



Sarah Hall

Haweswater
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Q: You have written two novels of historical fiction: *The Electric Michelangelo* and now, *Haweswater*. What attracts you to this genre as a writer?

A: Always a tough one to answer. I suppose it happened initially because the first novel I wrote, *Haweswater*, was based on an actual event. The dam was built in the first part of the twentieth century, so in a way the period for the novel was pre-selected. I really enjoyed the research for this though, from a general nineteen-thirties background study, to the specific engineer's reports describing the construction etc. It felt like quite a theatrical enterprise, considering which clothing might be worn, and what was being eaten back then, how current political and social events were impacting on people's lives, all in order to stage the novel authentically, naturally, visually. Once I'd parachuted myself into the era it was a wonderful process of discovery. I found myself fascinated by certain aspects, for example, the climate of feminist thought; between the world wars there was an

interesting clash of principles and ambition relating to women, between those who believed that traditional roles should be coveted, and those wanting more of the liberty and sense of capability that the war effort had afforded them. This is played out through Janet and Ella in the mother/daughter relationship in *Haweswater*.

I think the love of historical research, set-design and evocation, stayed with me for *The Electric Michelangelo*. Again, I had a brilliant time tracing the history of western tattooing and investigating old Coney Island and Morecambe Bay. I think it's true that much of the past pertains to what is contemporary. Both novels are firmly set in their periods but they do discuss matters which are relevant today and will likely be relevant tomorrow; industrialization, displacement, changing landscapes, the entertainment industry, identity, gender politics, conflict, loss. Historical fiction affords a great opportunity to indulge in period drama, while being a device through which to discuss symmetries and transferable issues. Having said all this I've just finished a new novel that has modern day settings, and I'm now working on a novella set in the future. So my time-traveling has become somewhat broader of late!

Q: Your prose is densely lyrical. What role does poetry play in your fiction?

A: I think the stories that I tell in *Haweswater* and *The Electric Michelangelo* are lyrical tales. *Haweswater* is about change, enormous change in a grand landscape, and seismic emotional change, and *The Electric Michelangelo* is about an outsider art-form (tattooing) and the often uncelebrated lives—good and bad—that this art represents over a certain historical period. There's a certain 'epic' feel to these books, and I think I wanted to find a voice to tell these tales that was entirely in sympathy with the lives and voices of those who move through these tales. It would be silly to talk about any novel as if it were objective, as if it strived to tell both sides, or be somehow fair and balanced: a novel is an epic telling, with an epic teller or narrator, and this teller is as much a dramatic construction—even if they narrate in the third person—as the stories themselves; the teller is not me. So the lyricism, I think, is a corollary to the nature of the stories: the physicality and amplification of the language in *The Electric Michelangelo* goes part and parcel with the intense physicality of Cyril Parks's vocation as a tattooist who wanders on the seaside margins of society. But this is all quite difficult to talk about, as it almost presents a chicken-and-egg problem: would either novel tell the same story if it told it in a different way? Each novel exists in the lyrical form that it took in the writing, and is told in the way that I felt it wanted to be told: if this wasn't the case, I wouldn't have been able to embark on the long voyage of writing, and certainly wouldn't have got to the end.

Q: *Haweswater* is set in northern England, your home territory. What are some of the challenges and pleasures of depicting a setting you know so well?

A: Well, for a start, all the people I know there were wondering if they were featured in the book! Strangely, I think one of the things that helped me was that the novel was written in America, a long way away from home, not in exile exactly but there certainly was a sense of remove, maybe longing, nostalgia: I think it encouraged a distilled recollection in my mind, so the most poignant things came through. One of the drawbacks of writing about a place known so well is that aspects of it might be taken for granted. I suppose we all become so used to 'home' that a certain blindness might creep in, no matter how gorgeous and atmospheric that place might be. There may be a point at which the lens is too close in to see a picture or the eye is not assailed enough by a fresh outlook for the imagination to fire. Writers can be rat-brained at the best of times, particularly when it comes to familiar walls, navigated mazes. I think being away from Cumbria definitely changed the focus for me, gave me some perspective. At a distance I could see the place, the people, and even the story of *Haweswater*. The reality of the environment faded, and it became imagined space. I'd always known about the dam, I grew up in its shadow, but it never registered that here was actually a colossal thing, massively impacting, and quite a tale. Of all the work I've done I think I'm probably proudest of this book, not only because it is my first, but proud in a very indigenous and tribal way. It's a privilege when a person is allowed to express, to the scale that a novel permits, their love and fealty for the place where they were born and raised.

Q: The setting of *Haweswater* is powerfully rendered, such that all of the reader's senses are engaged. How do you achieve a convincing setting for your characters?

A: Well I suppose it helps to know the intimate details of the place in question. If writing is in some way an attempt to make a writer's own experiences meaningful, then *Haweswater* certainly draws on my upbringing and experience. I was enormously fond of swimming in the rivers and waterfalls of the region when I was young – my mum would always joke that I was perfectly capable of breaking the ice in March to get into the water. I was fascinated by the riverbed; the life and scenery found there. Much of Lakeland's water is brackish or bluely lit from the slate surrounding it, so swimming stuck me as a kind of voyage into wonderfully strange and alien territory. The character of Isaac in the novel has this quality to him; part-fish. Conversely, his sister is very earthy. Because I'm interested in how place influences people I went as far as allowing the very atoms of Cumbria into these characters. I'm an avid fell-walker in the district. I think walking gives an opportunity to really experience the land, and commune with it. You touch it, smell it, hear it, and see it. I think I realized early on that stimulating the senses was a great way of drawing a reader in, allowing them to experience a situation or place, albeit synthetically and second-hand. For my part I know it always feels like a gift when a writer transports me, virtually as a reader, to another territory, an atmospheric venue, so that I can really appreciate the setting. The craft of writing can be very generous that way.

Cumbria is a severe and beautiful place. I ran absolutely wild over it when I was a child. The landscape was such a primary force and

presence in my life that I don't think it would have been possible for me to be the writer I am today without it. Place has been so important in my prose, to the point where the work is now being called 'geo-fiction'.

Q: In the course of your research on the *Haweswater* dam, did you uncover any information that surprised you? Was there anything that you wanted to include in your book but were unable to?

A: I did find some things about the building of the *Haweswater* dam remarkable. The level of industry that arrived suddenly in a very remote and quiet valley was shocking. I'm not sure what I had envisaged before the research, but I'm not very technologically minded and I find engineering fascinating and a bit stupefying because it is something so far from the realm of my common knowledge. To read up about small railways being built and centrifugal pumps being set up in what was essentially a far-flung farming valley, the hundreds of workers being bussed in and housed in a pre-fabricated shantytown; it all seemed vastly out of proportion. I didn't really come across any secret information, and I didn't really expect to. I'm cynical enough to believe that when it comes to industry, there are dealings that are strictly off-the-record or historically inaccessible. It's likely there were conversations and handshakes going on in smoky gentlemen's clubs long before the Act of Parliament authoring the building of the dam came to pass.

One thing I did have to leave out was my original character motivation for the attempt to blow up the dam in the latter part of the novel. Originally it was going to be politically driven. But all the general research I undertook, and the conversations I had with historians assured me that no such acts of domestic political violence would be realistic in that era of moderation. It's always slightly irked me that I had to fall back on the notion of tragedy and unstable grief when it comes to the heroine's motivations. I'm loath to reinforce that old image of the female hysteric. And I hope she's forgiven me!