

bonds

The
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Fiction Preview
2022



TWO
ROADS



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For the last 18 months the world has been bonded by an historic event. Our daily routines, our natural rhythms, who we can and cannot see, where we can go, have been shaped, bended, and dictated by this event. Our bonds with our friends, families, lovers, strangers, and colleagues have changed immensely. Our bond to the world, society and each other has been shaped anew.

In 2022, we are privileged to publish a host of fantastic novels that delve into the universal theme of bonds and what it says about our humanity. In these books you will find three generations of Memphis women united by their enduring strength; the links between art, books, and the right to live during the French Enlightenment; and the spiralling relationship between time and memory as a ghostwriter tries to untangle the past. We are taken to a man living alone in the Arctic Circle; transported to 19th century Glasgow as a deaf woman wrongly stands trial; and catapulted into the middle of two love triangles that unravel over the course of one hot American summer.

We have asked each of our authors to introduce their novels and share an extract, giving you a taste for the bonds that exist in their work. There is a wonderful array of worlds and characters to explore. We can't wait for you to dive in.

The Memoirs of Stockholm Sven

Nathaniel Ian Miller

As a naïve younger person, I wanted little more than to achieve independence and immediately begin perpetrating cruel acts of isolation and alienation upon myself. The amount of psychological clarity gained by such experiences, I thought, would increase in direct proportion to the severity.

I'm not sure why. I sneered at the dubious prospect of religious enlightenment, and I had nothing particular to flee, unless it were the usual strictures and expectations that chafe so many of us. Perhaps a person who feels himself, to some degree, perpetually alone, too often believes his own fiction: that he is bound to follow that untethered feeling to its logical end.

So I plotted in an abstract way and read everything I could find about polar explorers in search of glory or sublimation, antisocial fire tower lookouts, and almost every other kind of quarantined, self-sufficient, helpless, muttering, musing, tortured, beatific, ungroomed, fastidious, Montaigne-worshipping recluse. All of the above comprised my dream job.

Though I fell far short of lighthouse-keeping or austere self-reliance, I made a few honest tries at it. I quickly discovered – and re-discovered – that isolation is not nearly so hard to find as I'd imagined. It's everywhere. You've no doubt heard the tired old line that life in a city, surrounded by your fellow humans and yet alone, can be orders of magnitude more harrowing than life in the wilderness. But clichés are always out there, waiting to be seized upon by someone fresh, and I found to my shock and near-ruin that being alone in Richmond, Virginia, for example (alone, that is, except for my beloved dog and a horde of fleas birthed continuously from the bathtub drain), was something far more powerful, and far worse, than being alone in the sagebrush high country of Wyoming, where I laboured for a while in silence. In any case, as my father tried to make clear on many occasions, I am one of those people who needs people.

Now I'm about two decades older and here we are, sailing into the second year of a merciless pandemic, all of us a good deal more intimate with seclusion and with the bleak convictions that rebound and proliferate in one's mind when it's deprived of the great human (off-screen) sounding board. Fortunately, I'm in the privileged position of not having to make many drastic changes, depending upon the cataclysm: my family and I live and work on an old hilltop farm in rural Vermont. Over the last ten years, since well before the society of man became more deadly than usual, I've seldom come down. Now I come down even less. But I don't need to, because my people are here with me. If I could bestow gifts upon humanity like a benevolent god, I would first give them all the vaccine, and then stick them together with the people who understand and tolerate them best.

I don't know whether it's a resonant coincidence or a bitter irony that this novel of mine, *The Memoirs of Stockholm Sven*, investigates the same theme of perseverance through isolation, now so familiar to our reeling world. I began writing it nine years ago, after visiting the far northern archipelago of Svalbard as part of an artist residency called *The Arctic Circle*. In Raudfjorden, where the book takes place, I visited the 1920s-vintage hut of the real Stockholm Sven, an anchoritic trapper about whom we know almost nothing. It's unclear how many years he lived there after his face was disfigured in a mining accident, entirely alone in a vast, inhospitable landscape. Stepping inside his cabin, I was moved by the same sort of questions I've always asked: how does a person cope? How must the mind be altered in order to survive?

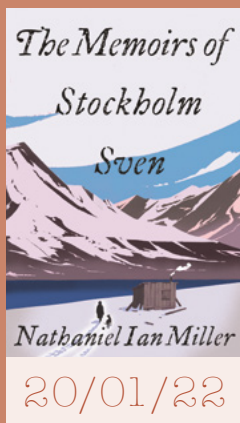
So I started writing. It was always going to be a fictional memoir. The surprise to me was that I thought it would be a tale, primarily, of isolation. But contrary to possible appearances, this is not (just) the story of painful metamorphosis in a vacuum, or one man's struggle against the elements. Rather, Sven's life, like mine, is electrified at key turns by a small but vital cast of eclectic characters: people drifting off the mainstream, like those who have kept me going and often, quite literally, kept me alive throughout my peregrinations.

As Sven evolved on the page, I saw that solitude was only going to be one finite part of the story, and that he was someone whose life would be given meaning less by his alienation than by the people (and dogs, of course) who insist on congregating around him.

May we all be so lucky.

John Murray 9781529359893 HB \$14.99





Extract

We climbed and I stared down at my labored footsteps until at last we stood on a mild summit. I gasped, both from the chill air I sucked down in great gasps and from my wonder at the sheer vastness of the land and sky retreating from view in all directions. The snow had subsided. Clouds moved at great speed, causing the light to change with weird frequency. In many places in the world, one's view is restricted, so one comes to rely upon a certain constancy, or at least a measured pace, to sun and sky. When the heavens begin to rush about in haste, it is usually the preface of a fearful storm. So if one lives in a land where the wind and clouds have nothing to obstruct them for miles upon miles, one must become acquainted with a sense of ongoing meteorological alarm.

The place had a bitter, desolate feeling. It was immense in scope. Nothing hemmed it in, or provided any sense of security whatsoever. Even the mountains were far off. They had a two-dimensional quality—so still and lifeless they seemed painted on canvas, their peaks so uniformly obscured by a roof of gray cloud that they lost nearly all distinction from one another, their differences marked only by the ragged bitten presence of an ice-blue glacial face.

The sky was something else altogether: an occasionally permeable mat woven of ink-leaking ropes. It was as if sunlight blinked from a slowly widening eyelid, leaving stripes of turquoise and orange across the bay. The water, perhaps, was liveliest. It heaved and shifted ceaselessly—a restless valley floor.

"I feel as though I could see the North Pole from here," I said at last.

"There is no land at the Pole and nothing to see, as you know quite well," Tapio said. "And you are facing south."

He showed me how the mountain ranges I was examining formed a perfect ring around the bay. It was called Alicehamna after the Princesse Alice, the ship that Prince Albert I of Monaco had used for scientific expeditions around the turn of the century. Tapio said the prince had funded Nansen, among others. "Not such a bad royal to be associated with, if one insists on honoring that vile institution." He was silent for a time—brooding, I suppose, on monarchy and other inferior modes of government.

Then he turned me around so that I was no longer looking at an enclosed bay but at the entrance to a great fjord. Beyond the ranges that slumped like ruined gates down to the water at either side, the ocean ran. "Now, maybe, you could see the Pole, if there were anything to see," Tapio said, "for you are standing almost at the eightieth parallel, and there are but five degrees of latitude between you and the invisible pin."

This jut of land, he went on, acted as a mighty buffer between the wide waters of the fjord's northern expanse, already a great deal calmer than what lay beyond Raudfjorden, or Red Fjord, and the bay of Alicehamna, where I had washed up on the beach like so much jetsam. It was as protected a harbor as one was likely to find in Spitsbergen. The mountain, as it had generously been categorized, which gave us such a fine vantage, was called Brucevarden.

"I don't know who Bruce was," Tapio said, "though I know the name of the dead man upon whose bones you tread."

To my embarrassment, it appeared that I had once more contrived to perch myself on a grave. "Oh dear," I said.

"Erik Zakariassen Mattilas," said Tapio, unmoved. "In 1908, he overwintered here. He died of scurvy."

"It must be a perilous place," I said.

"Yes. Welcome to your new hunting grounds. May you have better luck."

Hear No Evil

Sarah Smith

There are two of us standing in the reception area of a large Victorian building, a former library in the Gorbals area of Glasgow. We appear to be the only people there. My new boss pushes open the swing doors to the main hall, and I walk in for the first time.

There are at least a hundred people in the room. There is no noise. No; that's not true. The coffee machine hisses and crockery clatters. Chair metal scrapes along laminate flooring. An illuminated display board flashes up numbers as they are drawn for the bingo. Two women shout across the room – silently – their fingers conjuring conversation.

This was the first time I was introduced to the Deaf community and began to appreciate the beauty and complexity of sign language. Before I began working as an Adult Literacy and Numeracy Tutor at Glasgow's Deaf Connections, I'd only met Deaf people in environments that were predominantly made up of hearing people. This place was different. For a start, I was working alongside two Deaf colleagues. Here, I was the minority and that took some getting used to. I was forced to check my privilege, as we didn't say back then.

In *Hear No Evil*, set in 1817, teacher Robert Kinniburgh also gets a jolt to his world view when he is summoned to Edinburgh's decaying Tolbooth jail to interpret for a prisoner. At first, Jean Campbell, the young deaf woman he meets, is reluctant to tell her story, but the signs they have in common help them form a bond and she confides in him.

Jean has been moved to the Tolbooth following her arrest in Glasgow for the murder of her child. The authorities, unable to communicate with their silent prisoner, charge Robert with determining if she is fit for trial. If Jean is found guilty, she faces one of two fates: death by hanging or incarceration in an insane asylum.

Hear No Evil is inspired by a real case – a woman called Jean Campbell did stand trial at the High Court, the first Deaf person to do so, and Robert Kinniburgh, a teacher from Edinburgh's Deaf and Dumb Institution, interpreted her plea for the court. However, the book is a largely fictional account of the lead up to the crime, the trial, and its aftermath. Some characters are loosely based on real people, while others are entirely fictitious.

I began writing the novel because there was scant information on the Deaf experience in the surviving documents. Additionally, I wanted to see if I could represent signed communication on the page. There are surprisingly few characters in literature whose preferred mode of communication is sign language. I wanted to write a novel where modes of communication like BSL, Sign Supported English and lip-speaking/reading are an integral part of the dialogue.

Sign languages, in the early nineteenth century, weren't widespread and certainly not accepted or afforded any real respect within society. Deaf people were often pitied or misunderstood. For a modern audience, these attitudes seem antiquated and discriminatory but it's quite shocking to remember that British Sign Language was only officially recognised by the UK Government in 2003. Up until late last century, signing by Deaf children was discouraged, sometimes punished, invariably judged inferior to speech. So, sign language developed in pockets where numbers of Deaf people gathered. There was no internet, no television, most people didn't have the means to travel from place to place. As a result, Deaf languages don't necessarily follow a similar pattern of development to those that are spoken.

As time goes on, Robert begins to question the initial assumptions he has made about Jean, based on her gender and class and his beliefs about morality. They develop a friendship; Robert gets over his distaste for the privations of the Tolbooth and turns investigator. As the story moves from Edinburgh to Glasgow and back again, Robert uncovers a series of hidden truths that threaten to expose a tangle of dark secrets lurking beneath a veneer of respectability and philanthropy.

Looking at the book now, I can see that I poured a lot of my own experiences into the character of Robert. The Deaf people I met taught me at least as much as I taught them. My sign language ability is very basic, but I can start a conversation and that's incredibly important to me.

Two Roads 9781529369090 HB £16.99





Extract

Thursday, 27 February 1817: The Tolbooth Prison, Edinburgh

Robert pulled a chair from a small table and set it down opposite Jean. She reached over to him, laying her hand on his knee. She stared at his face and then, with her thumb, she smoothed his eyebrow and trailed her fingers down his cheek. She leant back again, still watching him intently.

Robert was surprised to find himself disconcerted by the touch of the deaf woman. As a teacher at the Deaf and Dumb Institution, he spent his days with deaf children and was used to the direct way they had of communicating with him. The pupils in his care were generally more tactile than other children of his acquaintance and he had grown used to unbidden hands tapping his elbow or tugging at his clothing to get his attention. Often, his pupils would use him as a physical canvas on which to illustrate their thinking, tracing the route of a journey on his palm or describing a person by pointing at similarities or differences in their teacher's appearance. Robert prided himself on adopting a fairly relaxed attitude to the personal questions that were sometimes posed to him and often disrespectful nicknames given to the staff by their charges.

Jean Campbell, on the other hand, bore the marks of her current predicament and came from a class of people he didn't normally consort with but, on closer inspection, she was an attractive woman of around thirty years, not that much younger than Robert himself, and he found he was more than slightly discomfited by the way her touch made him feel.

Robert regained his composure somewhat and focused on Jean, wondering how best to indicate to her who he was and what he was there for. He felt it was important to keep things as simple as possible.

My name, he signed, pointing his index and middle fingers to his temple, and finger-spelled **ROBERT**.

Jean watched him. She began to copy the shapes of the letters but got lost halfway through. Robert repeated himself. She tried a second time but lost the thread again. As if I am offering her an exotic new concept, thought Robert. She has no alphabet.

My name, he signed, and she smiled in recognition as he tapped two fingers to his temple and pivoted them forward. Pointing back at him, she indicated her understanding.

He lip-spoke his name to her and she nodded, then drew her fingers down her cheek in an approximation of the way she had touched his face earlier.

Your name, she signed and repeated the gesture.

'The clean-shaven one,' laughed Sibbald. 'She won't have seen many of those where she comes from, sir!'

Robert looked at the stubble on Sibbald's face, his unkempt, thinning hair and spidery brows. There was no mirror in the cell, but Robert realised that, although he was not a vain man by any means, he was almost dandified in comparison with this environment and its inhabitants.

'I suppose not, Mr Sibbald.'

Robert took notice of what had just happened with Jean. This had been the most basic of exchanges and yet it had told him so much. He shifted in his seat and began to communicate with her, using limited signs and reinforcing important information with a combination of repetition, lip-speaking and nodding, in the hope that it would help her to follow him.

Lord Succoth's note had contained a brief explanation to the effect that the court wished to discover if Jean was fit to plead in any practical or meaningful sense. The authorities were required to make a considered judgement about whether Jean could answer questions put to her by both the prosecution and defence advocates in a court of law and whether she was able, morally and intellectually, to understand what she had done and what the consequences of her actions might be.

If she stood trial, it would be the first time a deaf person had been examined in a Scottish court. If she was found guilty of murder, she was likely to be hanged. Robert couldn't help but wonder what Lord Succoth imagined might be his part in that turn of events.

Robert and Jean faced one another. The system he had settled on for the moment was crude and hardly sufficient for the task entrusted to him but, for now, it would have to do. It was all they had.

Friedrichstrasse 19

Emma Harding

I don't believe in ghosts. At least, I don't think I do. But I can't quite shake the sense that the dead leave traces of themselves behind. And because my day job is working in sound, as a radio producer, it's perhaps inevitable that in my imagination these traces take the form of voices impregnated in a building's walls.

After all, a building is a witness. Human lives echo around its stairwells and bedrooms; human history – especially in a city like Berlin – flickers in its windows, rattles its roof tiles, scuttles in the dust beneath the floorboards. Perhaps, if we listen carefully, we can tune into these earlier lives. We can read the room.

My friend Sarah lives in a Victorian building in north London. On a recent visit, she opened the door to the cellar to show me, on the painted wall, a meticulous pencilled record of every time the household had descended the steps during an air raid. Some dates in 1940 showed four or five visits. As I stood squinting at the copperplate handwriting, a family of four hurried past me down the stairs, the mother with a torch, the young boy clutching a teddy. All times happening at once.

I wanted to conjure something of this for my imagined building, Friedrichstrasse 19. The novel tells the stories of six characters, who all live in the same Berlin apartment, but at different points in history. There's a photographer's assistant in 1906, a new recruit to a terrorist cell in the mid-1980s, a former Kabarettist living through the Berlin airlift of 1948, a sound engineer in 2019, a Sixties pornographer, a young woman adapting to married life in 1929. They may never meet, but the legacy of their existence lingers in the fabric of the building. And their lives touch each other in ways they don't fully understand.

But of course, like us, they're mostly preoccupied with the immediate and the present. All of them are looking for connection. Six characters in search of an other. All of them, in their different ways, are lonely (although this didn't occur to me until I'd finished the novel). All of them are hoping to find a person who can truly see them, although to be seen truly by another can also feel unnerving, exposing.

My fictional building stands a couple of blocks south from Checkpoint Charlie, in what was West Berlin. I wanted it to be an apartment block that had miraculously survived the war – after all, it's estimated that by May 1945, 70% of Berlin was rubble – so Friedrichstrasse 19 is a building that is damaged by Allied bombers, but then rebuilt.

Friedrichstrasse itself runs for two miles, north to south, through the very centre of the city. Before the Second World War, it was the beating heart of Berlin, home to theatres, bars, Kabarett, shops and hotels. During the years of the DDR, it was border country – the location both of Checkpoint Charlie, but also the railway station, Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse, where those entitled to leave East Germany were separated from those who were not. A place of goodbyes, or as the Berliners called it, *Tränenpalast*, 'Palace of Tears'.

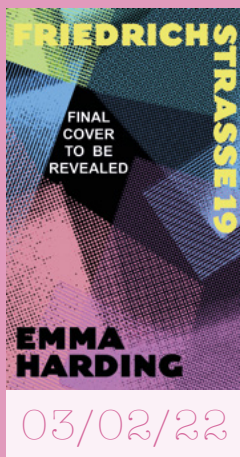
I didn't know Berlin in the twenty eight years when it was divided by a wall. I was still at school when the Wall came down, reading *Animal Farm* in class, as the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc played out on the television news. But the Wall had long been lodged in my consciousness. I'd seen the photographs of the early hours of its construction in August 1961, guarded by soldiers, Berliners standing on either side, watching themselves being walled up, walled out, walled in. And those other heart-breaking photos of women holding up their babies to show family members on the other side, of people jumping from windows to escape, of bodies in the death strip.

Most of us will never have to endure twenty eight years of separation from those we love. But nevertheless, these last eighteenth months have changed our relationship with walls. All over the world, millions of us have been confined to buildings in a way we've never experienced before.

But walls can also be porous. Through them we overhear fragments of other people's lives, in all their messiness and complexity and noise. These sounds may irritate us, may intrude on our day, but they're a reminder of the multiverse of a shared building, or a row of houses. A reminder of all we have in common. That we're not alone.

John Murray 9781529376180 HB £12.99





Extract

As she crossed the windswept expanse of Potsdamer Platz, she passed a billboard poster advertising an exhibition. The image made Heike stop, despite the rain. It was a black-and-white photograph of a figure in silhouette, a diver, falling through space, their body a perfect parabola. Heike's first thought was of Leni Riefenstahl's divers in *Olympia*, filmed so that they looked like angels flying through the air. Muscular shadows soaring against a darkening sky. But the light through which this figure fell was oddly patterned. Shadows cast abstract shapes across the diver's body, as well as the space behind them. On closer examination, it didn't look like an exterior shot, it didn't – come to that – look anything like a swimming pool. It looked like a person falling through a deep stairwell. Something inside Heike shifted and caught. She didn't remember ever having seen the photo before, but something about it seemed familiar, like an image from a recurring dream.

She read the accompanying text. *Wolf Bassermann: Magic and Mystery*, the dates of the exhibition and the name of the curator, Ilse Singer. She took out her phone and snapped a picture of the poster as a reminder, but then she realised she was too late. The exhibition had already closed. Perhaps she'd order the catalogue from Dussmann's.

There was a parcel waiting for her in her pigeonhole when she returned home. A new digital recorder. She carried it up to the apartment and, with a cup of lemon tea steaming on the table beside her, unpacked it carefully. The hit of freshly unwrapped plastic, scent of Leonie's Christmas-toy excitement. She discarded the instructions without reading them, inserted batteries, mic, headphones. Her index finger hit record and the acoustic world of the room dawned in her ears.

The hot-water pipes ticking, Frau Meyer's feet on the floor above. Cupboards being opened. Cooking pans. She adjusted the recording level. A vacuum cleaner from one of the apartments at the back of the building. A pigeon flapping somewhere. She couldn't quite place it. Perhaps it was sitting on the roof of the bay window. Or in the main stairwell?

She picked out other sounds. A passing bicycle. A cafe awning being wound up across the street. A group of teenage boys swearing and laughing. Tyres on the wet tarmac. Branches moving in the wind. A single leaf from the tree outside fell against the window pane and lodged in a gap between wood and glass, fluttering. A car drove by with drum'n'bass turned up to full volume so that the whole building momentarily pulsed with it.

Under all this was a sound she couldn't identify. She turned up the gain, her eyes squinting as though this would improve her hearing. Yes. There it was. A hum, a single sustained note, low, as though on a cello or double bass. Heike wondered whether it were the purr of a distant machine, some kind of construction vehicle, but the pitch never wavered, as she'd expect it to. Just as she was about to turn the machine off, her experiment complete, a voice spoke directly into her ear.

Was können wir sonst noch tun? What else can we do?

Heike instinctively turned around to see the elderly man who had spoken. But the room was empty.

She called out, 'Hello?' and then immediately felt foolish. Someone must have been speaking loudly on the landing outside, or accidentally turned their TV on with the volume at full. Whoever had spoken had gone quiet, moved off. But then, distantly, a woman weeping. Frau Meyer? But the sound seemed to be outside the door, not above. Still recording, but slipping her headphones down to her neck, Heike went to the door of the apartment and opened it. She stood on the landing, listening. But the only human sound was that of the vacuum cleaner being passed back and forth.

She put her headphones back over her ears, but the crying had disappeared.

Heike breathed in deeply, in an effort to wake up, to uncloud her senses. Everything in front of her felt oddly remote.

She pressed the stop button a little too hard and walked back into the apartment. Sitting on the sofa, she listened back to the track she'd just recorded. There it all was: pipes, floorboards, cupboards, pans, vacuum cleaner, bike, awning, leaf, drum'n'bass. She heard herself stand up and open the apartment door, heard her feet slip-slap out onto the landing. But this time there was no cello note, no male voice, no weeping. She pulled the headphones from her ears, threw the machine down on the cushion beside her. She was clearly going mad. This is where late nights and red wine and flirting with undertakers got you.

Privilege

Guinevere Glasfurd

Books connect us: writers, readers, booksellers, publishers. When a reader picks up a book, they don't necessarily think of what it took to get the book to the shop and into their hands. What matters is the story. Everything else is invisible. Yet, this journey of a book from writer to publisher, bookseller to reader was not always so straightforward and was often fraught with risk and danger.

Privilege is a picaresque story, filled with adventure and mishap. It takes you to the heart of book publishing and censorship in pre-revolutionary France, when a book required royal privilege before it could be published. This privilege required the sanction of the King, enforced by the Chief Censor and a network of spies. Books that fell foul of this system were censored or banned; others were published outside of France and smuggled back at great risk.

When we think of the Enlightenment, we think mostly of works by men. *Privilege* takes that story and turns it on its head, to reveal a very different book culture that was struggling into existence at the time. The novel carries you headlong into a world both familiar and strange: of fountains and gilded porcelain, literary salons and spies. It tells the story of Delphine Vimond, cast out from her family home after her father is disgraced. Into her life tumbles Chancery Smith, apprentice printer from London, sent to discover the mysterious author of a bundle of papers marked only D. In a battle of wits with the French censor, Henri Gilbert, Delphine and Chancery set off in a frantic search for D's author. But will they catch-up with D before Gilbert catches up with them?

I wrote *Privilege*, pell-mell, through 2020, as a way to bring myself out of the bleak lockdown corner I was in. The novel was just a file on my laptop at that point, but it felt hopeful, a way to look ahead. Every book is for the future in some way. Thousands turned to books during lockdown as a means of escape. In a difficult year, there was something incredibly heartening about that – about seeing books find a place in so many people's lives.

This is my third novel. As a woman, with working class roots in the north of England, the privilege of being published is not lost on me. I hope my novel not only leaves readers thinking about how books were published in the past, but also about the wider question of who is published today and why; about marginalised voices that still struggle to be heard or are suppressed.

Privilege might no longer be granted by kings, but it is an issue that goes right to the heart of publishing today.

Two Roads 9781529342901 HB £20





Extract

Delphine
1752

'Puis-je vous aider?' The bookseller took a step towards me.

I saw in a blink that it was not help the bookseller was offering, rather its frustration, for his eye went from me to the book in my hands. A frown deepened on his brow. My reply, no more than a whisper. *'Non, Monsieur, merci—'*

He lifted the book from my grasp and placed it on the shelf, out of reach. He selected another book and touched his fingers against the richly embossed leather covering it. Even in that scant light, I saw the detail lift before me, gold and shimmering: a dragon, ready to pounce. *Oh—!* I drew towards it, as a moth to a flame. But the book was not for me, but for the gentleman at the bookseller's side.

'I have this, an account of China. Extraordinarily vivid, extraordinarily rare. One of only a handful of copies in France, I am told. An absolute gem of a book. For those with an appreciative eye; a collector, such as yourself.'

The man took the book and turned through several pages. How ordinary, how plain it became in his hands. He gave a gruff shrug and handed it back, the bookseller's flattery unrewarded.

I took down another book from the shelf and considered it with what I hoped was the correct manner: a combination of grave intent and studious disdain.

'Is it a gift you are after? Something for a female mind?' the bookseller persisted as he hovered at the man's shoulder. Seeing that I had helped myself to another book, he plucked it off me with a scowl. *'I must ask you to remain seated.'* He nodded to a stool in the centre of the room.

'Do you not have anything more, er, tasty . . .?' The man dropped his voice, *'Un petit marron, for example?'*

A chestnut? The bookseller blinked and gave a sly smile. *'Ah, you seek something philosophical? Mais oui, bien sûr. You understand, I do not keep such material on the open shelf.'*

They exchanged knowing nods and then straightened abruptly when they noticed I was still there, listening with intent curiosity. He, too, had books that must be hidden away?

'I said—' The bookseller took me by the elbow and steered me back to the stool. This time he raised a finger in caution. *'This is where I require you to sit. I shall attend to your father next.'*

The man he had been talking to on matters philosophical had retreated further into the shop. It left the bookseller in a quandary: follow him, or stay where he was so he could keep a better eye on me. I brought my hands together in my lap and fixed a smile. With a stern frown in my direction, he followed after the man, the lure of a sale being impossible to resist.

I glimpsed Papa near the window, where an arrangement of pamphlets had been left. He examined them idly, drawing out one or two, before placing them back. Everyone occupied. Apart from me. I slipped down from the stool and crept back to the bookcase.

I scanned the shelves quickly. Then I saw it: the book with the golden dragon. I lifted it down, opened it, turning through page after page, seized with a hunger, almost painful, to gorge myself on all it contained. If I could have eaten it, I would have. I was so engrossed, I did not notice the bookseller's return, not until I felt a sharp tap on my shoulder.

I felt the hairs prickle at the back of my neck as he studied me. His moustache twitched. I could see him thinking, trying to place me now. His shoulders went down. I was a sneeze that could not be sneezed.

Memphis

Tara M. Stringfellow

Donald Trump won the 2016 Presidential Election a few days before my thirty-first birthday. A few days before that, my beloved Cubs defeated the Indians and won the World Series, after a rain delay and after over a hundred years of prayers. I celebrated in the laundromat on the corner of Bryn Mawr and Magnolia in Chicago. I was leaving soon to celebrate my birthday in New York City and well, needed clean clothes. Marilyn – I'll never forget her, gorgeous white hair done up in an elaborate bouffant the actual Marilyn would have donned – Marilyn, the woman who ran the laundromat, brought out a bottle of champagne from the back and the two of us screamed and danced and hugged each other and sprayed champagne and rewashed cashmere sweaters and cried for joy late into the night. So when Trump won not a week later, I was not so much shocked, but I was nonetheless devastated. I had just experienced a miracle Chicago had not seen in a century; how on earth was I now experiencing such grief? I have never been naïve about the racial injustices this country has birthed and suckled, but I did not prepare myself that the child American racism had weaned had grown into a full grown man. And that man now welded the Seal of the President of the United States. I did not prepare myself for the tangibility of the racism, that I could reach out and touch it like low-hanging strange fruit from a tree. Election night was an awakening that the wave of growing nationalism and domestic terrorism aimed not only at blacks, but at anyone marginalized – immigrants and refugees, my Muslim and Jewish brethren, all queer folk, Asian-Americans, women – was more tsunami than mere wave. That hate and hate speech had blanketed my country like a quilt. That America would shiver like the dumb fool She was without it.

I did what any black woman would do when she is lost. I called home. I'll never forget my mother's sigh on the other end of the line. Nor what she told me.

In times of extreme sorrow, we pray. In times of extreme joy, we pray.

I'd like to say that the Catholic in me took heed. That I got down on my knees in my mouse-infested Edgewater one-bedroom I rented post-divorce – the only box I could afford while working at odd jobs during the day and getting my MFA from Northwestern at night – and praised the good Lord. Crossed myself and left it up to Him.

I did not. Not for lack of trying. Every time I closed my eyes, the colour red would flash and blind me just as I got to . . . *full of Grace.*

Those red hats. Those red hats got me. How dare they? Walk around on stolen Indigenous grounds wearing a blood red hat that proclaimed its racism with as much fierce pride as any Confederate flag. What on earth did they know about greatness? About honor? Sacrifice? Blood? How dare they choose the color red. The color of the blood of my peoples and so many others who made and have always made this country great. I thought about the Apache and the Sioux and Nez Percé. I thought about my Asafo kin suffering, yet surviving, in the belly of a slave ship. I thought about the Chinese immigrants shipped here to build the very railroads that pass through every American city. I thought about the Japanese interned in camps and striped of a dignity that they so very much earned. I thought about the four little girls bombed down in Birmingham and how my grandmother didn't talk to nobody for weeks after, not a soul. I thought about my daddy telling me he remembered Emmett Till's funeral in Chicago that summer, about the men in his family chain-smoking to keep from sobbing. I thought about my mother telling me that when Dr King died, it snowed in Memphis. She was twelve. How could she not remember? Even though it was April, full on blizzard. She said God Himself didn't know what to do with His grief, so the heavens turned on Memphis. *Turned on us all, she said, for taking a king early.* I thought about Marilyn in my laundromat. That the love of the Cubs had brought a white and a black woman into sisterhood. That though massacres happen every day in America, so do miracles.

I drove in a blizzard from Chicago to Memphis that Christmas. I needed to be home in the South. I needed to eat food that was familiar and filling. I needed my mother. Christmas morning, she fried green tomatoes for breakfast and made a pot of hazelnut coffee. Where she found green tomatoes in Memphis in late December is another miracle only my mother can deliver. When she so graciously passed me a plate, I had already been up for hours.

'What are you writing, daughter?' she asked.



'A novel.'

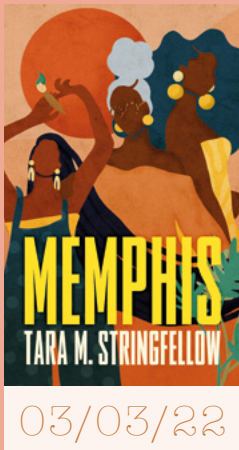
'What about?'

'You. Your mother. Auntie Winnie. All of us women. About how we're great. About how we've always been.'

'Let me see.'

And as she came around the kitchen island, hands still covered in the corn meal grit from the tomato batter, she let out another one of her legendary sighs. But this one, I swear to y'all, had so much hope in it. So much love. Like she had just draped a quilt over my shoulders.

'*Memphis*,' she said. 'Now that sounds lovely.'



Extract

The house looked living. Mama squeezed my hand as the three of us gazed up at it, our bleary exhaustion no match for the animated brightness before us.

"Papa Myron selected and placed each stone of the house's foundation himself," she whispered to me and Mya. "With the patience and diligence of a man deep in love."

The low house was a cat napping in the shade of plum trees, not at all like the three-story Victorian fortress we had just left. This house seemed somehow large and small at once—it sat on many different split levels that spanned out in all directions in a wild, Southern maze. A long driveway traversed the length of the yard, cut in half by a folding wooden barn gate. But what made the house breathe, what gave the house its lungs, was its front porch. Wide stone steps led to a front porch covered in heavy green ivy and honeysuckle and morning glory. Above the porch, my grandfather had erected a wooden pergola. Sunlight streaked through green vines and wooden planks that turned the porch into an unkempt greenhouse. The honeysuckle drew hummingbirds the size of baseballs; they fluttered atop the canopy in shades of indigo and emerald and burgundy. I could see cats on the porch—a dozen of them, maybe, an impossible number except for what a quick count told me. Some slept in heaps that looked softer than down, while others sat atop the green canopy, paws swiping at the birds. Bees as big as hands buzzed about, pollinating the morning glories, giving the yard a feeling that the green expanse itself was alive and humming and moving. The butterflies are what solidified my fascination. Small and periwinkle-blue, they danced within the canopy. The butterflies were African violets come alive. It was the finishing touch to a Southern symphony all conducted on a quarter-acre plot.

"Not now, Joan," Mama said, sighing.

I had out my pocket sketchbook, was already fumbling for the piece of charcoal somewhere in the many pockets of my Levi overalls. My larger sketchbook, my blank canvases the size of teacups, my brushes and inks and oils were all packed tight in the car. But my smaller sketchbook, I kept on me. At all times. Everywhere I went.

I wanted to capture the life of the front porch, imprint it in my notebook and in my memory. A quick landscape. Should've only taken a few minutes, but Mama was right. We were all dog tired. Even Wolf, who had slept most of the journey. Mya's face was drained of its usual spark, and as I put my sketchbook away, slightly defeated, her hand felt hot and limp in my own.

Mya, Mama, and I walked up the wide stone front steps hand in hand. My memories of staying here felt vague and far away—I'd been only three years old, and it felt like a lifetime ago—but now I remembered sitting on the porch and pouring milk for the cats. I remembered Mama cautioning me not to spill, though I usually did anyway. Her laughter, too—the sound of it like the seashell chimes coming from inside the house while I played with the cats echoed in my mind from years ago. And the door, I remembered that. It was a massive beast. A gilded lion's head with a gold hook in its snout was mounted on a wood door painted corn yellow. I had to paint a picture of this door, even if I had to spend months, years, finding the perfect hues. It was as magnificent as it was terrifying. By knocking, by opening the door, I knew we'd be letting out a whole host of ghosts.

The Quiet Whispers Never Stop

Olivia Fitzsimons

When I first started writing, not that long ago, I said, quite foolishly, I wasn't going to write about Northern Ireland. Never. Ever. This wannabe writer said no. It felt unsafe. Risky. Then, the province became *all* that I could write about. The irony is not lost on me when I think about how my debut novel is set in Northern Ireland in 1982 and 1994, yet during the pandemic I was unable to return home, despite living 150km south of the border. It wasn't safe. Nowhere on earth was.

This past year we've all, in some way, big or small, been trying to save ourselves, our families, friends, our societies, even strangers. Like James Bond. But if James Bond were from Northern Ireland, he would have to be a Protestant Bond or a Catholic Bond; even if he were an atheist or Muslim, he'd have to pick a side. Which James do you believe in? Because James is a construct. Identity is a construct. Geography is what creates us. If James were born in the province, things would be different for James. Maybe he would be too fucked up to do anything. Maybe James would have blown people up for a different side. Maybe his outfits would veer away from bespoke tuxedos and polished shoes into a scratchier, low-brow type of fashion. His piercing gaze magnified through a balaclava. Maybe he'd have volunteered to give out vaccines. Who knows? James Bond is a fictional character. He is an orphan, he keeps secrets, he does not want to get too close to anyone. He feels misunderstood by his superiors. He thinks about leaving a lot but then he comes back into the fold. James Bond and Northern Ireland have a *lot* in common.

James Bond wouldn't have an easy time keeping his secrets in small town Ulster. The secret service would be outdone by local gossip mongers and the jig would be up. James Bond out. Go back to M. Secrets do a lot of work in my debut novel, *The Quiet Whispers Never Stop*, truths that aren't acknowledged by the characters until it is too late, relationships kept hidden, lies told, hurts unacknowledged and unaccounted for. People saying nothing when even the smallest gesture of love would repair the bond that is breaking between them. Love is in the everyday, the details, small things. Hatred too.

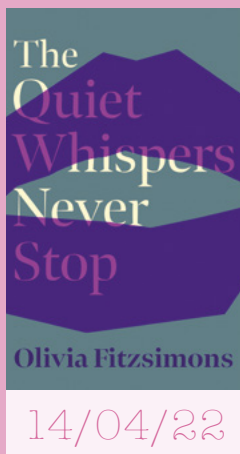
It feels transgressive to write about a place with so many secrets still. Like James Bond, our past is murky, our future unwritten. So many questions remain unanswered. So many people refuse to see the bonds that bind them together. It feels dangerous to explore what Northern Ireland is when I don't live there anymore, but my bond with the place, no matter the time away or the distance, remains.

Like James, I had to revisit a past I wasn't comfortable with. As I sat watching reruns of ads and news reels from 1982 and 1994 while I was researching the novel, I was shocked at what I watched on the telly, day in and day out, as a child: terror, propaganda, sadness. I think about my own kids, about how viewing these types of images might affect them. I think about my friends, those who left and those who stayed. I think how fortunate I was as a child to know people from both sides, family friends, school friends, neighbours. I don't consider religion anymore. My kids didn't get given any gods. Belief systems rarely come up when I meet a writer from Northern Ireland these days. I marvel at their talent and value their camaraderie. I don't question where they live or who they went to school with.

For me it's in the past but as I watched the riots recently at the peace lines, I feel it all in the present; I know for some, identity is all they think about, oxygen to the grief they've lived with for years. I think again, despite everything, all the hurts, about how much I love the place and yet how much my heart broke over it. The grief that so many of us carry around, packaged in neat black humour, bitter and beating, every day. The suit we wear is not unlike James Bond's tuxedo, we find a way to present ourselves to the world to hide our hurts. We tailor ourselves to manage our grief so we can get on with things, we appear the same despite our differences, because of them. Maybe it's time to take off the suit, dress smart casual. Covid has upended so many uncertainties. Our emotions have gone rogue under pressure. We've lost our place in the world, everything we thought we knew is under scrutiny. But hope remains.

A lot of us from round here like words, know their power, the value of a well-timed phrase. How many times did James use a bit of banter to buy time for a daring escape? Our accent can be a warm hug or a warning. Words can scar or heal us. Words can damn us or transport us. Better than a fancy suit and a car full of gadgets. Words can save us, better than any secret agent.





Extract

Normally, when she'd finally arrive at the Cathedral and then St Patrick's Stone, she'd pause, respectfully, like it's an open coffin, with a dead relative laid out, waiting for you to mutter prayers and kiss the cold plastic skin of the recently deceased. Sam blesses herself, then splays out on the slab, cadaver lite. She would lie back, luxuriating in the sun-warmed exterior of the stone as she'd proceed to smoke like she were on a beach somewhere in France. Cannes. Mont-Saint-Michel. Île De Ré. Places from travel mags that she'd pore over in the newsagent. Locations they'd use for *Vogue* covers. Except she's never been to France. Cigarette artfully poised at her thin-lipped mouth. Modelling and pouting as if her lips belonged to Sharon Stone. A show without an audience.

Normally, this place would be hers. Today there is a full complement of tourists, Christians and idiots.

There are still two hours before the parade finishes and the place is packed. Her cigarette smoke catches in the sunlight mingling above her. She wonders what Patrick would have made of all this. He lies, apparently, below their feet. *Saint Patrick*, so *they say*, a slave that made us all believe in God, is what gives this town its name, hard-won against the odds of terrorism tourism. Other places argue that this is not true. Like Armagh. *Other places* want to claim *our Paddy* for themselves.

A brand-new sign explains Patrick's final journey. Apparently Patrick wished to die in Armagh but the angel Victor ... Victor? Whoever heard of an angel called Victor? Victor sounded like a right arsehole. Victor is the name of the foreign fella who works in the chipper. Anyway, the Angel Victor came to Patrick in a dream, persuaded him to let two untamed oxen carry him to his final resting place. The chances of 'two untamed' *anything* pulling him *anywhere* past Saul was a bloody miracle in the first place. What a fool. Guided by the will of God ... to *Downpatrick*.

Sam smiles to herself as she reads the blurb. She blocks out the earache boom of American accents faltering over the parish place-name pronunciations. Imagines some local boyo back on approximately 16 March 461 AD dying to get back for his tea. Sees him calling time on the whole thing. Now town councils argue back and forth the decision of some Yee-haw with two big 'untamed' cattle, what the hell did they expect? Tourism boards have yearly meetings around who 'owns' St Patrick and all that comes with that ownership. Sam finds it funny that anyone would want to admit they had a slave in the first place and that he was basically a rent-a-kill bloke from Wales who vanquished all our snakes and gave us Jesus as a replacement. He was about the same age as Sam when they took him into captivity. The poor sod. Imagine that. At least Paddy's not down there on his own – there's Colmcille, massively into the rowing and Bridget making her bloody crosses – loads of craic.

Every year some poor unfortunate Yanks end up in Downpatrick instead of Dublin, freeze-watching overloaded Massey Fergusons, crowned with hay bales and children of the corn, done up with their ma's best lipstick on their cheeks and a few old bedsheets, led by a local eejit with a few pints too many on board, staggering along with a big stick pretending to be the aforementioned saint. Followed, in no particular order, at least none that was clearly visible, by pipe bands/baton-twirlers/insert-random-musical-slash-gymnastic-act-as-appropriate and a few other unlucky foreign sods brought over by the council. This year it is an American Patriot named Valentino. It's embarrassing. In the middle of Lent Paddy's Day is an oasis of hedonism in a desert of giving up stuff you love for forty days and nights. The kids get chocolate. The adults, alcohol. Teenagers just get the hypocrisy. Because even Jesus Christ himself would have walked out of that sand pit and taken them twelve disciples and got shitfaced in whatever pub he found first. Christ, he could have turned that water into wine into green beer.

Paddy's Day is just an excuse to get steaming drunk like the rest of Ireland. An annual chance to fit in with our southern cousins, shake off the yoke of our northern brethren, disguise our little bits of true blue Protestantism that we secretly love, wee signs that we aren't the same type of Catholics as southern *Cath-ol-ics*. Our own breed, our own special mixture just across the border, washed and rinsed and polished by the BBC and British High Street Shops and sterling claiming us no matter how much green we possess. Identity is a bitch.

The Red Arrow

William Brewer

I'm not too good at this, summing up a book. Especially a book I wrote. And with *The Red Arrow*—well, mystery and uncertainty are two of its bigger engines, so to suggest any summary feels vaguely wrong in ways both practical and aesthetic. Then you add the fact that I'm supposed to be saying something about *The Red Arrow* within the theme of "bonds" and my mind pretty much drops offline. To be clear, this is not a critique of the task but rather an articulation of my own limitations. Trust me, I wish I knocked this stuff out of the park. It'd be better for the both of us.

What I feel I can say about *The Red Arrow* and bonds is that it's a novel that begins shortly after a major bond has been severed: the narrator, unnamed, has recently found an end to his twenty-year relationship with depression. Emphasis here on "relationship" because that's precisely how these ruminative diseases—including depression, anxiety, addiction, and OCD—work: they become such a consistent and intimate part of you that eventually they'll eclipse you outright if allowed. Maybe then this is a book less about forming bonds and more about demolishing them, and then discovering the kind of freedom, openness, and clarity that can come after. There's a very distinct energy to that latter part, and my hope is the reader might recognize it as synchronous with the kind of radical, "I'm going to make some changes"-type energy one might feel about life after, say, being stuck at home for a year during the horror show of a global pandemic.

So yes, *The Red Arrow* is a book that is in part about depression's end, which is a kind of book I was never able to find in all the years I've been a reader, the majority of which I was a depressed reader. How does the narrator's depression end? My gut wants to say, "read and find out," but I guess it isn't much of a spoiler to say that psychedelic therapy is involved. You've probably heard of psychedelic therapy by now but if not, the quick of it is that some very good people are using psychedelics like psilocybin, LSD, and MDMA to treat some of our minds' worst ills, and with immense success. I, for one, owe my life to it.

Perhaps here's where I can say something else about bonds. When you undergo psychedelic therapy, there's one thing you must do. It's repeated over and over like a mantra. It's the most important part. You must *let go*. Let go of control. Let go of every idea you have about yourself, every perception, every memory. Let go of the past. Let go of the future. Let go of language. Let go of your mind. Let go of your yourself. Let go of your life. Break your bonds with these most fundamental elements of consciousness and it turns out you might find a clearer, more vibrant, and more dynamic life and reality on the other side.

It is this reality that *The Red Arrow* is calling from. In doing so, it engages with certain questions and ideas relating to the roles of fiction, narrative, and time in our lives. Stuff like: How much of "you" is truly there? and: How much of memory is an act of fiction? and: What might we find in this uncertain space between fact and fiction from which memory emerges? and: What's it like to watch the story of your life go up in a kind of technicolor smoke?

If this is all sounding a bit up in the clouds, please believe me when I say I've tried to keep things very much on *terra firma*. It's set on a high-speed train, for example, and there's loads of tangible, wild, and (I hope) entertaining mysteries and journeys, including a chemical spill in down-and-out West Virginia, meditations on art and aesthetics, New York City, some weird stuff involving quantum physics, jaunts through Sicily and Rome, wormholes made from real books by folks like Geoff Dyer and W.G. Sebald, the occasional bizarre and haunted vision, a road trip, artificial intelligence, Northern California, love, and a good bit of food and bev. I've been told it has an entropic energy and honestly, that's all I could ask for—that it reads like something in a state of constant bloom. Which is not a bad description of a good trip. Take the whole dose. Let the voice be your guide.

John Murray 9781529369670 HB \$12.99





Extract

I want to say, first of all, that I am happy. This was not always the case. In truth, it was hardly ever the case—even when I felt happy I wasn’t because I knew that was all it was, a feeling, an illusion that would soon be chased out by something I call the Mist. That I am happy now can be attributed to the fact that the journey worked, the *treatment* worked. I won’t describe the treatment yet, because if I do so now, I’ll lose you. What you should know is that I am thirty-three years old, of solid physical health (good levels of the new good cholesterol, low levels of the bad, proper pulse, no chemical dependencies), a professional failure, and am sitting solo on the Frecciarossa train waiting to depart from Roma Termini for Modena by way of Bologna. I am in Italy for my honeymoon; I was married in September, nine months ago, but we delayed the trip for better weather. Back on Piazza di Pasquino, at the very posh G-Rough hotel, a seventeenth-century townhouse converted into a temple of Italian design, Annie, my wife, is still asleep—as we both understand this trip is something I should do on my own—in the palatial king bed, an original piece by the famed furniture designer Guglielmo Ulrich, as is all the room’s furniture, and after whom the room is named, and about whom I speak as if I’ve got a clue who he is. I don’t.

I’m going to Modena to find a physicist. Because of the terms of my contract, I am not allowed to name or acknowledge him in any way, publicly or privately, until our project is complete and he has decided if he wants to credit me. For that reason, I will simply call him the Physicist, though if you’re that curious it shouldn’t be too difficult to find the one famous theoretical physicist native to Modena.

I need to find the Physicist because he owes me a story. *His* story, specifically; more specifically, the second half of his life’s story, from our present moment all the way back to what he calls the “great realization,” the moment when he had a “breakthrough in perception,” as he describes it, after which he excelled in the study of physics, the result of which is his groundbreaking though still controversial theory of quantum gravity. (I’m not allowed to name that either.) Everything from birth up to a year before the great realization I’ve already got, but it’s the “realization” that matters: it is my ticket out of a sizable debt hole I created when I failed to write a book promised to one of our nation’s largest publishers, publishers who paid me a rather sizable advance I can’t pay back because I blew it all on things like four days in the junior suite of the luxury G-Rough hotel. Many dark-suited women and men in a Manhattan high-rise are eagerly waiting to give me a legal suplex if I don’t deliver.

The good news is that, posttreatment, I’m able to forgive myself for getting into such a position, and I feel grateful for that. Yet no matter how profound the treatment was, how life changing—and it was those things—I realize I can’t ignore that the debt is still very real, still my problem to solve, and, worse, that it haunts me beyond its financial implications. It’s the last thorn stuck in my foot from years spent walking through thorns. Except not only is it keeping that time alive, and keeping me connected to it, it’s also got the power to infect the new life I’ve been gifted. And so even in my happiness and clear mind I also feel anxious enough about the day’s potential that I couldn’t bring myself to eat anything from the G-Rough’s impressive a.m. spread, not even a prosciutto slice or cube of melon to go with my morning cappuccino, which, now in the gut, has me feeling about as eager as possible for this train to come awake and race me closer to closure.

The solution is simple: all I’ve got to do is find the Physicist, get the rest of his story, and finish the job I was hired to do, which is to ghostwrite his memoir. Indeed, through a sequence of events that can seem either cruel or felicitous depending on which side of a life-changing treatment you find yourself, I found myself in a position where, by ghostwriting the Physicist’s memoir, I could cancel my debt with my publisher. Whenever I turn in a new ghostwritten section, the money I’d normally receive in compensation is instead deducted from my negative balance. The more of his life I write, the more of my life I get back.

Factory Girls

Michelle Gallen

In one of my first job interviews, the man across the desk from me told me to remove the two month's experience I'd gained working in a shirt factory from my CV, as it was 'embarrassing'. I was shocked. It hadn't occurred to me that the most significant work experience I'd gained to date was 'embarrassing' or that it was less desirable than the alternative he was suggesting – two months of unemployment. My time in a Northern Irish shirt factory taught me much more about teamwork, optimisation, negotiation, bullying, tribalism, sexism and capitalism than the summer I'd spent photocopying and filing in a genteel Dublin publishing office. But I did as he said, and quietly erased the factory job from my CV.

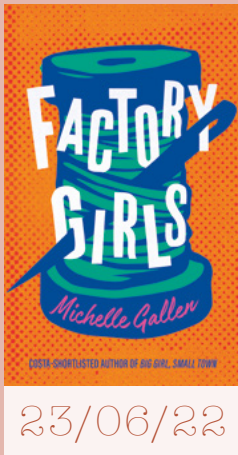
Yet my experiences in the factory resurfaced again and again throughout my life – at dinner parties, during team drinks, in job interviews, and in my writing. It's because I'm fascinated by crucibles – places where people cannot escape from each other – such as small towns where residents from all walks of life rub shoulders, and workplaces where humans from various backgrounds and ages are paid to work side by side. During the hot, tense summer I worked in the shirt factory, I felt trapped in a small world: my peer group amounted to less than one hundred people, some of whom I was related to, most of whom I had nothing in common with. I had no car, and could not drive. Mobile phones and the internet were years away from penetrating the closely-knit community I lived in. The house I lived in felt stuffed to bursting point with my parents and five siblings, each of us preoccupied with our own concerns – love, exam results, money worries, grief. The poor, deeply-divided town I grew up in was so small that it was impossible to avoid other Catholics when shopping or socialising, and yet I'd never met most people from the 'other side' of the town, who went to different schools, shopped in different shops, drank in different pubs and worshiped in different churches. But my factory job threw me into a crucible unlike any I'd encountered. Protestants and Catholics worked side by side in a 'neutral' workplace in order to manufacture men's shirts. Political and paramilitary events outside of the factory – both historical and current – impacted on our daily routines. On top of this, the 90s were the twilight of the British textile industry – Asian factories with cheaper workers, less rigorous employment rules, longer hours and better machinery were undercutting factories in Great Britain and Ireland. The famous shirt factories of Derry city – which had once supplied the world with shirts – were shuttered and silent, leaving the workers unions defunct and whole streets unemployed.

That work experience was the inspiration for my novel *Factory Girls*. It's set in the summer of 1994, a period that was scarred by a brutal tit-for-tat paramilitary campaign, buoyed by Ireland's performance in the world cup, and which ended in the IRA ceasefire. In the novel, three school leavers who have grown up in a deprived small town take what they hope will be summer jobs in the local shirt factory. The factory is kept on life support by government subsidies that allow it to limp from one short-term contract to the next, and its workers live from pay cheque to pay cheque. The novel focusses on the experiences of mouthy Maeve Murray, who hopes her A-level results will be good enough to earn her a ticket out of town. Indeed, as she notes 'The whole town was waiting for the results. They'd decree who'd get away and who'd be left behind, which families had the hope of a teacher or doctor or lawyer, and which families would be kissing Woody Duffy's arse in the hope of a carpentry apprenticeship.' But what seems at first glance to be a great opportunity to earn money before starting university turns out to be a crucible in which Maeve – and the other vulnerable workers in the factory – are tested in ways they're not equipped to handle.

Factory Girls is a macrocosm of today's labour market, where unions have been defanged or destroyed, and tech giants have formed monopolies that make billionaires of the faceless few and zero-hours minimum wage slaves of the many. Mega-corporations condemn labour unions, saying they are unfair barriers to competition. CEOs complain that unions force companies to negotiate with a cartel, preventing them from freely competing for individual workers. But without unions, it's the employers who form unfair monopolies. In *Factory Girls* the boss exploits his near monopoly on local employment, setting low wages for workers who have no other options. He abuses his position both financially and morally, and does little to smooth over the tensions between the Catholic and Protestant workforce. It suits Andy to have a workforce focussed on infighting rather than uniting against him. The novel invites the reader to consider with Maeve the terrible consequences of focussing on minor differences in the workplace, sport, and society instead of celebrating diversity and uniting to strengthen common needs.

John Murray 9781529386264 HB £14.99





Extract

Later that morning, Maeve listened as a couple of lifers whinged about their targets. She couldn't figure out their obsession with targets.

She was well used to hearing about targets – she'd grown up classifying buildings, institutions, organisations and people into types of target, which included the popular categories 'legitimate', 'soft', 'high profile', 'intended' and 'unintentional'.

Willie Fraser, for example, was a full-time member of the UDR who came from a long line of what Maeve's ma called *Deep Protestants* (a title they'd earned three generations back when their ancestors had drowned a couple of alleged Catholic sheep-rustlers in a cattle trough in the Town centre). Willie was clearly a legitimate target.

Jody Johnson was a part-time RUC officer and postwoman, making her both a legitimate and a soft target. The IRA got her one Valentine's morning, when her route was longer and slower than usual because of the glut of cards in her bag.

Seventeen-year-old Catholic, Hugh Devine – shot dead the week after he got his driving licence as he filled in for Simon Frost (a Protestant breadman and a part-time UDR soldier) – had been an unintentional target.

British politicians were easy, being both 'legitimate' and 'high profile'.

Any shop, takeaway, garage, company or human who supplied the Army or RUC with foods, goods or services was a legitimate target, as were court buildings, army bases, police barracks and all associated aerial and road vehicles.

Factory targets were a whole different story.

When Maeve had been told her target was to iron seventy shirts an hour, she'd felt like an IRA apprentice who'd been handed a hammer and orders to eliminate the British Prime Minister: success was possible, but highly unlikely.

She'd learned about ironing from her mam, who fucking hated it. *Pressing school blouses* she'd told Maeve and Deirdre, *is a waste of time, money and electricity*. She'd pull clean blouses out of the washing machine as soon as it stopped, then shook the worst of the creases out and hung them in front of the fire. If it was dry, she'd hang the blouses on the line in the back yard, where the wind worried them smooth. Maeve's blouses never looked crisp when she first got dressed. But after she'd worked up a bit of a lather on her walk to school, her blouse looked no different to Aoife's.

Maeve's mam didn't iron t-shirts, jeans, knickers, trousers or bed linen. But before a special occasion, she'd ceremoniously scissor open the spindly yellow legs of the ironing board in front of the TV. Then she'd go to the cupboard under the kitchen sink, where the iron squatted. She'd dust it off and fill the reservoir with water, before plugging it in. She'd smoke a fag while the iron spat and dribbled on the ironing board, building up a head of steam. Finally, she'd get to her feet and start ironing Maeve's da's good shirt. It could take her the length of an episode of *Coronation Street* to press a shirt – longer if a neighbour called in for a chat. When she was done, she'd hand it over like it was a day's work before sitting down to recover with a cup of tea. So not only did Maeve think that ironing seventy shirts in a day – never mind an hour – was madness, she couldn't understand why anyone would bust a gut trying to iron over seventy shirts an hour in order to earn tuppence. She took the matter up with Aoife that lunchtime.

'So what about these targets Aoife? Why should I sweat for an hour to have the chance of earning two and a half p extra? I'd make more money going down the back of the sofa looking for pennies.'

'I'm not sure.' Aoife said, looking at Maeve with the expression she used when she couldn't tell if she was messing or serious.

'What? You'd break a sweat for two and a half p?'

'Well I was thinking about it,' she said, cautious as a cat, 'Let's say I iron seventy shirts an hour. If I iron an extra ten shirts on top, I get an extra twenty-five pence in the hour.'

'LOADSAMONEY.'

Maeve's Harry Enfield impression didn't earn a smile from Aoife. She wasn't mad into him. Maeve had heard Mrs O'Neill describe him as trashy, which showed she both got – and missed – the point.

'Ok.' Aoife said, biting her lip. 'But if your basic is £1.75 an hour, you've just awarded yourself a pay increase of over 14%.'

Maeve grasped Aoife's satisfaction with the percentage. But it was the idea of pennies turning into pounds that transformed her into a machine. By the end of her second week, Maeve was ironing over one hundred shirts an hour. Doing that ten hours a day for two days earned her a CD. She liked that the factory taught her what felt like another Important Lesson: *the right target can light a fire under your arse*.

Little Prisons

Ilona Bannister

In the autumn of 2019, I started writing *Little Prisons*, a story about Penny, a woman confined to her flat because of extreme anxiety and agoraphobia triggered by the loss of her baby daughter. She wore a surgical mask whenever she walked the few steps to the laundrette on the ground floor. She was afraid of breathing air exhaled by other people. She would only open her door on the chain when her groceries were delivered, forcing the delivery man to push each item through the narrow space because she was afraid of touching him inadvertently.

In the spring of 2020, as I received texts from Sainsbury's explaining contactless delivery procedures while I frantically tried to source face masks for my family for the rare times we would leave the house, I saw that Penny's story was no longer a fictional tale about living with mental illness. I watched her anxieties become a part of all of our daily lives, played out on viral YouTube videos of people talking to themselves in mirrors, in shortages of hand sanitiser, and in the nervous, tired eyes of strangers peeking above their masks as they walked round one another and crossed the road so that they wouldn't touch each other in passing. As I tried to manage my own personal, life-long battle with anxiety in our new world, I watched as the thread tethering all of us to normality was pulled tighter and tighter every day, that one last tug threatening to unravel us completely. And of course, some of us – many of us – did unravel. Are unravelling still.

Little Prisons is about how each of us is just a few steps away from a life in the margins, forgotten and silenced, no matter how secure we feel our place is in the centre. It is a story about women pushed to the edges of our society, where we prefer to keep those impacted by migration, mental illness, poverty, old age and domestic violence, so that we don't have to look at them. It is about the incredible strength it takes to live a life made invisible by others.

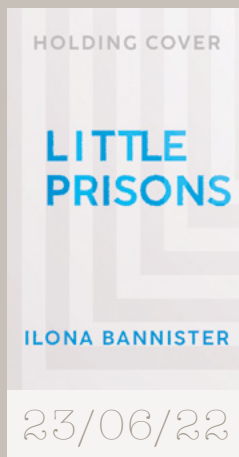
In the non-descript building in a gentrifying corner of London where the novel is set, there is Penny, doing daily battle with her mind that is convinced that the world beyond her door is too dangerous for her, and her heart that knows it isn't. Penny's neighbour, Carla, an American expat and single mother of two teens, has lived in a coercive relationship for many years, too paralysed by fear and too worn down by her controlling husband to escape her situation. Mable, Penny's upstairs neighbour, an elderly Jamaican pensioner and devout Jehovah's Witness, has sacrificed everything for her faith, including her relationship with her family. And Woman, the housekeeper and nanny for the family on the second floor, has been trafficked and is being forced to work against her will. When she is not cleaning and cooking for the family, she works in the laundrette they own on the ground floor, ironing shirts and washing clothes, a hidden slave in full view of the public.

Through grocery deliveries, glimpses through windows, and overheard conversations in the stairwell, the women come to know each other with the intimacy city dwellers develop with their neighbours. Their tiny kindnesses and small acts of compassion help them each find a way to mend the broken paths in their lives. They will help each other, not so they can make themselves whole, or healed, or heroes, but just so they can keep going and live lives that are a little less lonely and a little more loved.

I hope these four women show us what happens when we take time to look at the people who we never really see. I hope they make us aware of whose voices and stories we choose to hear, and whose we ignore, consciously and unconsciously, because we can't stand the sound. I hope they remind us, as the past year has, that we all walk a fine line every day, resting on a false edge of security that our lives will follow the plans we have made. I think we will find out that when we do slip off the tightrope there is great beauty and great humanity to be found in places where we never looked before.

Two Roads 9781529353907 HB £14.99





Extract

Woman

Vestibule

Woman quickly goes downstairs to the vestibule to continue cleaning. She sweeps the floor in big wide strokes. Then she mops, watching the wet mop draw dismal rainbows in shades of grey on the concrete. She jumps when the door to the building opens suddenly behind her. She stands aside as the three young women from flat 3C bundle into the vestibule, carrying their shopping in their hands because they forgot their reusable bags.

The one with blue streaks in her hair holds the door open for her flatmate as they laugh and joke. If Woman could read English, she would see that the one with pink streaks in her hair wears a sweatshirt that says, "If You're Not Angry, You're Not Paying Attention." They brush past Woman without a glance, giggling on their way to the stairs, trekking muddy boot prints through the freshly mopped floor.

Woman mops that section of the floor again. She paints an arch, takes one step back, paints another, a second step back, a third step, and the sharp corner of the steel handle of the door pushes into her spine. She stops. She drops the mop. She pushes the door open a crack and cold air whistles in.

She is alone, Madame is out, Sir is out, Master is watching the dark haired Americans on his phone in laundrette, Old Madame is with the children. She could run, right now. She puts one foot out the door. She has never used this door. She has always entered laundrette on the ground floor through the entrance at the back. She has never set foot on this pavement of this street in front of this building where she has lived for three years.

In Dubai they locked her in the flat, but not here. They have never locked her in here because they know it is not necessary. She has no money, no passport, no English, no shoes. No friend, no food, no coat, nowhere to go. No idea where she is. No map, no way to get home. No kindness of strangers, no guardian angel, no police. They know the names of her family, of Mother, of Auntie. They know the last place she lived with her family in Capital City. She can run, but if she does, she cannot be sure that they will not hunt her family down, force them to pay her debt, or do worse.

Penny

First floor corridor

Penny is unsteady on her feet. She swallows, hard. She is sweating, short of breath, hands shaking. She looks up at the fluorescent tube light. She takes one step. She takes another. She takes a third. She is emboldened. She is empowered. She is triumphant. She is normal! She could leave the building, she could go outside, to the shop, to the library, to the park, to her old house, where Jamie and Olivi—

And then the shouting starts behind Carla's door. She is frozen. She cannot move forward. She cannot move back.

Woman

First floor corridor

Woman lets go of the door and lets it fall closed by itself. The urge to flee is gone. She needs only the image of Mother, murdered and slumped over her tea, of Beauty shrieking by her side, to drain the will to fight from her limbs. She feels a prolonged chill from her flirtation with the cold from outside. She puts the mop and broom and bucket in the cupboard under the stairs. She will leave. But not that way. Not by running into the wind, wild, with no direction.

On her way upstairs, lost in her own sadness, Woman stops short when she sees Penny in the middle of the first-floor corridor, hands in her pockets, her breastbone pulsing up and down in a ragged rhythm under the fluorescent light. Her eyes darting everywhere, Penny's top half looks like it's trying to curl into a ball but her legs are rooted to the floor.

Woman approaches her slowly, cautiously, as though Penny is a wounded animal that she is trying not to frighten. She hears muted shouting, a man yelling at the red-haired woman in 1A. Woman steps closer, and Penny blows out some air. She does not look at Woman, but it's clear she knows she's there. When Woman is six feet away she searches Penny's face until she gets her eyes to focus on her. She says the only English word she knows that seems to fit their circumstance.

"Help," Woman says to Penny.

"Help," Penny says to Woman.

This is Gonna End in Tears

Liza Klaussmann

Writing a novel is, in some ways, like creating a time capsule. As a writer, you take all the things that are swirling around you at the time — all your questions, your obsessions, your desires and fears — and thread them through your narrative. Buried within the public-facing story, then, is a kind of reflection of who you were when the work was written.

From the time I put my head down, more than five years ago now, to begin *This Is Gonna End in Tears* to the time I raised my head from the last page, my life had seismically changed. I had slipped into my forties, suffered a major heartbreak, become a single mother, and was living through a global pandemic that had cut me off from my family and my friends, at least physically.

Unsurprisingly, my relationship to the book I had set out to write had also changed. That story — one about three friends whose intense childhood friendship and subsequent romantic entanglements have determined much of their lives — had been subtly shaded by another: one about grace, about forgiveness. About how some of us survive and some of us don't.

The one thing that didn't alter, however, was the idea that our ability to remember, our ability to dream, to imagine a more incandescent future, is what keeps us going, keeps us sane, keeps us waking up in the morning and getting out of bed. Knowing that there are corners to turn. There are second acts, and even third acts.

I've always been fascinated by group dynamics — families, groups of friends. How we navigate each other, hurt each other, love each other, survive each other. And with my first two novels I was able to write about those themes while being out in the world myself, watching, experiencing. But with this book, that wasn't the case; I was first a new mother to a baby, housebound, and then a mother to a toddler during Covid times, housebound. And what resulted was very much reliant on memory and dream.

The colors of the houses in Wonderland, the fictional town where *This Is Gonna End in Tears* takes place, were brighter, the sun shone hotter, the appetites — for sex, for food, for love — were bigger. The music played in my head sweeter, sadder. And the smell of things that I now could only conjure in my imagination became an obsession: chlorine in a swimming pool, suntan oil on warm skin, sticking to magazine paper, dusty driveways, boat fuel, seaweed and salt from the ocean.

Still, the book was always going to be about memory in some ways — the memory of the people we were, the people we thought we'd become. And, of course, my own childhood memories of the 1980s. I had longed to write about that time before I forgot all the details — the sound of a cassette tape clicking to the end, the taste of Mike and Ikes and Reeses Pieces and Junior Mints in a dark movie theatre, passing a plate of Cracker Barrel and Wheat Thins at my parents' cocktail parties, the air heavy with the smell of L'Air du Temps and Opium.

The pandemic has changed our relationships, put a screen between us where a warm body once might have been. It has tested and, in some cases, severed our bonds. I've spent more time than I'd like to think crying down the phone to someone I missed so badly that it was a physical ache. And it was in this state that I came to understand something else about group dynamics: that when you strip away the ability to have everyday interactions, you forgive people more, you care less about small slights — you know everyone is just trying to get through the best they can. And so my characters also came to understand this — that bonds are forged through time, memory, incident, and love, but also through the grace we allow ourselves and others.

So this novel, in the end, became as much about the past as what we do with it in the present. How much we are able to forgive in order to hold those who seem so far close to us. And to dream, of course, about turning that corner.

John Murray 9781529389364 HB \$14.99





Extract

Miller Everley stood in her underwear in the kitchen of her orange house in Wonderland staring at the pea green phone on the wall, willing herself to pick it up. The room was bathed in a kind of mossy iridescent glow that she at first thought was cast by the early morning rain on the growing leaves and grass outside, but then remembered was just the tint of her Ted Lapidus sunglasses, a gift from Ash for her fortieth birthday, earlier this year. She wore them so often now that at times she forgot the world wasn't actually green.

Miller chewed delicately on a tender part of her cuticle, weighing her options. In the end, she walked over to the fridge — marigold yellow with fake wood detailing on the handle. When they'd bought the house twelve years ago, the salesman had told her that it was the color to have. She'd regretted it almost immediately.

She took out a Tab and drank it down, leaning against the open fridge door, the cold air leaking out and prickling her bare skin. Then, picking one of the twenty or so personal-sized tins of Blue Diamond almonds that lined the shelves of the cupboard, she sat down at the table, hooking her finger through the tab and pulling back the lid.

She ate the almonds deliberately, one by one, her foot propped on the edge of the battered farm table, thinking about — but refusing to make eye contact with — the telephone. She knew that once she picked it up a chain of events would be set in motion. Whether big or small, she couldn't say, but events all the same. And events were what she was trying to avoid these days.

She knew she couldn't put it off any longer: she had to phone her husband. He needed to be the one to break the news to Olly. Between the two evils — calling Olly or calling Ash — calling Ash was definitely the lesser.

As it rang, Miller stretched out the long phone cord with her bare foot, poking her big toe into the coils, drawing it back and forth across the sandy linoleum floor.

"Hello?" Her husband's voice sounded the same as always and Miller was faintly surprised by this, as if she'd imagined him differently somehow.

"It's me," she said. "It's Miller," she added unnecessarily.

There was a pause and then: "Hi. I'm . . . What time is it?"

"Something's happened," she said, and quickly, so that she wouldn't have to think about the fact that Ash was there, but that maybe he wasn't alone, which of course, hadn't entered into the first equation she'd made.

Miller heard rustling.

"Hold on, I'm turning on the light," Ash said.

She didn't want to dissect the rustling.

"What were you saying?"

She could picture the bedroom in their New York pied-a-terre, the one they'd bought after they'd left New York for good twelve years ago: the big double bed pushed up against the built-in shelves containing their books and family photos, the white ruffled bed skirt, the grey plush carpet. The curtains would be closed. He always slept with the curtains closed, a fact that had irritated her throughout their married life. Though now, maybe, he slept with them open? She hadn't seen him in three months. Any number of things could have changed.

"I got a call from the Starry Acres Nursing Home," she said.

"The . . . I'm sorry? What?"

"Starry Acres," Miller repeated. "You know, Aunt Tassie's nursing home. Over the bridge."

Ash had never visited Aunt Tassie there, but Miller had. A couple of times, anyway. She'd meant to go more. Now she was sorry she hadn't made more of an effort.

"Right . . ."

"It seems she attacked another resident? That's what they're saying, though honestly, I can't imagine it. Anyway, they haven't been able to reach Olly." She paused, waiting for Ash to respond. He didn't. "I'm going to have to go get her," Miller sighed.

"Oh, right," Ash said. "I thought . . . well, never mind. Do what you think is best, of course."

Miller pulled the cord tighter around her toe. "The thing is . . ."

Ash sighed. "What's the thing, Miller?"

The wariness and irritation, the goddamn long-suffering-ness in Ash's voice made her want to scream. "Well, Ash, someone needs to get in touch with Olly. I don't have his number." This was a weak excuse, she knew. "But I know you do, from the last time, when we had to sign the papers . . ."

It had been four years since either of them had spoken to Olly. And an even longer time since they'd actually been friends.

"Hang on a minute," Ash said, his voice hardening in a way that Miller had always hated. She gritted her teeth. "Why does anyone have to do that? I mean, fuck Olly."

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