when I turned thirty-five, and was coming to terms with the way that my life didn't resemble the life I'd planned for myself in my twenties. There was more unhappiness, more uncertainty, more failure. I found in Lessing's 1962 *The Golden Notebook* a portrait of life at a similar stage, and found that reading it I was able to see the joy and the freedom in this middle period of life where you accept difficulty and learn to live closer to the precipice.

I finished writing *Free Woman* in 2017, the year that the Me Too movement erupted. I became curious about what a novel like *The Golden Notebook* would look like now, a novel that mixed the personal and the political, looking at feminist issues through the prism of messy, lived experience. On New Year's Eve of that year, I found a copy of Mary McCarthy's 1963 novel *The Group* in a friend's bathroom, and spent the first day of 2018 in bed, reading it alongside my three-month-old baby. McCarthy was an American contemporary of Lessing's, another glamorous woman of 1950s letters, who shared Lessing's combination of intellectual penetration and storytelling. Her novel portrays a group of university friends in 1930s America. She was writing it partly because she was distressed by how little had changed for women by 1963. Reading her novel, I was disturbed in turn by how little had changed by 2018. Women were still disapproved of as bad mothers when they found breastfeeding and early motherhood difficult, still had to choose whether to accept opportunities for advancement from sexually predatory men, still were more likely to be doing most of the childcare and domestic tasks. Yet now, as then, there were fiercely intelligent women thinking hard about sex, motherhood, marriage and the politics of the world around them. By the time I finished reading the novel, I wanted to have a go at writing *The Group* for my own times.

I knew from reading *The Golden Notebook* that I prefer fiction where one of the characters is writing, and the words don't appear magically on the page. So I invented a character, Stella, with aspects of my own personality and voice, and made her the storyteller, documenting her own life alongside the lives of her four friends, all of whom share names and characteristics with McCarthy's characters. It's set over the course of 2018: the Kavanaugh hearing is happening in the background, Brexit limps along in parallel with Stella's divorce. These elements of the contemporary moment contribute to the verisimilitude, and to the feeling that life brings juxtapositions of the personal and the political and that we interpret private events through the lens of the public world and vice versa. I was aware as I wrote that I was doing something contemporary. I admire many of the writers seen now as writing autofiction, and was happy to be engaged in a similar project. But at the same time I was writing back to the literary past: to McCarthy and Lessing and beyond them to the nineteenth century realist novels I've always loved. I thought of George Eliot, commenting on her characters in *Middlemarch*, and gained strength from that as I allowed Stella to comment on her friends. I've enjoyed having the chance to take a clear-eyed look at the world I inhabit, and I hope that some readers will enjoy that too.

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lara feigel the group

The Group

Lara Feigel

We worry about not knowing our friends well enough, but sometimes we see their lives with a clarity that feels like a form of betrayal. This afternoon at Priss's, where the five of us congregated: the newly-upholstered antique armchair, the home-made elderflower muffins, the absent husbands, in Kay's case as likely to be fucking another woman as working, the unfamiliar children we pretend to delight in while noting their close-set eyes and dissatisfied requests for more cake, more attention, more room in an already over-crowded world.

I felt vulnerable arriving at Priss's, because as half an hour earlier I'd slipped in the rain and banged my head on the car. I'd been walking round it after strapping Maggie in, and then I slid forwards, knocking my head. It felt over-charged because I bought the car from Chris yesterday. We'd agreed, when we split up, that we'd share it, but that meant me having it all the time except when he needed it, and he'd suddenly started asking for it more often and at short notice. He kept taunting me, telling me to buy him out, and then yesterday I took the bait. So as I carried Maggie to Priss's front door, I was worried that I'd got concussion from the fall and worried that I'd fallen over because I couldn't do it, being a single car owner as well as a single mother. I didn't have the strength. The sight of Priss's house made it worse – that symmetrical front garden with its hand-made tiles and neat flowerbeds and hedge (where do they keep the bins?). It reminded me that I'd once lived in a similar house and I felt angry with Priss for taking the sturdiness of her surroundings for granted.

All this meant that I entered the house resenting Chris, resenting the friends gathered in Priss's sitting room, whose lives seemed suddenly so much better ordered than mine, and resenting the monochrome sogginess of this March in which spring fails to arrive. As I put down our things, Priss took Maggie from me and then Priss and I brushed cheeks across the baby. I wondered if I ought to be pressing my lips into the shape of an actual kiss of the kind I press noisily on my children's faces but hardly ever on my friends', and wondered whether Priss and Helena do this more naturally. Priss looked stylish, as always, her blonde hair escaping artfully from a bun. But the hollows underneath her eyes were

deeper and darker than I remembered them, and I caught a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror, my hair greying and flattened by rain. These peculiarly unfamiliar middle-aged faces made me miss the illusions, the excitement that was so close to falling in love of that undergraduate summer when we became a group.

It began with a picnic on a meadow, lit up with a fairy tale sheen that I distrust as I recall it, though I think I'm right in remembering that it really was coated in yellow. I have never seen as many buttercups as we used to see there. Helena and Polly and I had agreed to share the James Street house in our second year, then Helena had invited Priss to join us, and I'd invited Kay, so this was a chance for the five of us to meet. Kay and Polly and I were already there, picnicking among the buttercups, the river visible behind us. I can picture Polly's eyes, so blue against the water and sky that they could have been transparent windows onto the world behind. We were meant to be revising but we'd escaped and allocated ourselves a two-hour slot of fun. Polly was telling us, I remember, about the latest of her dismissive, controlling boyfriends, but her voice was bright with cruelty as she catalogued his faults and there was a sense that it didn't matter because her real, sustained life was with us, her friends.

The others arrived on bicycles, both wearing white, with Priss's long blonde hair and dress blowing up around her in the breeze. She was as stylish then as she is now, which excited me. There was a sense that your friends' appearances could be yours by proxy, as there is now with our husbands. It's hard to recall how impressed I was by her in those days, because since then I've realised that there's a kind of disconnect between the extraordinary way that she looks and the more ordinary things that she says, which tend to be a version of what the people around her are saying. Over the last few years, this has made me reluctant to talk in her presence, because I don't want my thoughts to be stolen. But that day I was delighted by her, and delighted by my life in general. I hadn't been very popular at school so it felt like an unexpected triumph to find myself sitting on the grass with four girls I admired so much, planning to live together, forming a posse of the kind I'd felt excluded from in the past. I thought back to the low point of my school career, when I'd fallen out with my best friend just before the camping expedition, so I ended up having to share a tent with the other two rejects of the moment, shy and unappealing girls whom I recall snoring at night more loudly than they were prepared to speak by day.

Kay and I lay on the grass, as we often did together in those days, describing the clouds above us, and the others joined us, feet and arms overlapping carelessly, making me crave more of it, as touch always does even when it's as innocuous as it was then, fearing the moment when it will be withdrawn. It felt so wonderfully timeless, so much the kind of thing that we might have been doing fifty years earlier, on that same patch of grass, on an identical May day, that we escaped time. We overran our two hours as we drank the miraculously chilled Pimms that Helena produced from her bag. I don't think I'd drunk Pimms before university, and its sugary brightness still evokes for me the relieved sociability that I felt then, easing into the new sense of myself as someone with friends. Thus the group was formed, and since then there's been a restful quality in group life that enables the otherwise insistent noise of my thoughts to quieten. That's why I miss it now. There was a warmth between the five of us that day that had nothing to do with the intellectual connection I usually seek in friendship and was much more about just living alongside each other.

The Paris Library

Janet Skeslien Charles

As a farmer's daughter, I understand the importance of roots. *The Paris Library* took hold of me when I was a child in rural Montana. In the novel, I describe my own feelings of frustration at being marooned in the countryside. Most people had lived in my town for generations. Only one person had come from afar – a French war bride. Her lilting accent made English sound even more beautiful. As a child, I was fascinated by the story of a GI sweeping Claudine off her feet and onto the windswept plains of his native Montana. It was only when I researched English war brides who travelled to Canada and the US that I understood how challenging and even heartbreaking it must have been for the brides to leave their families behind. (I could go on for days about my research concerning these brave women.) Given my fascination with war brides, my main character Odile had to be one.

You could say that I nourished the roots of my novel at university, where I studied French, Russian, and English. My favourite professor was from France, and she was like no one else. While students and professors wore baggy jeans and Birkenstock sandals with woolly socks, she sported sleek black clothes and a platinum bob. Strict and standoffish, she never mentioned her personal life or her past, until one day in class, she spoke of World War II. With tears in her eyes, she explained how men from her hometown punished her mother because they suspected she'd had a relationship with a Nazi. Her crime was 'horizontal collaboration'. Her sentence was brutal public humiliation. I never forgot my professor's haunted expression or her mother's fate.

When I moved to Paris in 1999, I struggled to find a job, friends, and a writing community. I volunteered, then later worked, at the American Library, where members hail from 60 countries. The Library, which celebrates its centennial in 2020, has a fascinating history. I spent years tracking down documents about Dorothy Reeder, Clara de Chambrun, and Boris Netchaeff, the resourceful team of librarians who kept the Library open during the war and delivered books to Jewish members. While working at the Library as the programs manager, I was thrilled to host writers such as Lionel Shriver and Tatiana de Rosnay. I will never forget their kindness and generosity. At our weekly 'Evenings with an Author' series, voracious readers discussed books over wine and food. Like Odile in the book, I even had my own habitués. I wanted to create a sense of belonging for library members then, and I hope that in *The Paris Library*, I have created a sense of belonging for readers now.

If I had to sum up the plot of the book, I would say, 'World War II. Paris is occupied. There is a war on words, and it's Nazis vs Librarians.' But themes are as important as the plot. Just as in my first novel *Moonlight in Odessa*, I'm interested in exploring relationships, the clash of cultures, and coming of age (at any age), as well as the elements that make us who we are – friends and family, first loves and favourite authors. I want to show the effect that we have on each other, how we hinder and help each other, and how we carry our loved ones with us (whether we want to or not).

Growing up, I resented small-town life. Now I'm grateful for my upbringing, for my parents and grandmother who shared their love of reading, for the librarians who not only created a safe haven but also recommended books that put my feelings into words and showed me that I wasn't alone. I return to Montana, to my roots, with a sense of gratitude. I love spending time with my family and my teachers and librarians, who have become dear friends. This novel is a love letter to libraries and librarians. In this digital age, our libraries – our third space, our sanctuary, our source of facts in a fake-news world – are more vital than ever. Children, especially, need these havens of books and imagination. *The Paris Library* is a reminder that we must appreciate them.

Two Roads
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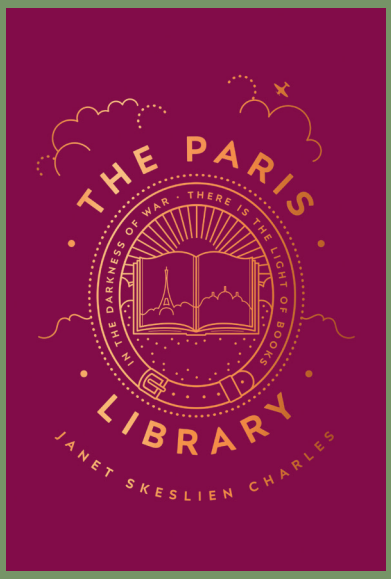


The Paris Library

Janet Skeslien Charles

Numbers floated round my head like stars. 823. The numbers were the key to a new life. 822. Constellations of hope. 841. In my bedroom late at night, in the morning on the way to get croissants, series after series – 810, 840, 890 – formed in front of my eyes. They represented freedom, the future. Along with the numbers, I'd studied the history of libraries, going back to the 1500s. In England, while Henry VIII was busy chopping off his wives' heads, our King François was modernising his library, which he opened to scholars. His royal collection was the beginning of the Bibliothèque Nationale. Now, at the desk in my bedroom, I prepared for my job interview at the American Library, reviewing my notes one last time: founded in 1920; the first in Paris to let the public into the stacks; subscribers from over thirty countries, one-quarter of them from France. I held fast to these facts and figures, hoping they'd make me appear qualified to the Directress.

I strode from my family's apartment on the sooty rue de Rome, across from the Saint-Lazare train station, where locomotives coughed up smoke. The wind whipped my hair, and I tucked tendrils under my tam hat. In the distance, I could see the gold dome of Saint-Augustin church. Religion, 200. Old Testament, 221. And the New Testament? I waited, but the number wouldn't come. I was so nervous that I forgot simple facts. I drew my notebook from my bag. Ah, yes, 225. I knew that.

My favourite part of library school had been the Dewey Decimal system. Conceived in 1873 by the American librarian Melvil Dewey, it used ten classes to organise library books on shelves based on subject. There was a number for everything, allowing any reader to find any book in any library. For example, Maman took pride in her 648 (housekeeping). Papa wouldn't admit it, but he really did enjoy 785 (chamber music). My twin brother was more of a 636.8 person, while I preferred 636.7. (Cats and dogs, respectively.)

I arrived on le grand boulevard, where in the space of a block, the city shrugged off her working-class mantle and donned a mink coat. The coarse

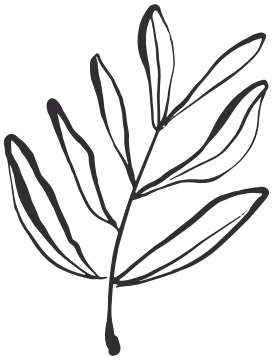
smell of coal dissipated, replaced by the honeyed jasmine of Joy, worn by women delighting in the window display of Nina Ricci's dresses and Kislav green leather gloves. Further along, I wound around musicians exiting the shop that sold wrinkled sheet music, past the baroque building with the blue door, and turned the corner, onto a narrow side street. I knew the way by heart.

I loved Paris, a city with secrets. Like book covers, some leather, some cloth, each Parisian door led to an unexpected world. A courtyard could contain a knot of bicycles or a plump concierge armed with a broom. In the case of the Library, the massive wooden door opened to a secret garden. Bordered by petunias on one side, lawn on the other, the white pebbled path led to the brick-and-stone mansion. I crossed the threshold, beneath French and American flags flittering side by side, and hung my jacket on the rickety coatrack. Breathing in the best smell in the world – a mélange of the mossy scent of musty books and crisp newspaper pages, I felt as if I'd come home.

Dear Miss Reeder,

Thank you for discussing the job with me. I was thrilled to be interviewed. This library means more to me than any place in Paris. When I was little, my Aunt Caroline took me to Story Hour. It's thanks to her that I studied English and fell in love with the library. Though my aunt is no longer with us, I continue to seek her at the American Library. I open books and turn to their pockets in the back, hoping to see her name on the card. Reading the same novels as she did makes me feel as if we're still close.

The library is my haven. I can always find a corner of the stacks to call my own, to read and dream. I want to make sure everyone has that chance, most especially the people who feel different and need a place to call home.



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TWO
ROADS