

My Writing Life interview with Jacob Kerr

Fran Harvey

Hi, I'm Fran Harvey, and I'm a writer and musician who likes talking to other writers about their writing life. Today I'm talking to the mysterious Jacob Kerr. Jacob was born in the North East of England and lives in rural Northumberland and I'm calling him mysterious because, wisely, Jacob is pretty much invisible on the internet apart from announcements about his debut novel, *The Green Man of Eshwood Hall*, which came out on 6 October. It is the first in a series of folk horror novels set in North Albion, which is a mythical version of Northumberland, and the second book, *The Wolf of Whindale* is coming out in 2024. *Green Man* is absolutely brilliant. It's lush, and it's harsh, and it's brutal. And it's got an incredibly strong voice and characters. It follows 13-year-old Izzy and her family as they tried to settle into life in the servants' quarters of the decaying Eshwood Hall, which is near the fairly isolated village of Eshwood, and Eshwood Forest. It explores class, family dynamics and the dark depths of folklore. And honestly, it could have been written to my personal taste. I don't think a writer has so immediately joined my favourites list in some years. So I really strongly recommend it. Like, I can't recommend it enough. I also need to apologise, listeners, in advance: unfortunately, COVID has caught me. My voice is going in and out. But we're gonna give this a shot anyway and just see how it goes. Jacob, thank you so much for talking to me today.

Jacob Kerr

Thank you for that introduction, Fran. That's lovely. That's how you make sure you get a complimentary copy of anything I ever write from now on.

Fran Harvey

Oh, I'll take it! Thank you! [laughs] So we're talking on Zoom. So, whereabouts are you calling from?

Jacob Kerr

From deepest, darkest Northumberland, which I should perhaps be calling North Albion, but that seems a bit gimmicky. So, the honest answer is Northumberland. [laughs]

Fran Harvey

So I can see some books in the background. Are you in your writing space at the moment?

Jacob Kerr

I am, well, I am and I'm not. I have this lovely room that I've got set up just as I like it, with my books, and it has a nice desk and an armchair. And everything should be as it needs to be - and I realise I never, or very rarely, do any writing here. I write next door on the settee, listening to music sometimes. And it meant so much to have this, have a space that's my own sort of study or library. And it does mean a lot. But it's weirdly, once you've got it, you then go off and write in another room.

Fran Harvey

It's sort of like locational procrastination, isn't it? You need to know that the space is there to use...

Jacob Kerr

Yeah.

Fran Harvey

... to be able to go and do the work somewhere else.

Jacob Kerr

Yeah, yeah. Very mysterious. But there you go.

Fran Harvey

You've said that you listen to music sometimes while you're doing settee writing, and music is part of The Green Man of Eshwood Hall - it comes up a few times. What sort of music do you listen to while you're writing?

Jacob Kerr

I found that Izzy, the central character, has a sort of musical theme in my mind. And it just came about by accident. But I was listening to the guitar playing of Robbie Basho, who was an American, kind of very strange, kind of folk guitar player of the 60s and 70s. And he died in about 1984. So he's from that generation of guitar players where they're really fusing classical and folk and traditions from all over the world. And they're just, it's part of that period. He also has a really unusual voice. He sings on some of his songs, and he has a very deep sort of chest, warbly voice and it's very haunting. And I found that that was sort of Izzy's theme. So if I needed to try to tune into her character, I'd put on some Robbie Basho. And then other times, there's obvious things like classical music or jazz that has no vocals, so you can easily write to it. But a weird thing I found with this book: I could write to rock music from the

90s, which is what I liked when I was a teenager. So maybe that's why I was listening to it, you know, because when I was 13, I'd be listening to Soundgarden and Nirvana and stuff. So I'd put that on sometimes, which is really not at all fitting for the world of the book. But er...

Fran Harvey

I think that makes sense to me though, because obviously like Nirvana and Soundgarden have a certain level of anger in them and tension. And there are parts of the book where I could 100% imagine like certain directors, if this is ever made into a film - I'm just throwing this out there because I would love it if it was made into a film as well - but I can see certain directors modernising it using that sort of music, because it's got that rage in it and that that anger is in the book. Everyone's, no matter how much they're pretending, really quite unhappy. And there's tensions all the way through it, which I've got another question about that later. So we'll come back to it but. Um, I usually start with a particular question on these interviews, and we've got sidetracked and into things far more quickly, so I'm just gonna jump back to it. It's really two questions. So, I'm going to split into two. What did you read or experience that made you want to be a writer? Have you always wanted to be a writer?

Jacob Kerr

I have. I have. And I think the earliest writing that really captured my imagination would be, well, Alan Garner, who everyone knows, and everyone knows is incredible. And also John Gordon, who's been, I think, kind of forgotten. But is sort of in the Alan Garner school, if you like. But of the two, it was John Gordon that I - I just went crazy for him when I was a kid. And I read *The Giant Under The Snow*, which is actually a kind of a weirdly Green Man-ish story. And that was his biggest hit. But then I read everything else. I read just all of his books. I think he's the first writer that I did that with, you know, when you just fall in love with the writer and just seek out everything you can. So very much sort of spooky, Boy's Own, plucky, state school children find fragment of ancient artefacts and awaken latent forces of English weirdness. You know, that kind of thing. And, yeah, that's, I love that. [laughs]

Fran Harvey

John Gordon - he's been recommended to me before, so I've actually been on the hunt for his books for a while, and most of them are quite difficult to get hold of unless you're getting quite battered secondhand copies. But I did actually read this week that one of his books is being re-released. And it's not *The Giant Under The Snow*. It's another one, some point in the next couple of months, I think he's sort of having a bit of a resurgence, which is quite exciting.

Jacob Kerr

That would be great, if that happened, yeah. Because I struggled as well. I just recently thought, I'm gonna go back and read and see how these stand up. And really struggled to get hold of them. I got The Giant Under The Snow. And I have to say, I think it does stand up really well. It's a real page turner, it's really tightly constructed. And it still has that atmosphere that I remember. So it stands up. Definitely,

Fran Harvey

That's always a relief, when you go back and you're like, oh no it is genuinely as good as I remember.

Jacob Kerr

Yeah.

Fran Harvey

So on the back of reading those and being caught up in that spirit, can you remember what the first thing you wrote was, where you were writing it thinking 'I want to be a writer'? Can you remember what it was, however far back that is?

Jacob Kerr

I have a memory, a sort of a vivid memory of writing a ghost story, when I was ... I'd be about eight or nine. And the teacher liked it. And I had, of course, provided drawings to accompany it as you do when you're that age. And the teacher said, 'This is such a scary story, I think you should read it for the younger kids in the school and scare them.' I think that must have been Halloween when we were doing this. So I did. So I went - I was sent to the sort of... I don't know if they were second years of this primary school, so they'd be sort of six, and I'd be eight or nine, which, there's a sort of gulf between you at that age, or you think there is. And I read this ghost story that I'd written. And I remember that being, you know, like a huge event. Yes that was very pleasing. All these little faces I was scaring.
[laughs]

Fran Harvey

Can you remember any specifics about the story, like, whose ghost was it?

Jacob Kerr

You know, I don't keep that much old stuff around; I winnow it out. But I do still have that story. And it's hysterically funny, now. But I think I got my mam to type it up for me. So it's actually typed up and legible. She was learning to type at the time. And, yeah, it's - it's hilarious. It's just what you would expect really. It does not, you know [laughs] it does not stand up, sadly.

Fran Harvey

It doesn't quite hit the John Gordon level. [laughing] You wisely are quite private - you don't actually put much of yourself out there - which we mentioned actually, before we started sort of this the official podcast section of this recording, that you're finding it quite unnerving having to expose yourself as you're trying to promote the book. So I don't know a huge amount about you. I was wondering, do you write any other genres or forms of writing, or are you strictly a folk horror novel writer?

Jacob Kerr

No. I have lots of short story ideas, which I'm - I haven't actually finished a short story yet. So that's, that seems to be a distinct form that I'm still wrestling with. And I have lots of ideas for essays about the horror genre, as well. And I always wish there were more of those. I wish more horror writers or directors would write nonfiction, because I think that's a really interesting form. And anyone who is interested, Joel Lane is a fantastic writer.

Fran Harvey

Oh yes.

Jacob Kerr

And his essays are just really superb. I love those. And I suppose that's what I - I'd like to try and write something, yeah, that just spreads the word, I suppose, about writers that I like. And the Stephen King book *Dance Macabre* - I remember reading that when I was quite young as well. And that meant a lot to me, just this idea of a sort of guidebook to this world. It's a very, sort of American-centric horror guide, but still, I love that.

Fran Harvey

I picked that up - I was quite young as well, I think I was about 18, 19, when I found a copy of that. And I reread it a few times. Like I was travelling at the time, so I didn't have many other options. But it's a very, very readable book, and I think probably pretty formative in getting into horror as like a proper fan. Have you read, um, there's a book called *Writing the Uncanny* that came out last year. I want to say

Dan Coxon edit it, and it's just won an award. But that's like six or seven essays about writing horror and the uncanny. And it's really good. It's worth a read.

Jacob Kerr

Thank you for the recommendation. I haven't read that.

Fran Harvey

So folklore, rural life, history - because the Green Man of Eshwood Hall is set in the 60s - are all really important parts of your debut book. How much research did you have to do for it?

Jacob Kerr

The basic story was, I had a sort of a strong sense of that world, because I grew up hearing stories about that time from me mam and her side of the family. So I felt this kind of, just this sense of ... I don't about ownership, but I felt like I'd been there myself. Because if you've heard those stories when you're growing up, you just take ownership of them in this kind of an embarrassed way. So the research was often kind of after the fact and trying to just check whether my assumptions had been, you know, actually stood up? And could this, would this have been possible? And did the dates actually line up and so on? Yeah, the book is very much - it's set in 1962. And it's in the sort of the last moment before, you could say, the 60s start to swing and start to, uh, well, they don't really swing till 67-68. But 62, it's before the Beatles have arrived, before the Rolling Stones have formed, I suppose. And before any of that's got going at all. So it's very much, it's still in that kind of long post-war period. And I wanted it to have that sense of occurring, you know, before this sort of modern moment could be said to begin,

Fran Harvey

I love the the feeling of ownership of the stories because, reading the book, you really evoke sort of the atmosphere and the place - it absolutely comes to life. Like the fair in particular, you do this fantastic description. So there's a couple of points that really jumped out at me, there's the description going through the fair and certain events at the fair, involving rams, which I'm not going to describe any further for listeners because they have to discover that part for themselves. But like that was really, that was incredibly evocative. But there's also these more - I think this is what I love about it, because you do this beautiful marrying of really brutal circumstances and violence, with essentially poetry. The description of the Green Man's appearance of him folding into shapes is absolutely gorgeous. It's absolutely beautiful. And again, it is, I think it's very easy for people to write a passage like that, but leave it so vague that you're kind of like 'oh, yeah, so there's something kind of going on with leave's,

but you're very specific about it, and you can see the movement, but it doesn't lose any of the beauty, which is amazing. I've lost sense of the question here. I've now just resorted to complimenting you endlessly. I'm sorry. [laughs]

Jacob Kerr

Absolutely fine. Just keep going. [laughs] No, I will say but the fair chapter, so May Day chapter. It weirdly became this... I think it's the longest chapter in the book. And I came to feel that if I could get that right, I'd be okay and I'd manage; I'd be able to write the whole novel if I could write this scene - this long chapter properly. And it does sort of feel this, like a kind of pivotal - and it's not pivotal in any plot sense - but it may be it's pivotal in terms of themes, and maybe pivotal for the reader that, if they get through that, I feel like they'll still stick with the book to the end, you know. If that holds your attention, then I've got you. [laughs]

Fran Harvey

It definitely does feel pivotal. And I think it's - I was trying to figure out why. And I had a question about this, actually, It's the pressure and the tension that's been building up all the way through. And it feels like that's the point where it has hit the sort of, I don't know, like the boiling pot metaphor thing where it's not quite boiling, but it's roiling over and getting ready to just go. And that feels like the point where that happens. And I did wonder how planned - because it feels like the control of the tension through the book to, like, what is then an inevitable ending. That's the part I love about it. It's unexpected, but it's also when you think about it, it's inevitable, the way that it ends. How did you - did you plan for that tension to just roll through like that? Basically, this is a long version of that, like, are you sort of a pantsing writer, like you just kind of go for it and see how it ends up? Or did you plot out the levels of tension and the plot as it goes, and have that all in place to figure out chapter to chapter?

Jacob Kerr

What I do is plot out the story, because when I started trying to write, I found it very difficult to, to have any sense of forward movement and I kind of made myself go back and read the great storytellers, like Robert Louis Stevenson, who just have that incredible sense of propulsion through a narrative, to try to teach myself how to do that. So I found it helpful to plot out the book in a fairly detailed way. And I wrote everything on index cards: every sort of plot point, with any details that were coming to mind, and arranged them. And then the index cards were useful, because then you can rearrange if you want to move scenes around, and I ended up with the whole thing plotted out like that. And from that structure, I worked with it at that level, until I was confident that it was moving and structured in the right way. And

then to actually write the thing, that's when the pantsing comes in. Because I think once you've got it all plotted out, you can afford to just jump into scenes that you can't wait to write, because you've plotted it out. And you you're really excited about writing this bit and that bit. So it was written in this crazy non-order. It was just, you know the scenes that I couldn't wait to write first. And then leaving the kind of more connective bits until later. But then, sometimes the things I was really looking forward to writing were a struggle. And sometimes the connective bits that I'd left turned out to be really fun to write, actually, and became important scenes.

Fran Harvey

So you said you used index cards, so obviously, that's a pen and ink moment. When you came to the actual writing after you'd got the structure and everything planned out, was that a typing thing to get it down as fast as possible? Are you by-hand author?

Jacob Kerr

Yeah, it was typing. It was on a laptop, which is just so convenient. The index cards had to be pen and ink and I keep written notes and things, but for the actual writing, it was all laptop, which I think, you know, I'm just so used to it doesn't feel too cold and impersonal anymore. It's just, you know, your laptop is just, it's just part of you, I think at this point in the game, isn't it? [laughs]

Fran Harvey

It really is. Do you keep a particular sort of writing schedule?

Jacob Kerr

It's just whenever. I wish it was more scheduled because I'd like to have it be a more steady reliable part of each day, really. But unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. And, yeah, there's something about writing: whenever you try to push it in a particular direction, it will sort of push back and go off in another direction. It's definitely more - it's more of a cat than a dog, in my experience, in that regard, you know. It will not be bidden; it won't be told. So I totally thought this story will be written in the winter months and it'll be and it's best read in the winter months when everything's dark and spooky. So I wrote the bulk of it, of course, through the summer, the spring and summer, and that's when it's actually set. I know it's coming out for Halloween, and I think it is probably best read with the long nights, but even at that level, it was often written sitting in the unreliable Northumbrian sunshine, or listening to rock music. [laughter] It's not the self image I had in mind.

Fran Harvey

When you started writing, did you go on any courses? Or do you have like a writing group that you go to, or a reliable reader, a reliable first reader, that you go to, to kind of give you feedback? Or are you more of an isolated writing type?

Jacob Kerr

No, I do have a reader who's also a writer, and I trust her judgement implicitly. And I think that's how I've, that's how I've written for the longest time. And that's how I think I've figured it out. I've never had much experience with writers' groups. It's quite a, it's a lonely job, I think, really. And so I suppose I feel a bit wary of writers' groups, rightly or wrongly, just because I think it's, you know, if you - when you're reading, you're just by yourself. And when you. if you want to write, certainly a novel, you're going to need to deal with your own company. You know, if you're going to make it to the end. So I suppose I think I'm more inclined to just embrace that, you know. You're going to, you're going to end up sort of a bit of a loner, a bit of a weirdo, so just embrace it. [laughs]

Fran Harvey

That takes us to the last question that I have, which is: do you have your best bit of advice for somebody who's either just coming to writing or has been away from it for a while and is trying to get back into it?

Jacob Kerr

Yeah. So I would say, for me, I quite like setting myself reading to do, in order - like reading Robert Louis Stevenson - just as almost as like medicine to try to get those storytelling responses going. And I think in terms of the kinds of fiction that I'm interested in writing, I think, for atmosphere, I would go to Walter de la Mare's, short stories, which are not so short, but they're the most rich, immersive atmosphere you can get really. Or I'm thinking about Shirley Jackson, and reading *The Haunting of Hill House* was really helpful as well. I think that had something to do with the point of view and the character, central character of *Hill House*. I found that really useful. And that book has the best opening of any book, I think. So I found that useful. Like with the *Green Man*, I wrote the short prologue bit. I think that was one of the first things I wrote and certainly once I'd written that, I thought, 'Great, okay, that's the note to be struck. And I'll go away from that, but if I need to circle back towards it, there it is.' You know, that was just a really helpful, 'this is the key we're in'. And *Hill House* has that just at an incredible level, just that opening paragraph. It's amazing. And yeah, for observed detail of character or setting, Elizabeth Bowen is kind of impossible to beat. So I think, reading a lot, but not just being a

reader; reading as a way of looking out for what writers are really good at, and what you can learn from them. And then thinking about, you know, returning to them with that in mind, to just learn those skills. Set yourself homework. That's my tip. [laughs]

Fran Harvey

I realise I've just said that that's the last question, but that has made me want to ask, when you were discovering those writers, did you have - because you had the teacher who is obviously like massively supportive of your first horror story, and had you reading it in class - did you have anyone like that with your writing, as you were sort of growing up or getting into it, who was just pointing the way towards the books and authors to read to like, feed your writing? Or was it just a case of going to the library and figuring it out?

Jacob Kerr

It was a lot more than that. I think after that teacher - and that was Primary School, and I'm very grateful for encountering that teacher who was really supportive of me generally and just encouraging of the stories I would write or whatever, and he was great - I think after that it was a lot more kind of just pursuing reading you know that I'd come across. Yeah, so I think maybe that's where the lonely room comes in, because you just kind of that is where you have these intense vivid experiences of reading work that blows your mind. And you have those experiences alone, for better or worse.

Fran Harvey

Thank you, that was wonderful. I've really enjoyed this. This has been an excellent chat. Thank you so much for making the time and putting up with my coughing as well, I really appreciate that.

Jacob Kerr

[laughs] Well, thank you, Fran. It was lovely. That was really good.

Fran Harvey

Listeners, the Green Man of Eshwood Hall is out now and I really, really, really, really recommend it. So please do check it out. And obviously, please also check out the other episodes of this Writing Life podcast on Spotify and give us a follow, and thank you as always for listening.