



## Sarah Hall

**The Electric Michelangelo**  
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**Your first novel, *Haweswater*, was published in 2002 in the U.K. and your second, *The Electric Michelangelo*, two years later. This is quite a pace, particularly for well-crafted, literary fiction. Could you talk about your writing habits a little?**

It didn't feel so fast in the greater scheme of things really. I finished editing *Haweswater* and compulsively turned my hand to something else. The idea for the next novel felt strong, which helped propel it forward. Perhaps there was a little of the sense that, ok, the first book had sold, now I was a writer, a proper writer, and in accordance with all ingrained western work ethics, I felt I needed to clock my card and be producing continuously, not sitting on my bum. Plus I like to think of the brain, the creative portion anyway, as a muscle - you can rest it, but ultimately you keep flexing it and it stays healthy. These days there's quite a bit of the other end of things, events, readings, traveling

round, which goes with the territory I guess, and even though it's fun, it never quite feels authentic and like work, the way writing does.

**How has your writing changed between *Haweswater* and *The Electric Michelangelo*?**

The language possibly became a little bolder; I became a little more reconciled, or adventurous, with the poetic, and the northern baroque style. In *Haweswater* the language was quite taut, with short sentences, though dense somehow too, and in *The Electric Michelangelo* it rolls about and often triplicates images and outright rhymes in places, which was a conscious move — I really thought what the hell, I'll go for it here with this carnival of a book. What I'm working on now is cleaner and a bit more pared down, to suit the subject matter I'm handling, and I find it refreshing, cleansing, like sorbet after a rich dinner. I hope my writing is and always will be variable, depending on its suitability to the subject matter of a book.

**The two locales of the book are Morecambe Bay in the Northwest of England and Coney Island, Brooklyn. You come from Cumbria, England. To what extent has that area influenced your writing? Can you talk about how living in the East Village influenced your work?**

It so difficult to locate the influences of landscape and place in your own writing, and say, with certainty, there, that quality arrived from this region. But then, I'm the first to proudly confess to a northern timbre and a northern sensibility to my own work — I just falter when I'm asked to qualify it with specifics! There are obvious flavours; vernacular speech, histories, characterization. Past actually setting the scene here, it may also be the brio, or the energy, the toughness and the heart. The north is a place of opposites I think — beauty and ugliness, reticence and abundance. But it is hard to describe and define — it's resonant and obscure and haunted — it's funny, you drive north on the M6, our big long motorway from the South of England to Scotland, and after a time you see these signs that read 'The North', and that's that, no actual place names until you're up into the territory. Many of my favorite contemporary writers, particularly poets, are northern by birth or residency, and I don't think that's coincidental. For literature, I think the important thing is not trying to channel and render the place I'm from. When I turn to a new work it's always with a concept of something other, like tattooing, or a lost valley, and the north bleeds in, it's in the veins so to speak. I never actually lived in the East Village of Manhattan — but one of my dearest friends did, and she now lives in Brooklyn. I've spent a lot of time with her in both places, and when you visit somewhere with a resident as your guide something more intimate is granted to you. In the acknowledgements at the end of the book I mention her — 'without her eyes I never would have seen New York tipping just so against the light'. And that's the truth.

**Can you talk about the experience of getting a tattoo, in terms of how it affected the writing of the book?**

I first got tattooed about seven years before writing the book. I've long been interested in it as a folk art. I had another tattoo done during the research, not purely for research purposes of course, but it was really helpful, and really painful ... It's an absolutely terrifying and electrifying experience. The art form itself is so odd and so intriguing; it's perfect for a novel I'd say.

***The Electric Michelangelo* is rich in visual imagery, from the seascapes to the sensory detail, making it ideal for the cinema: Would you have any reservations about seeing a film made of your novel?**

No, no reservations at all, I'd be thrilled in fact. Film is a different medium from fiction, with its own protocols and objectives and emphases, and I suspect, as a writer, seeing the original work on screen, you just have let go of your first version of the story to an extent. Having said that, there are themes and politics within the book, which are vital to it, and I'd hate for them to be sidelined or lost for the sake of plot only.

**Is there a dream writing project for you, in terms of subject matter or genre, a book of poetry perhaps? Do you write short stories as well?**

Dream subject matter, hmm, I think each novel has a subject matter which is, at the time, the most fascinating and compelling and untapped thing I can think of to write about or I wouldn't be on with it as a project. There are subjects that I know are precious and I want to write about in the future so I am mulling them over and wondering which is the best way to get at them — pretty much like a thief sizing up that jewel in the case! It has to be done carefully, undauntedly, and possibly even a bit covertly! I do write short stories — and I have a collection coming out with my British publisher. I started my career writing poetry, had some published in anthologies and magazines in the UK, and though I've moved into prose I still have a deep reverence for poetry. So yes, a collection is possibly the ultimate in publishing goodies, but I'd love to think I'm trying now for a poetry/prose hybrid with the books I write. Catdog fiction.

**What are you working on now?**

Two novels, one of which is going to have to go on the back burner I think, and that collection of short stories I mentioned. I'm also renovating a Victorian property in the north of England at the moment, so I'm not at my computer as much as I should be. I keep hoping every night that some benevolent magical elves will come in while I'm sleeping and fix up the house and write a best-seller for me and in the morning it will all be done ... So much for the work.