

C: Hi Sarah welcome to the podcast. I'm really happy to have you on with me today to discuss your debut novel, *A Sign of Her Own*.

S: Hi Chloe thank you very much for having me today ... it's an honour. A great start to 2024.

C: Sarah can you start by introducing the novel to us and tell us what *A Sign of Her Own* is about

S: Yes, so *A Sign of Her Own* is about a young Deaf woman and the invention of the telephone. It's set in late 19th century Boston and London. The central character is Ellen Lark and she receives a visit from her former teacher Alexander Graham Bell who's been challenged over his right to the telephone patent and asks for her help. So, it's a reckoning for her with her past, the decision she has made, the truth about Bell's work with Deaf people and she must decide whether to help him or whether to speak out and tell her own story.

C: Obviously this is partly based on historical fact and I wondered where your inspiration began because I think it's a story that not a lot of people will have heard about. So, for you was it a discovery of that history that inspired this novel?

S: Yeah, it really was a discovery. I mean I grew up myself deaf. My mother's deaf as well and she has two deaf sisters but it wasn't something that we ever discussed. And as an adult I started learning British Sign Language, I started learning about Deaf history and culture and reading a lot more about it. And it was about 15 years ago now that I came across this story in a book about French and American Deaf history that had a chapter on Bell, that focused not on his work as an inventor but on his work with Deaf people, in particular promoting speech training and oralism over the use of sign language. And yeah, I didn't know about this and it seemed, yeah, not very widely known. And I started reading more about his pupils and it was really in trying to find out information about them, that this story, about Ellen, that this story, about the telephone, began to take shape.

C: And obviously you mentioned Ellen there, she's your, the heart of your story. And I read that you were very keen to put a deaf woman right at the centre of this novel. So how did you create Ellen? Was she based on anyone in real life?

S: Yeah, so she's a fictional character. And I made the decision quite early on that I wanted this to be a perspective on the telephone that really told from a Deaf perspective. She was based on Bell's pupil so... but there's not a lot of information about his pupils in historical records with the exception of his wife, Mabel, who was deaf and was one of his pupils and lots of her letters, they were on the online archive. I think it was really reading his class notebooks though with his pupils, they would be filled with all of his instructions about visible speech which is a particular method he used. And every now and then there would be these little lines of responses from his pupils, just snippets, they really, sort of, riveted me and I sort of wanted to kind of try and imagine what that experience was for them, as one of his pupils, at the time he was inventing the telephone.

C: So that research must have been so interesting. Tell us a little bit more about how you went about the research. Were there things that you had to leave out because you didn't have space for them in the book? How did you decide?

S: Yeah, I mean, there were so many things that got left out. And so many... Yeah it was a constant juggling I think of what to put in and what to take out. And think also because you can go down a real rabbit hole with research and you know you get really into something that's really fascinating and you really want to include them and it can be quite hard to step back I think and decide what the story doesn't need. I think, you know, there was so much research around the telephone but I was trying to do it in tandem with the story so that the research was shaping the story but the story was sort of, you know, telling me when I needed to do more

research as well. So it was that kind of two-way process. For me, I think, it was really thinking about the advent of the telephone and what Ellen Lark, as my main character, might have had access to. So you know, was there... might she have been involved or was there something that happened just that maybe nobody had written down because they didn't think it was an important perspective to tell it from. So, it was really trying to imagine those kind of gaps in the record where Ellen might, sort of, step in.

C: I often hear from people who write historical fiction that it's those gaps in history that excite them the most.

S: Yeah, I think so, I think so. They're very compelling I think for writers and for readers as well, yeah.

C: Definitely. I wanted to ask about the two timelines in the novel because we watch Ellen grow up and go through this almost discovery, or re-discovery, of the world now that she's deaf, but we've also got this timeline, later in life where she's visited by Alexander Graham Bell. Why did you decide to use two timelines, and not just one story, through her life?

S: Yeah I mean I think it's quite a big decision to make, particularly as a... writing your first novel as well because it's a balancing act to get the two timelines to work together. But I think... I was really interested in Bell's period in London. So he worked on the telephone in Boston and then a few years later when the telephone's being invented he comes to London and he has a really bad year. You know, the telephone patent being challenged, being difficult to secure. He's having all sorts of business troubles and at the end of the year he takes himself off to Scotland to set up a school for deaf children because he felt passionate that that's what he wanted to do and he just wants to forget about the telephone. I was interested by the personal journey of Ellen and her own reckoning with Bell and everything she has been told about Deafness and drawing a parallel I guess between her coming to terms with and deciding how to take control of her story as Bell is kind of grappling with his.

C: I think one of the most powerful moments in the book for me was Ellen trying to navigate this new world, a world where she couldn't hear. And she suddenly experiences things that she hadn't before. So, words disappearing on people's lips, because the words don't form properly, I suppose. And her struggling to lip read, and this kind of lack of sound because first of all, she thinks it's the snow, the snow has dampened the sound of the world. Do you hope that readers will come away from this book with a better understanding or more empathetic towards people who are deaf?

S: Yeah, I think I really wanted readers to come away with an appreciation of what it feels like to be deaf, but I guess, but there are so many ways of being deaf and there's lots of different types of Deaf experience and I think Ellen is a particular type. She's post-lingually deaf, having lost her hearing aged 4. But she does encounter other Deaf characters in the novel though, so I hope some of that variety is there. But I think, you know, people so often think of deafness being a lack or an absence and I wanted to show a Deaf character in a life and that kind of richness of experience. And also the kinds of misconceptions that people have about Deafness, some of which has changed since the 19th century, some which hasn't. and you know the kind of burden of carrying those that Ellen as a character has.

C: I think, speaking as someone who's disabled, and you yourself are deaf, there are few books out there, few fiction, there's not a lot of fiction out there that deals with the lives of people who are Deaf or disabled. And I think sometimes it feels like we have to do everything [laughs] in these books because it's rare. and it sometimes feels like a lot of pressure to cover all bases of what it's like to be deaf, what it's like to be disabled. Whereas actually, you can only do so much with one character.

S: Yeah, I think, yeah, I really, really agree. You feel like you need to explain, at the same time that's not really the job of fiction to explain. It's more about, yeah, it's more about inhabiting, but you also have to think

about the story and where that takes you. And so I definitely really felt that in creating Ellen, you know, that kind of demand, what people might expect in a story and how you explain it as well, because, you know, specifically in terms of deafness, it's quite hard to explain what you do understand and what you don't understand. And yet the story needs to move forward. So how do you take readers along with you doing that. I think, you know, there are not many books at all with Deaf and disabled characters in and I think the narrative about disability isn't challenged very much as well. So, so often there is a narrative about, you know, being cured, or a disabled person existing in isolation in the story to serve the purpose of the non-disabled character, and I was really interested in trying to create a narrative that might even be about someone's own journey into taking control of their story.

C: Definitely. Things are improving, I would say, in terms of the publishing industry being... wanting that diversity of voice. But did you feel... were you concerned maybe about this story being accepted by the publishing world or did it not matter to you, just wanted to write this story anyway?

S: So, I was concerned, I did feel that, you know, I'd heard feedback from other writers about, you know, writing disabled characters. And, you know, yeah, I did feel concerned. At the same time I think, it was a story that I just had to write. I really felt encouraged by... later on in writing the book there were a couple of Deaf authors, Raymond Antrobus writing poetry in the UK and Sara Novic writing fiction in the US. I think seeing some of the attention and responses that they received for their work was hugely encouraging for me and really made me feel quite hopeful I think about the book. And there just need to be more stories with Deaf and disabled characters out there.

C: I totally agree. We've talked about, I guess, some of the research challenges of this novel. But what else was difficult about writing this book? What was the hardest part about writing this book?

S: I feel like probably every writer would say this but finding the time. I mean, it was really, it was really hard. And I think no matter... for so many reasons it's hard to find the time. You know other jobs, care, and responsibilities, all sorts of things. But it took me a very long time to write it. And, you know, it still amazes me to think that I've managed to finish it. So that was definitely the biggest challenge. I think, the other challenge, I guess, was trying to get her perspective. I was thinking about the different modes of communication that she had as a Deaf person, how you write them in fiction. So, she uses lip reading, speech, sign language, and trying to think about how you capture and convey them and also writing about sign language in the book as well, because it's a visual/spatial language and so it's very difficult if not impossible to represent in prose and fiction. So, yeah, that was another challenging area. But I think gave me a lot of creative energy while I was writing, thinking about how to solve it.

C: When you talk about time management and fitting it in around your work, were you writing in every scrap of time you had available? Or did you manage to find, you know, a weekend or how did you write?

S: I think, every scrap of time available, and just making sure every day I did something that kept the book in my mind. I think I was so worried about waiting for time to appear, and the sitting down and then being like, I can't even remember what the book's about anymore because it's been so long.

C: [laughs]

S: I think it was, you know just, every day even if it was just reading a paragraph and making some notes on it or something that just meant it was always, sort of in the back of my mind, turning away. And yeah, eventually it came together.

C: And was this your first attempt to write a novel or had you... had you had other gos? I think I speak to some authors who, this has always been a dream and they've always been working at it. And then others who... this is their first time and they wait till they've... you know. They're not writing when they were a child, they're writing when they're much older. But what was it like for you?

S: So, the book took me so long, it took me about 10 years to write it. So, in some ways it feels like what I've been doing. But there was a novel before it that I wrote very quickly, kind of on a whim, as a "Oh, I'd love to write a novel", it was a very joyful sort of writing experience. But I think I knew it was never really going to go anywhere. And then I started thinking, seriously "Okay, what can I write" and came across this story about Alexander Graham Bell, it took me several years actually to kind of get up the courage to write about it. And you know, commit to it.

C: Was your previous attempt a historical novel or something else?

S: It feels like such a long time ago now, it was contemporary, it was contemporary fiction, it was a kind of high concept novel that sort of seemed appealing at the time when I wrote it. I was like "Hmm, I don't know about that".

C: [laughs] So in 2019, you were shortlisted for the Lucy Cavendish prize, which is obviously a really prominent and successful prize and there are lots of people who have won or been shortlisted and gone on to get an agent and then a book deal. So what pushed you to apply for that prize? And how did that success of being shortlisted change your career?

S: So the Lucy Cavendish Prize was a huge deal for me. It was one of the first prizes I entered. And I did it quite last minute. I think I felt that my idea of the book, the finished book, might be a bit unattainable unless I really started to put it out there and make it feel like it was a real thing that I wanted to get out into the world. And just, that act of sending it off, I think, felt important to do for that reason. And yeah, it was an incredible opportunity for me. I got shortlisted and I met my agent through the prize, who was on the panel. And then, you know, we worked together on finishing the book, and it got published. So it was still, you know, took me many years after the prize to get the book finished and to get to this point. But, you know, it was a huge opportunity and I think prizes are incredible platforms for new writers.

C: Yeah absolutely. I always say to people, even if you thought you're not ready, it's worth applying. Because you never know what might happen from it.

S: Yeah.

C: You don't need to win. You just need to put your work out there and hope that someone likes it and will then contact you. Happens a lot. So yeah, I would encourage people to enter... Obviously, the process of being published takes a long time. And there are times where you feel this is the best thing that's ever happened to me. And then there are times where maybe you feel a bit low or things take forever, and you're not sure whether your book's just disappeared. We talk a lot about being a debut and the ups and downs. So I wondered whether you had any advice for next year's cohort? What would you... how would you kind of advise them to cope with all the ups and downs of signing a book deal?

S: Yeah, you're right [laughs]. Ups and downs is, you know, the way to describe it. I think it can be quite turbulent. I think... I think for me... I think I was, you know, I never saw beyond the point of getting a book deal cause, you know, that always seemed like such a huge goal to get to in the first place. And then I think, you know, having got one. I realised just how much I didn't know. And so, you know, connecting with other debut authors has been really helpful, just because it's a very particular experience, I think. [laughs] So I think you will need to go through it with other people going through the same thing. And that's been a big source

of support. And yeah, I think really recognising that there are periods when absolutely nothing seems to happen at all [laughs]. And then periods when lots of things happen and it can be quite hard to adjust, you know, to both and you just have to focus on, you know, what are the things that keep you going on a daily basis and also just getting back to writing. I think because it takes such a long time, that end process of, you know, the final edit, and you know, the book being finished and the publicity. And you realise that it's actually been a very long time since you sat down with a new project, or sat down and just wrote and sort of engaged with that really creative side of things. So, I think finding ways to get back to that, and the joy of that, you know, in small steps and small ways is really helpful as well.

C: Absolutely. I keep hearing from authors saying “start something new, write something else” while you're going through that. I just couldn't so I don't know how well other people do it, but it happens.

S: Yeah, I think writing for the fun, I mean, I think you feel like a pressure to write the next book. But you know, I think that getting back to the... whether it's another book or whether it's just writing. It's getting back to that, I think. That can be a good distraction and helps you remember why you're doing it at all.

C: Yeah, absolutely. So finally, Sarah, can you give us a little hint or a tease of what you might be working on at the moment?

S: I'm not sure I can, to be honest. I am working on something but it feels very early days so I'm still sort of working out the dimensions of it. But I'm really interested in writing more about Deaf experience from different angles so I'm hoping to develop that.

C: Do you think... is it gonna be a contemporary novel or historical or are you not sure yet?

S: More contemporary.

C: Okay, interesting.

S: Sorry to end on an ambiguous note!

C: No, no, no! I think a lot of writers, and I am the same, are almost a little bit superstitious about saying too much because sometimes it can kind of kill the idea and it kills the enthusiasm if you talk about it too much when it's in the early phases so, well it's absolutely fine.

S: Yeah.

C: I'm really looking forward to finding out what it will be in the future. But for the time being, Sarah, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

S: Thank you, thank you.