



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

*(Unedited)*

**Parul - LWS:** [00:00:00] Hello writers and welcome to the London Writers Salon podcast. I'm Parul, I'm your host, and I'm the co-founder of the London Writers Salon. And our salon interviews are a chance for us to go behind the scenes of a writer's journey and really dig into the stories behind the stories. And each week we invite a writer to the salon that we admire, to join us to talk about the craft of writing.

The art of building a writing career and the reality of navigating the creative world. And today we have the honor of speaking with the award-winning author Sarah Hall. Sarah is one of the UK's most talented authors. She's the author of 13 novels and Short story collections. Her work has been published in more than 15 languages, and she's garnered a few awards along the way, including the Betty Trask Award, the Commonwealth Writers a Best First Novel Award, Portico Prize.

She's also served on the judging panels for the Booker Prize, the Northern Writers Award, and the Commonwealth Short Story Award. And this year she's the [00:01:00] chair of the judging panel for the Forward Rise of Poetry. And her latest book is Helm. It has a beautiful cover, and Daisy Johnson says of it, Sarah Hall's writing has conquered.

Body and the soul, and it now conquers the wind itself. So I have some questions for Sarah for this interview. We'll be talking about her journey as a writer, her experience of crafting stories, how she thinks about the creative process, and of course we'll be digging into her latest book. But in around an hour or so I will open it up for any questions that you have.

So do chime in on the chat. If you have any questions at any point, we'll try and circle around to it. Without further ado, welcome to the London Writers Salon on Sarah.

**Sarah:** Thank you very much for having me and thanks everyone for being here. My goodness, all around the world.



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**Parul - LWS:** Yes, indeed. And it's so exciting to be able to dive into what seems to be such a passion, but also skill of yours, this whole writing business, this malarkey. And I'd love to take you [00:02:00] back to just, I'd love to understand you a little bit better by thinking, going back to your earlier years when you look back now.

When you were a child or a teenager, what was your relationship with reading and writing?

**Sarah:** Oh, it was really mixed. It's such a difficult question for me to answer because I, I was brought up in a little cottage in the Lake District and there were lots of books in the cottage. I used to joke that it was more about insulating the walls because it was so cold in there. My mum and my dad were both readers but I came at it very differently.

I think my dad would select the books that he wanted and he would read intermittently. But my mom who. Who I suppose would've been my first experience of somebody reading to me. Although my dad was very good at reading to me when he got home from work as well, would tear through anything.

She just went to the library every week or twice a week. She'd get the bus into town to, to get into town, we would have to walk across Moreland, cross a bridge, pick up the bus, get the bus 10 miles into town and she'd do the shopping. But she would always [00:03:00] go to the library and she would just get anything out, anything that was available.

I, she must have read the whole library. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd read it twice. And so she was always bringing books home, lugging them home, and she would just, she couldn't stop her reading. So there were great examples for me. In some ways they, books were embraced in the household. I am not sure to what extent they'd had access to them when they were growing up. So it was quite important that they were in the house, I think. And I was a good reader at school. I enjoyed it, but it frightened me as well. So while I did the work and was a good school kid and was doing okay with grades and things, IFI found the



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experience of reading quite difficult. Didn't have, didn't seem to have any problems with it. I wasn't stumbling over words or anything like that. I found it really lonely. So every time I would take a book and open it up, I got a kind of shiver, this feeling of I'm going into some kind of oubliette of loneliness and lots of writers talk about companion ability with characters.

I never really found that until I was a teenager. [00:04:00] And then certain characters struck me as meaningful or resonant with me. But until that point, I don't really remember it being a comfortable experience to read.

**Parul - LWS:** What characters do you remember finding a connection with?

**Sarah:** So I think I, previously I've cited. These kind of, not necessarily strong or unusual female characters, but but capable ones. Ann Burden in *Z for Zacharia*, I had to read *Z for Zacharia* at school and she made an impression on me because she was managing on a farm alone in a valley.

And I was brought up in, an agricultural valley and the idea that you could be a young teenage girl and your family's disappeared because there's been a nuclear war. And you're struggling alone, and then you have to contend with a male stranger that turns up. The book was exhilarating and terrifying.

She was clever, she was afraid, but she was also very adept at surviving. came across this character and I thought, she's just marvelous. And then the end of that story where [00:05:00] she decides that she's gonna steal a radiation suit and light out into the wilderness just because she's seen birds circling.

And it's a kind of like a leap of faith and hope. I remember the end of this book thinking my God, how brave, how brilliant how crazy. So it was characters like that really were doing something unusual within a kind of female gender stereotyping.

**Parul - LWS:** I remember that book so much so well as well. The setting as well was so haunting. And we're gonna be talking about some of these things in relation to your book as well, how you think about setting and characters. You



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mentioned earlier about where you are, you're in Cumbria and there's a guardian interview I just, you glanced upon where you describe a friend coming to visit you and he says, when he sees where you kinda grew up, he's oh, wow, you make sense now.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Parul - LWS:** And I'd love to know what he meant by that. How did you take it?

**Sarah:** I thought it was great. I, I I think I probably do have some feral characteristics. [00:06:00] and I think he was referring to my work as well, how could I write what I'd been writing and touch on some of the things that I'd been touching on. I don't know. I suppose I've always felt that sometimes if you bring someone back to their home territory, even if they've been away for a while, they seem to blossom or they relax or something happens.

And I've lived away from Cumbria multiple times, quite long distances away. I lived in America. But whenever I would come back just on a sensual level I felt like my shoulders dropped, would always drop when I got back. I could smell the goth and the grassland on the moor and the river, that kind of silty trouty smell of the river. all of a sudden I just would feel like I was in my native territory somehow, like I was an animal. So I get it. I get why he said that, and I think it's a pretty accurate depiction of me.

**Parul - LWS:** So you went to university and you took a creative writing course at St. University of St. Andrews. I'm curious about, because you've mentioned that in some of the interviews you've done before, I'm curious about what [00:07:00] you felt that taught you, what did you come away with?

**Sarah:** Oh, I don't know. I did take an undergraduate module at Rist with the wonderful Patricia Duner as well, and that was pretty important. It's hard to know exactly what you're learning as a writer because I think while you can study technique at university and you're practicing your own writing, it's not until you come across an editor who really rigorously works with you, I think



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that you might end up having those light bulb moments about and line editing. So for me, just the idea of taking myself seriously as a writer, although, to be honest with you, that was a period where there weren't very many writing courses in Britain and it didn't feel like it was gonna be a gateway to getting published. I did it because I loved it. I didn't have any expectations beyond it. So I wasn't really expecting to become a published writer from it. In some ways that's good because you can just focus on art. I know I will have picked up things there and being around other writers who are very [00:08:00] passionate about what they were doing, the Americans on the course were taking it way more seriously.

They were paying triple the amount of course they were, but also I think they'd just come out of a different system. And there were more courses in America at that time. And so the idea that you could, it was a stage towards your career was I think, natural for them. Whereas it was slightly surprising to me that, they could consider this a way to get published. It sounds very strange. So I took it seriously, but at the same time I was quite relaxed about the whole thing. And I definitely absorbed sort of techniques during that time. We were analyzing a lot of work of other writers, which is helpful. I think reading is obviously a huge. A helpful part of becoming a writer, seeing how it's done, seeing how it's done well. So it was definitely a good stepping stone along the way. And then the ones after that really consolidated what I'd learned.

**Parul - LWS:** Since your first book was a short science fiction novel set in a bar, and you say it was completely [00:09:00] unpublishable and taught me what not to do, what did it teach you not to do?

**Sarah:** I didn't know what a novel was, at St. Andrews I studied poetry In the short story I hadn't ever taken a formal course in writing novels, so it was almost like I was teaching myself how to do it by teaching myself how not to do it. The length is a thing that I produced was, it was nothing.

It was too short. It was a kind of an exercise in sustainability, but not quite far enough. I suppose it was somewhere between a novella and an extended short story. But it was a good exercise. It was one of those exercises in thinking about how you bring all the component parts together on a grand scale.



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And it was the first time I'd attempted anything that long and it was really flawed. It was critiqued a couple of times by man who would go on to become my editor at Favor and Favor.

**Parul - LWS:** This is Lee Brax.

**Sarah:** this is Lee. Yeah, this is Lee. So Lee bought a couple of my poems an anthology of new British poetry called First Pressings [00:10:00] 0 0 1. I think they were supposed to be 0, 0 2, 3 and four, but they never happened. So it's this unique thing. But because I had him as a contact at the publishing house I sent work to him and he was generous in his critiquing. And he just said a very hard lesson, said this is not publishable.

I don't think this is right. It's not salvageable. Let's just put it aside and think about something else. And it was the right thing to say. It was a hard lesson. I remember I was sitting in his office in London at the time and he peered at me and said, are you gonna cry? I was like, no. How dare, I'm from the north.

I'm not gonna cry. And inside, of course, I'm like, ouch. But it was the right thing to say. 'cause then I went on to write horse water, which was a second attempt at a novel and had enough about it that it meant that we could create something out of it.

**Parul - LWS:** It went on to win the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for best first novels. It made a bit of a splash. I'm curious about, 'cause you just said now that the first one [00:11:00] you weren't able to bring together the idea on a grand scale. So if we then look at Halls Water, maybe first tell us a little bit about it and then maybe we explore some of how you constructed it.

**Sarah:** Yeah, one of the interesting things about horse water is it was structurally wrong. When I first wrote it, I was really not very confident about writing historical fiction. I'm not a historian and the book is set, in the 1920s and thirties. And in a way I was brought up in a late district of the seventies and eighties, which is not dissimilar to, the fifties, maybe in the forties 'cause modernity is quite slow.





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It was quite slow. It's now rapid in the late district. But back then it was quite slow. And there were characters around who lived through that era, and I felt quite comfortable with the traditions and the sort of, I really wasn't comfortable thinking, oh, I'm writing historical fiction, so I built a modern framework around it, which involved I can't even remember clearly now. It was a kind of mother who was dying of lung cancer. [00:12:00] Terrible irony that my mother would go on 20 years later to die of lung cancer. but there was probably some anxiety about her being a smoker at that point. But I created a modern contemporary frame around it. Like apparatus to justify the writing of this story and it didn't work. And one of the first things that Lee Braxton said to me was, just get rid of it. Strip it out. You don't need it. You just have to, you have to trust that you're telling the story, in the era when the horse water dam was built. And let's stick with that. And again, it was a great decision. Just focus the story in. And that was a lesson in making. time period I'm writing about or place, I'm writing about experiential and vivid and live for the reader. Because if you're funneling in and really trying to create the best story you can in an era, in, in a place, and thinking about it as the sole focus rather than all the justifications we might feel we need for the [00:13:00] telling of a story.

And I think lots of us have felt like, why do I get to tell this story? What is it that, that I'm bringing to this story? You take all that away and focus on creating a virtual world. That's a great lesson, that's a great lesson that transfers into every piece of fiction that I've ever written.

Do that you're in this place, in this time and these characters are natural and real? Are you immersed? Are you feeling it? Are you there as a reader? And that's exactly what that editing program taught me.

**Parul - LWS:** Really interesting. And just to be clear, when you talk about some of the sort of justifications that you had inserted before, is that like the backstory? You mean that you were trying to explain why the characters were there rather than going straight in? Is that what you.

**Sarah:** some ways I think, or just we reach for what's comfortable maybe in the early stages of writing. So it was a crutch to be able to write a contemporary



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story about a woman and her daughter or a woman and a person somehow related later to, I can't even remember what the construct was.

Now it's become [00:14:00] so vague, think it was me just reaching for a place of safety literally in a time of safety in the writing. And I maybe felt I can't even remember, maybe in that era there might have been books around that were doing that, that had a contemporary frame reaching back into the past for some reason.

I think there probably were a few around in that era, and it seemed like a way to construct a novel because one of the main things. That a writer goes into kind of panic about is just how do I make this macro, magnificent thing? It's so big. How will it, how will the structure work?

How will it hold together? And I think probably that was on my mind too. I'm writing something longer than I've ever written before, and it's not super long novel, it's average lengths novel. But just in my own mind, and again, we're always looking for these ways of solving problems and anxieties that we have as writers.

I think an extra scaffolding around it gave me a sense of, I've, I'm making something and it's gonna [00:15:00] stand up and it's not gonna fall down. But I was wrong. I was wrong. I just wasn't concentrating on the proper build.

**Parul - LWS:** Okay, so you decided to concentrate on the proper build and take away all the fic artificial sort of scaffolding as Lee suggested. What did that look like then? So you are, you're back at the desk trying to come into the story and this is quite a while ago, so I'm not sure how much you remember it, but I'm just curious about how you then entered the story.

Are you just going into a scene straight away? The one that you connect with the most? Is that where you start?

**Sarah:** As I remember it, and I don't, I'm very bad at remembering my process. I don't keep a diary, I don't keep notes on how I've worked. So all the versions





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tend to fade away once they're done. But as I remember it I just was trying to find the right jigsaw pieces that fit together. So I think the past tense and the present tense are both they're both at work in the novel as it's pub at the publishable version of it. and again, that was doing something, it was enlivening [00:16:00] some scenes and bringing, bringing drama into them in the present tense somewhere in the past tense. But it was just. As I remember it, I wasn't necessarily writing it in chronological order. I just reached for scenes That felt right that time. In the process of writing it, and again, that might have been because I don't plan overly when I'm writing. That might have been me solving a structural problem. Okay. I can see, month down the line in this story that this has happened, or I need to pause and think about how this character is gonna develop more or how, the main character of Janet and her mother, how that's gonna begin to work. I'm gonna bring in my waterworks representative now, the love interest. And so you can switch between different perspectives in order to something that felt right. But a lot of it was intuitive. I have to say. I work quite intuitively that way. Yeah, it's, it can lead to a little more editing after, if you haven't, if you haven't driven a clear path through it to begin [00:17:00] with. But it just seems to work for me these days. It's a different, but that, back then it, I felt like it was a big project in intuition.

**Parul - LWS:** Interesting. So like you, you talked about going for writing the scenes that you were drawn to and then maybe. Moving them around later. At what point are you involving other people, whether it's Lee or another beta reader, to look at the draft?

**Sarah:** I didn't until I had a finished draft of it and then it went to Lee. Never really worked with a writing group and I don't know, I always feel like as a writer, I've always wanted to make an attempt at a full artistic vision of something before it goes to a reader so that they can have the experience and understand what the totality of the vision has been, and whether that's working or not. Not that it doesn't change, things can change but so I'm I'm quite, dogmatic. I have a lot of discipline. I will sit down and finish something, so that's quite helpful. It I've always [00:18:00] felt that the propulsion there and that problems can be solved as I'm writing them. So I always try and complete something. Occasionally I might pass on a section of a, of something I'm writing just to test the narrative voice and see if that's working with someone.



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But on the whole, I'll tend to finish a manuscript and then it will go off to editor. I have now trusted readers that I'll also send it to, but it's not usually a partial.

**Parul - LWS:** And how many drafts do you typically do, or at least if either this book or subsequent novels? How many drafts have you done on average before it's ready?

**Sarah:** Varies novel to novel. Some of them have been quite clean. I've gone back to handwriting the first draft. So that happened around *Burnt Coat*, which was the novel before *Helm* in *Lockdown*. I just picked up an exercise book and started handwriting again. Whereas I had a whole period of just going straight to the laptop and typing. And so [00:19:00] that's a different process because you're then transferring handwritten notes to text, and that's quite a large edit when you do that. So there's probably now a much earlier, harder edit that gets done early on, moving from hand write, handwritten, story to text. *Horse water*. There were quite a few drafts, and *Fare* and *Faber* built in quite a long time for it to be edited.

I was a new writer. I was very young. I was, I think I was 26 when that book sold. And so they built in quite a long time, quite a long editing period before it was published, which was the right thing. So there were lots of drafts some novels, haven't needed lots of drafts. *The wolf border* was pretty clean, but at that point, that's my what, fifth novel. I'd had a lot of practice by then. *Helm* was difficult I've been trying to write it for so long and I've made false starts with it and then tried to recalibrate things. So there was a lot of editing to do on that, not least because of all the [00:20:00] narratives that are in it. So each novel has been different. *Kaha* and *Army* was quite clean. They had a lot of propulsion writing that story. It was almost like being on a roller coaster, writing *Kaha* and *Army*. Yeah.

**Parul - LWS:** And writing by hand what are you finding it's doing for you? How does it shift the way you think and write?

**Sarah:** It's such an interesting question, and I suppose laterally, I've wanted to feel free again, in writing, you get to a point where you are known for certain



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things and I'm, again, I'm not a writer that's terribly self-aware when I'm writing, so I don't feel like I'm writing against myself. after 25 years, and dealing with a lot of dark subject matter and political subject matter and serious subject matter, which I have and have tried to, and have tried to put in my best effort and really tackle things intellectually and sensually and creatively [00:21:00] after burnt coat, I just felt like I wanted to be free and I wanted to be playful, and I wanted to find that childish. Joy in writing again, horse water in the electorate. Michelangelo, my second book electorate. Michelangelo especially, I was so full of joy, I'd had a novel published, it was unexpected. No, great splash. I was living in America at the time. It was published in Britain, so I was divorced from the scene. But the mere fact that somebody had a work, it's oh my goodness, this is a chance, this is a gift. And so electric, Michelangelo, I was absolutely full of joy. And I think it shows in the book it's vibrant. The language is lyrical. It's even rhyming in places, there are rhyming sentences. It was just a kind of buoyant in some ways. And I've wanted to go back to that. So I think handwriting feels almost childlike. It's taking me back to feeling like I'm just penning a poem from, from my teenage years on my twenties. There's no great [00:22:00] significance to it. Your mind is telling you it's just handwritten.

I'm not typing it, it's not an official document. It's freedom. It's a journal. It's you can hide it in a drawer. It's, it doesn't really exist. It's just, it's illicit. And I've really enjoyed that. I've really enjoyed that feeling. But I also think there's a kind of fluency and a messiness to the work that will then be corrected.

Although the messiness will be corrected. Hopefully the fluidity and the fluency will stay moving it over to, to typewritten text. So I think it's the best of both worlds. I think you've got that kind of freedom again and joyfulness and in consequence and, levity, also. It enables me to do a really thorough first hard edit, which puts you in a much better position later on, I think.

So for anyone who's felt like they're getting stuck because they can't quite manage to get the edit correct I recommend it. I really do. I think going back to handwriting and then transferring it and making it something [00:23:00] more formal after that is brilliant. It's difficult.



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You have to get your head around all kinds of things and notes and, look at your handwriting and think, why did I write that then, horizontally and diagonally and then I made, and that's difficult and you're studying your own notes and there's a star there with a little thing, but what was I doing? But the focus. And again, I'm a bit, I'm rambling now, but I think having written so many short stories where you are editing, your editing brain becomes frontal, you are trying to first draft something way more perfect for a short story, way more taught, way more considered. There is something about that back to novels, and that's where it, that's where it happens to me from the handwriting to the text.

That's where the, that frontal editing comes in and it comes in earlier than it would if I was just typing.

**Parul - LWS:** Love the you are ground grounding yourself back to the joy and the playfulness, because I think it's so easy. To get lost in the process and feel disheartened or

**Sarah:** [00:24:00] Yeah.

**Parul - LWS:** a sort of a new set stage, a new setting for ourselves as we write.

**Sarah:** That's right. And often when I'm teaching I'll try and bring along surprising pieces of fiction for people that are just a little bit bonkers, a little bit surprising in ways you don't expect naive. Like just to show the idea that again, we can be magical, we can be free, we can be silly, we can be all these things.

You don't have to be tol, you might be, you might go on to be, but actually to begin with. Good grief. It's brilliant. What a great thing to do. Craft creativity. It's wonderful. I love Richard Brogan for that reason. I often take sombrero fallout into a lesson and, the story begins.

This sombrero falls out of the sky. What, of course

**Parul - LWS:** Yeah.



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**Sarah:** do that. You can do anything you want. I.

**Parul - LWS:** Are there any other stories that you return to, that you bring into your classes?

**Sarah:** It depends on the class, but that's a good one, I think. And the chapters are quite small, so again, you're showing people how you can block [00:25:00] in. I love bringing short stories in. They're so satisfying if they're done well. So I've often used John McGregor short stories, partly because they're quite innovative, structurally sometimes. But again they're offering so much in a short space of time. And I think if writers and writers who are beginning out can get their head around the idea of a form, and the content working within it, and that relationship much harder to do with a novel, isn't it? 'cause you can't see it early on. What's the relationship between content and form? Sometimes you don't solve your chapter breaks until a long way down the line. But when you take a short story in, as an example it's great for writers and readers to be able to see that relationship between. Its shape, its form, and the content.

So it's nice way of making a microcosm in terms of, how we think about fiction

**Parul - LWS:** It's really interesting to me the way you talk about short stories, the way you talk about that taughtness, about using the frontal lobe, about being a lot more intentional and more, almost disciplined with it. And [00:26:00] so as well as publishing. And you've talked about the several novels that you've published, the lecture of Michelangelo, a Holland Army out of paint, a Dead Man.

You've written short stories and you have two short story collections, Madam Zero and the Beautiful Indifference.

**Sarah:** three Southern Traveler

**Parul - LWS:** three, sorry. Three.

**Sarah:** fine.



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**Parul - LWS:** And you said, actually I'm so fascinated by some of the things you've said generally around short stories. You talk about I heard you say the world on a pin or some kind of metaphor like that.

And it really struck me about how much depth was needed in a short story. I wonder if you can, and you, sorry. You also talked about, you said that you have this phrase where you say good short stories, ask for a philosophical understanding of literature. And how the short story reverberates out and around any of these themes.

I wonder if you could talk about why we need to worry about bringing the whole world into a short story.

**Sarah:** Oh, it's difficult, isn't it? I suppose when you think about a short story, often I think of an episode or sometimes even a view, so [00:27:00] short stories, because there's a compression and there's a choice of length. You're restricted really to a smaller amount of words. you are having to compress or at least choose a section of a story the world operates.

The world of that story operates beyond it. So if you imagine looking through the keyhole into a room, something's happening in that room. It might be disquieting, it might be weird, it might be, titillating, scandalous, whatever it is. And a short story is often that section, the kind of the small section around some disquiet, but obviously there's a bigger world around that's led to it.

So with the short story, because you are remaining in the active drama usually within a small space, you're still having to refer to what's gone on outside it. I often call it the hinterland when I'm teaching. So you've got your kind of active center of the story which should be referring to things you know, that have happened around it.

And then you get those beautiful layers and the sense of compression so that whatever's happening might be disquieting and confusing, but it also makes [00:28:00] sense in a in the greater scheme of things. And it's a real, it's a real art form, it's a real skill to be able to a satisfying, smaller fiction. With a sense





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that it has greater meaning. And the best short story writers can do it. They've created a world that makes logical sense, even if it's science fiction. Is why I think science fiction and fantasy works so well and ghost stories, they work so well in the short form. 'cause again, if you can convince the reader that they're in an immersive world just for short time, weird stuff's happening and then you're out, you're gone. They believe whatever, they believe whatever else is around it because they've had that brief experience. And they don't have too long to question, the ghosts really exist. What is this planet that we're on? Is the full like technological breakdown of this new, exciting, world computer, world ai, whatever it is. So the trick is really do you create that brilliant small virtual [00:29:00] world that whereby you. You don't have to go and convince everyone of the greater world around it. They just take it. They take it that it exists and it's hard. It's very hard.

**Parul - LWS:** Let's take one of your short stories as an example. The Grotesque won and maybe this, or we could take another one, but the Grotesque won the BBC short Story award and I was curious whether you remember or able to just dissect it for us a little bit as an outsider now. 'cause you've, wrote it a little while back because you remember.

Maybe tell us a little bit about that. There's the sort of story arc and then where the seed came from for that story.

**Sarah:** That one. I suppose with that story, I was interested in the reality of worlds. Whether because it, the character, the main character in that story, not really quite sure what's happening to her in the end, there's a possibility that. As she sat by the river, thinking about her family and the strange thing that has just happened to [00:30:00] her and her discomfort when faced with the very gritty real world she might actually do something.

You're not quite sure that she is still alive towards the end of the story.

**Parul - LWS:** So it starts with her sort of on her way home.



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**Sarah:** yeah, that's right. She's picked up some jam for her mom. She's going home. She's slightly infantilized character, still living at home. Very strong family. And she's seen a homeless man on the street and has wanted to intervene and help, but has felt a kind of, dissonance around the subject to kind of repulsion, but also this desire to help. And he, he's somebody some of the horrible university kids have piled fruit on his face and made a kind of an actual, like artistic grotesque of his face. This, she finds this horrifying. Yeah, but I think the kind of sense of everything being masked and grotesque and strange, and you exist in one world, you might not exist in another, or you might, that was the sort of central premise for the story.

And so I wanted that kind of [00:31:00] sliding feeling towards the end where she gets home. She immersed in her family where she doesn't really feel comfortable or feel like she fits or feel like she has agency. And I suppose it's what happens when you peel back all the masks of family and the way you live. So for that story, it was about that feeling of, often with short stories, you're thinking about you pulling the rug out from underneath the reader at some point, like they're not expecting something, maybe expecting it and then it happens. But for her character, I think I wanted that sense of. Is she really still here? Is she really still in the world? Does she exist? Does she have agency? Ha, is she in the river? Is she alive? It's all very vague. Very vague. But I wanted to play with that dissonance,

**Parul - LWS:** Yes.

**Sarah:** across her experience.

**Parul - LWS:** And so in that story, she goes home and she's, it's her birthday and. She's supposed she's hungry, but she won't tell the family that she's actually hungry. And [00:32:00] then you hear that someone's drowned

I think, or the river.

We assume it's the homeless sky. And then you pull the rug under.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

But I'm curious about some of the way that you've built what's interesting about how you built the world? Is there so much depth while she's even just trying to get a scone? There's a layer of like you say, agencies there's a layer of her own agency, her fam, family dynamics where she fits in the world.

And I guess my question is around, I'm curious about how you constructed this. Is this something in your, that just came to you in your first draft or is it when you're editing it, you are thinking, I need to tighten this, make it more tense. I need to add an extra section here. I need to hone that line.

**Sarah:** No, that one came out like Mrs. Fox, that one came out really easily. And the story just happened. And again, I do trust my intuition often because I think as a writer you are, you have to trust that you're preoccupied with something, that there's some theme or there's some [00:33:00] example, psychological example of something that you are interested in.

And you can construct a drama, which is almost like a case study for it. So I actually have a short story called Case Study too, is a found document, of psychologists found document. And it breaks down a kind of, a psychological story that way. And that's how I work. I think I often have a sense that I want to tell a story that there is some drama, there are some characters, and I know that I'm working over something, but I'm not very aware of what it is.

And I actually worry about being, becoming too aware of what it is that I'm trying to work over, because then I worry that I'll just start signposting and forcing a theme or being too on the nose. So I feel like the more I can just create an activated drama I use this phrase a lot. I activated drama, an activated world, that you believe you are in that feels experiential. all the rest, all the preoccupations that I have, all the interest in, psychology, ev whatever, it's, [00:34:00] that's bugging me. Is going to be in that story, it's going to be at work in that story. hopefully when the reader comes to that story, they'll be like, oh yeah, okay. That's a story about Infantilization, that's a story about possibly family abuse.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

That's a story about this. And it's playing out as an example of that. So I suppose that's what I'm doing. I'm trying to create examples. When I'm interested in a particular subject, I'm creating an example of it. And the more I turn to think about what I'm actually doing, that's when I worry that, and I have done that in the past, how to paint a dead man.

I did do that. I built bridges between the narratives. There was one version of that novel where I tried to force bridges between the four stories. And it didn't work. It just looked constructed. You lost the sense of being able to join this story, join this character, be in their world. So after that lesson from House Paint a Dead man, I took it all out and put it back [00:35:00] to the way it was after that lesson. I'm, I just try and be confident in the fact that I'm, my job is to be a fantasist. It's to believe myself in the thing that I'm making for the reader. will find in it whatever they find in it. If I've done my job well as a writer, then it's been loaded with inquiry preoccupation, possibly opinion, a sort of political premise. Maybe a question. Kaha Army. The question is, what would you, what would it take for you to turn against your government? We, or we can all condemn terrorism.

We can all say, no, this is awful. What would it take for you in your comfortable life to pick up a gun and defend something or attack without defending? So there was that question at heart. Kahan was written after nine 11. I was living in America when that happened. That was my question. would it take? Let's think about what this, what it takes to do that. [00:36:00] and so if you start with that question and you just build a world and a scenario around it, then the reader can come to it, experience it and think, would I do that's awful. Maybe I wouldn't do that.

I would've acted differently. Or Yeah, I can see that if that was happening to women in my country, I would do that. I would do that.

**Parul - LWS:** I love all this, and it's, this is, I can see how this is your process. It works for you, someone like me. So I'm asking you as a student, I know you're, you teach at the, at a university creative writing course. So I'm writing a short story and I have a plot. I like the plot. It's around a woman whose life is unraveling as she's on her way home.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

But reading your stories, I'm like, oh, I don't even have a, I don't have the depth that, that you bring to it. Would your advice to someone like me who feels like they have a thin mattress of a story versus the whole. Layers and textures. Would your advice be to just start from scratch or would, are there any other prompts that you might offer me [00:37:00] to rethink this

**Sarah:** yeah, it's, it is a good question, and I felt that way too. I felt like sometimes I have. One layer and I want the other layers. What, what can be done about that? And the story doesn't always come out fully formed. It feels great when it does, but actually the reality is on the whole things do need work. There are. psychological depth, I think can be referred to quite dexterously and subtly. For me it would be they have lots of questions immediately. Why is her life falling apart? She's walking home. Is she gonna get to her home? Where is she walking from? What's, is she actually gonna go home? Is she not gonna go home? What has led her to this moment in her life? And why is this moment in her life important and a crux moment? If it's not a crux moment, maybe that's significant too. From childhood right back. From childhood. What is it that's brought her here?

What are the possibilities for her in 20 years time, you can telescope in and telescope out, and in that way add complexity to characters because, we all [00:38:00] have like experiences and they play out through your whole adult life. So already with your character, I'm thinking, how has she got to this point, of unravel. Are the things in the world? What are the things in her? How does that all come together? What's on the walk? And actually you don't need to do a lot because if you convince me that I'm walking with her that's the main thing for me. If I'm walking down the street with her and I can feel the, I can feel a pavement under her feet and I can smell what she's smelling, and the filter of the filter of her mind is giving me a way of thinking about the landscape around her. And the landscape is being filtered by how she feels and what's happening with her. And realities. That's all you need to do. I just need to be with her in that moment. And I imagine that there's way more going on in that story than you've probably given yourself credit for already.

**Parul - LWS:** That's really helpful. I love that. I love the telescoping in, telescoping out and actually just staying with her, staying in her mind, allowing



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

*(Unedited)*

her to filter through. That's brilliant. Thank you so much. I would love to now [00:39:00] turn to your latest book, *Helm*. First tell us about *Helm*. What is *Helm*?

**Sarah:** *Helm* is the only named wind in Britain, so the *helm* wind happens in the north. Pennines very close to where I was brought up. It was always strange to me that there is only one named wind in Britain, because in Britain we tend to like to name everything if it's natural, but again, like I knew about it as a child and maybe didn't think too much about it.

And then as you grow up you're like, this is a really special thing. This is a phenomenon. And it is, it's a pretty extraordinary phenomenon. So it's a hurricane strength wind that forms it doesn't form it, it has a lot of different component parts, so it takes quite a lot meteorologically for it to form. happens is on the top of cross Fail, which is the highest pennine in the Pennine Mountain range, you get a huge big base cloud. The wind is coming from time side, Newcastle over towards the west. The shape of the mountain allows this wind to [00:40:00] force itself down. You need cold and hot layers, and this wind forces itself down into the Eden Valley.

Come on, there is a valley named Eden, like it's just gold for a writer into the valley. Bounces back up, forms a rotor cloud. So you get these two extraordinary clouds and a hurricane strength wind. There's a lot of folklore around it. It's beautiful. The cloud formations are beautiful and terrifying.

The wind can do a lot of damage, it was like a presence for me growing up. I was brought up very rurally, very in a very remote place and people often ask me Why there's so many animals in your books? And I'm like it's because I saw more animals than humans on an average day. Was the demographic.

It was animals and it was the river and a mountain and a wind. So they are presences, they're not human presences, but they're, it seems. Natural and normal for me to wanna write about these things.





## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

*(Unedited)*

**Parul - LWS:** I love that in your acknowledgements, you thank your parents for having this stone cottage where you would watch the storms.

**Sarah:** there was a little hill next to it that if [00:41:00] you walked up to the top of it, you had a, you had an open view of cross fell and you could see the whole thing going on. It's like a theater show. And the kids from the villages in that valley, sometimes they were late for school because the wind was so bad.

And I don't know, it just seemed so, I knew I wanted to write about it because it's a brilliant phenomenon, it's unique in the British Isles. But then of course, I tried to write about it over the years, but wasn't quite sure how to do it.

**Parul - LWS:** This is 20 years you've been wanting to write.

**Sarah:** So another thing that I've tended to do is I've outlined stories that I want to write and sold them to Faber. And then I haven't written that book. I've written a different book to fulfill a contract, and they're always happy so long as they get a decent book. But the book about the Helm wind was contracted really like about 20 years ago. It's, and I just wasn't able to write it and a couple of times I think I've re I've tried to write it again.

It's always been there, I've always been taking notes about it.

**Parul - LWS:** What was the tipping point?

**Sarah:** ah, Climate Catastrophe. I think it was [00:42:00] really just earth systems breakdown, suddenly thinking. 'cause I was always thinking about the historical stories to do with the wind, over the millennia. What's our human understanding of weather? Very different in the Victorian period to the, the kind of the dark ages when you know that people believed in aerial demons. different to the Neolithic age when it was literally survival, in its most raw sense. So I knew that I wanted to span millennia with this story, but I was looking backwards, trying to pull out the most interesting historical stories as a way to try and understand our developing interest in weather and how that's changed significantly or has it over hundreds and hundreds of years. And then all of a



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

sudden, it's ridiculous, isn't it? Because I wrote the Kaha Army, which is about climate change. The Wolf Board is about rewilding. I, I've always written environmental fiction and I've always been thinking politically about, industrial [00:43:00] impact systems changes. And it seemed like the obvious thing. And it took me a while to go hang on a minute, if I'm writing about the helm wind. I'm writing a kind of biography of the helm wind. Am I not writing a eulogy for the helm wind? Because it's not gonna be around if we muck around too much with the weather systems, we are muck around with the weather systems.

The impact of, us on the weather might mean that it stops happening for a number of different reasons. My premise in the novel is microplastics and clouds. So I have one character that's studying that. It probably wouldn't be that altered the helm wind. It might be something different.

The kind of global temperature rises because you need an, you need a temperature and you need inversions for the helm wind to happen. So the kind of cold hot air, but actually the destabilization of our weather systems just mean that we might lose it as a phenomenon. And then it changed everything because there was an end point.

It was a kind of [00:44:00] the idea that this. Wind that's so old. It's as old as the kind of stabilization of the climate in Britain. That's how old it is. Might have an end date because of us. This anthro, the Anthropocene. Basically we might stop this incredible, phenomenal phenomenon from happening. And there I had kind of shape for the book.

**Parul - LWS:** What's interesting is the way you've made it into such a playful character, Thomas.

**Sarah:** that was the other thing. I think the idea, and we're hearing this more and more on, we're just reminding ourselves that the human story is not separate from nature's story. So nature narrating itself, it's not new. It's not a new concept by any stretch, but it's a really important one I think. Whether we're thinking about river rights, as Robert writing about whatever it is. Just thinking about. Precedents nature, having precedents and kind of priority [00:45:00] and rights



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

and meaning and respect and value. so it seems quite clear to me that there should be some form of narrative voice for helm, but not just one, because it's a wind and it's variable. And it's been so many different things across thousands of years.

It's been an aerial demon, it's been a kind of sky monster. It's been a, it's been all kinds of different things. It's now data sets. As we study how things happen there are pictures that represent helm. There are equations that represent helm. And these stories are being told about Helm, but Helm's voice is just very varied.

In some ways it's playful, like antic, aren't humans fun? Look at what they're doing, they're ridiculous. Look at all the stuff they're building and look, they're having sex. That's great. Woo-hoo.

**Parul - LWS:** Yeah, that was hilarious. I'd love to hear Helm's voice. Would you give us a bit of a reading?

**Sarah:** yeah, so it's it's a sort of third person. Helm is not Helm, helm talking about Helm self in the third person. So it's a kind of, it's a voice that [00:46:00] sort of is Helm but isn't Helm. Anyway, I'll, shall I just read the

**Parul - LWS:** Yes, please.

**Sarah:** I'll read the opening stretch and it was, it's so much fun to have written this, even though, I'm thinking about some catastrophic weather changes. I'm gonna hold the book up because I love this cover.

**Parul - LWS:** Beautiful cover.

**Sarah:** Yeah, I think they did a great job. Okay. Helm doesn't know when Helm was born. Brooded, conjured or conceived, formed above the highest mountain, first blown into the valley long before humankind. That brief, busy interlude. Time happens all at once.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

For helm, more or less relative to longevity, blink of the eye. Universally warning, helm loves cliches. Typical for English, weather, something of a disorder, some would say of what fantastical, phenomenal, and calculable things. Helm is made [00:47:00] and data and law, atmospheric principles and folktales, spirit and substance, opposites and inversions. So many identities and personalities. It makes Helm's HeadSpin. In the beginning there was no helm boring for the world. Obviously there were eons before helm arrived. The necessary arrangements had to be made on the planet and in the sky. would take ages for helm to be recognized, let alone named during which helm suffered loneliness, inconsequence and ignorance, an original and very terrible fugue state, or helm didn't care. Helm was just on standby. But in the beginning, nothing else had a name, either or a pronoun or a preference. There was no godly language. There were, there was no creative designer or clerical administrator, no titler of the things. It was all serious planetary business, [00:48:00] collision, making earth and its moon, sun shrinking and getting hotter.

Everything bilious, oxygen less, not great for living. Earth was hot and cold, et cetera, for millennia, fevers and chills, blah blah. Huge continental arguments occurred with fire and grinding, geological upheaval, smashing subsidence seas, and lost seas. It was very dynamic. In amongst this, a little island was produced with a forced up folded together, eroded down spine, a ridge of cross bedded, water laid glacier carved stones. The pen nine mountains were formed across which forests and grassland, aox and wolves, Neanderthals, Normans, glamps, and Ramblers could come and go. Note the biggest fell its gradient and shape Geological Corvette. To be accurate is most important in this scenario, or fossils are the devil's trick. Some benign deity sneezed to make the [00:49:00] world or artisanal aliens left their Play-Doh behind. balancing act, elephants, turtles, or any other creation theory, hollow earth, flat earth mud collection, hanging cord, corpse reuse, dream time biosphere as gemstone in the ring of a galactic giant. Please insert alternative here. Helm doesn't care which story is true, so long as there is hell.

**Parul - LWS:** Love the voice. I love the playfulness that comes through,

**Sarah:** Ah. you.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

**Parul - LWS:** and you'll see the, some love for you in the chat as well. What surprised you about writing Helm after holding it in for so long?

**Sarah:** Oh just the freedom again of. So many ways of telling stories, and I'd find I'd found that the stumbling block really in the beginning, this idea that, oh my God, there are so many [00:50:00] historical stories around this wind. There's so much folklore, there are so many propositions about it.

Some of the stories that I end up telling in the novel were literally only speculative ideas about how to figure out the wind. So there's one long story about a Victorian steam engineer who has an idea that he's gonna build a machine on the mountain will somehow understand the vector of the wind by steaming it, mad kind of Victorian steam mania. And that was just speculative. I came across, it was one line in a text somewhere that somebody had this idea. And I was like, okay, thank you. Because that idea can become a whole, 20,000 words of narrative. And. I suppose it was just the permission Helm being this kind of puckish narrator giving permission to all for all these stories to happen.

Because Helm is slightly narcissistic as well. Sometimes in the notes helm just loves attention. So whenever anybody's trying to figure out Helm or, or just worship helm or even try and [00:51:00] exercise Helm because they believe Helm's a demon, it's great. 'cause all attention is good attention, right? And it was almost like giving permission for this multitude of stories to take place across, 2000 years. and it was really freeing. Again, it was really joyful. It was fun. It allowed me to innovate, I was thinking, oh my goodness. Is quite boring if you're around for that length of time. But humans are entertaining. What's interesting about humans, they make things. They make things that helm can blow around but can't actually do anything with. So in the novel, helm is obsessed with trinkets. Helm calls them trinkets, and trinkets might be anything, a gun a cup, clothing. And so the things that humans make and lose and break and drop Helm gets fascinated by and decides to create this museum on the Pennines.

So it's an dropped iPhones, and it just allowed me to pick, pick a few items that humans have made that say a lot about us put them into the Museum of Helm,



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

make a little [00:52:00] curatorial thing for them. again, it's just I dunno if that's a novel. I dunno if it's a short story.

It's just a section of prose. It's fun. It's like an extract from a label in a museum that you would see. And it was just great. Just great to be able to do all those things.

**Parul - LWS:** And that was gonna be my next question. It's just how did you construct the whole story, but it sounds like you were having fun with a section

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Parul - LWS:** And then what were you just moving to the next scene that you saw?

**Sarah:** Yeah, I was having fun with the sections until I had to put it all together, then I was having the worst nightmare imaginable. So there are major narratives and there are minor narratives, and there are bits and bobs as I've been calling them, and I knew they were all gonna work together, but there are multiple ways that they can work together.

So the narratives weave like with how to paint a dead man, the narratives weave together and hopefully they're talking to each other across time. And they were all written, they were written in one go. So the four main stories I [00:53:00] wrote and completed each one in turn. So I was in that world, stayed in that world. And, but there were obvious breaks in it where I knew it was gonna a deck of cards, it was gonna be flicked in with everything else but the putting it together, God. If I thought how to paint a dead man was bad with four narratives that I was trying to weave. This is, this was just impossible.

So I had it laid out on the table. I tried a few different versions. In the end I went back to an early version like with House Painted Dead Man, that kind of intuitive sense of this should happen next, and this goes with this. And yes, these stories are like a thousand years apart, but there's something quite similar going on here and sometimes it's the men who are in charge of industry are





## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

trying to oppress or capture or qualify and quantify helm and the women and maybe a bit more synergistic with Helms.

So they're working with helm, respecting helm in a seance trying to get helm to arrive in spirit form [00:54:00] so that, and then you become aware of those things that, this sounds like a very. Gendered story. It's not. But there was a sense of, okay, we need to think about the weather and the environment and how it's, how we've tried to control it, but how we've also lived successfully with it, because I wanted this to be a positive piece of environmental fiction. So there are stories about, the overriding story is we have really, we are ruining the climate, and that's problematic. However, throughout time there have been ways where we have existed in a more holistic way with nature. They're in there too. And I hope they serve as a kind of positive countervailing belief system in humans and our ability to be less destructive, to be creative.

And, I don't know, synergistic,

**Parul - LWS:** I guess just like you were saying earlier, you never want to,

**Sarah:** I.

**Parul - LWS:** You want everything to be subtly placed in, so it's around the experience of being there with the characters, even though [00:55:00] these, morals are being taught to us. It's always within the experience of the characters.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that's absolutely right. And I think that's the main thing. And even though some of these characters are so far away from my experience there's a sort of a wizard priest character, ba based on a historical figure, but slightly different in my book, who is dragging a giant cross up the mountain because cross fell used to be called fiends fell because everyone believed a fiend lived at the top of it.

Of course they did. There was a wind demon up there. Anyway, so it imagines this character in the 12 hundreds dragging a huge cross up the mountain in order to exercise this demon. So far away from my experience, but I've always wanted



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

to be ambitious and try to inhabit these experiences, even if they're very different from mine. So yeah, you are always reaching, I think Andrew Miller once said, you, you can reach very far down into the well of the self and bring something out which might allow you to really make that [00:56:00] grand leap. And and I am that mad person that has carried heavy loads up mountains. When I was a kid the little, the hill, the little mountain next to my parents' house, I would walk up it and then I would walk down it and I would get to the bottom and I would think, can I go back up that I'm just gonna do it?

And I would then I would go up again and come down and go up again. I was that kind of, possessed person who would try to get to my physical limit. in those ways you can reach for characters that are doing extraordinary things and think, okay, can try and make this, exorcist, real.

**Parul - LWS:** I love that. Connecting your own experiences to the character you're trying to reach for, and maybe just staying on that point of writing about characters, whether it's the environment as a character or the landscape as character or an individual who has maybe far removed from our own experiences or day-to-day living.

How are you ideating within that? And this is really down to like details. Are you, do you write notes? Do you have voice memos or do you just go for it? Try and [00:57:00] write as best as you can and then review it?

**Sarah:** Yeah, I probably, so I am researching I'm making some notes from research, but not too heavy because I think. You'll remember the salient details, but more importantly, and this might sound mad for historical fiction, you will bend them to suit what you need them to be. My mom was a great storyteller, not because she could tell great stories, but because she misremembered things and she elaborated and she exaggerated, and I love So you would end up with a story that wasn't fully right, but it was better. It was better than the one that she could have told. And I think, if you stick to the facts, it's very helpful in some ways. You can create an authentic piece of fiction, but you can also, not create a kind of a living contemporary version of historical fiction.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

Hillary Mantel is the great kind of revolutionary writer in this regard. [00:58:00] so yeah, I, I do research, I research where I need to, and then I try to. It would be a fantasist and convince everyone of a situation. Convince my,

**Parul - LWS:** you have this in a notebook?

**Sarah:** yeah. Yeah. There are notebooks. And there are several different notebooks for this, for helm, because I was writing individual stories and then I was making notes on the wind.

I was making scientific notes, hesitate to use the I was making folkloric notes, all kinds of different things. I was reading things like the folklore of plants, because I've got a herbalist in there. She's quite an important character. Really varied research for this book. Reading up about the kind of late neolithic age but also just really making some kind of leaps of faith and speculative leaps as well.

I have no idea. We have no idea like what the kind of. Religious thinking or spiritual thinking of late Neolithic peoples [00:59:00] was like, but maybe we can patch it together from various ideas or some research or the things that were left behind, the artifacts. And I, again, I just love that ability to really create something that feels original, even if it's not fully original, because nothing ever is I love feeling like there's a fresh field of snow and I can just go and run around in it and create a pattern. I love the idea perhaps something original that's grounded, but also, really being speculative, really creating a proposition that, may or may not work. Don't get me wrong lots of critics would say I fall off the tightrope a lot. I do because I'm really trying to do something there.

Reintroducing wolves to Britain, what, or or a kind of dystopian fiction. The challenge is that you have to make it even more real and more convincing. The further you go imaginatively, the more you have to convince people of it. And I love that challenge. And Helm was very challenging [01:00:00] that way.

Put me well out of my safety zones again, historically and and all the rest. But that's okay. I think that's okay.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

**Parul - LWS:** More broadly, when you try and bring the landscape into your work how do you, what are you doing to try and bring them in as characters

**Sarah:** I suppose again, it's that sense of presence, isn't it? It's like, especially when I was a kid, what was my day? My day was being on the moorland. So there were hairs, there were birds, there was smells, there was the feel of the ground. It has a kind of text, texture and sensuality.

And not personality and character Exactly. Is it? But it is,

**Parul - LWS:** as presence? Yeah.

**Sarah:** It's a presence. Yeah. It's animate somehow. It's living it's is, it is important in my work as the human characters are complex because landscapes are [01:01:00] complex. And I, yeah. So I've always tried to really pay attention to, look, I paid attention to the landscape when I was a kid.

I was just fascinated by it. I think a lot of nature writers and environmental fiction writers would say that that they were really obsessed with the river, obsessed with the life in the river. And I was, as a kid, I was in the river for hours looking under the stones and, trying to see underwater and be in those other worlds.

So it's, can I bring that sensual experience onto the page for the reader? Because isn't that the most wonderful form of connection if you feel embodied as a reader, you feel like you're embodied in that work that, that you are having those experiences slightly horrifying, but also, it's almost like you you've plugged in two human brains together and the nervous systems of two human beings.

I just think it's beautiful.

**Parul - LWS:** I think that's why we read.

**Sarah:** Yeah.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

**Parul - LWS:** One, one final question on helm. Did you have any moments where you just wanted to give up because it felt too [01:02:00] hard? And if so, what did you do?

**Sarah:** yeah. Yeah. 'cause it took me 20 years. So there were plenty of those moments. There were plenty of moments where I thought I just can't do this one. It's too hard. It's I just like the wind. I just can't get hold of it. I just, how do you even do that? So there were, yeah, there were tons of moments where I thought, do I focus this?

Is this just a story about the building of a stone circle? Is this just the story about a man trying to exercise a demon? Is it just the story of a man building a ridiculous steam machine up a mountain? It's like I've gotta focus it in, I've gotta focus it in, and then that kind of maximal, maximal sense of, actually, no, it's broad. I could go on forever with these stories. There had to be a stopping point, but. I just somehow relaxing, again, put shoulders down, just relax. It doesn't have to be a tight three narrative story, with three people making an ascent of the mountain, very formulaic. It doesn't have to be that you don't have to do formulaic.[01:03:00]

It's the wind. It's free. We don't know, which direction the wind is gonna go in. It's okay. So it's maybe just about giving myself permission to not, I don't know, maybe stop worrying about what it should be and just allowing it to be lots of things.

**Parul - LWS:** Maybe just staying on that theme of worrying about what a story is once it hits the publishers and then hits the shelf. What's your relationship then with worry, with regards to how the book is then received

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Parul - LWS:** find it?

**Sarah:** I think I've been going long enough now and can edit myself well enough now that I know when something is working on some level. So it



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

generally doesn't get into the hands of someone else unless I'm confident that it's an activated piece of fiction. That, that the writing is good enough of a quality there's enough interesting in there and that it's an experience for a reader.

Then I'll hand it over. So on some level, I have to be reasonably confident that it's gonna do [01:04:00] something for somebody as a reader. But you never know. And this book, because it's so sprawling and big and I had no sense. I had no sense of what it, I still don't, I can't tell you what it is.

It's a novel kind of, but I can't I can't enclose it. In my mind, I can't think of a way of, my publisher's done a way better job than me of trying to encapsulate what it is in order to market it. but it's really hard. And so I turned it over and was thinking, I just have no sense.

I have no sense of what this experience is gonna be like for a reader, because I've been monkeying around with the narratives and thinking structurally and it's so many things, so many spinning plates in this book. Is that gonna be okay for a reader? Are they gonna be okay? Is it, are they going to leave one story and join another and be okay with that and then be ready to come back again to that person's story? I'm trying to use my technical ability thinking, okay, chapter needs to be a certain length so that you're immersed in [01:05:00] that world. It's not too short that you don't really care about the character when you're with them. So all this technical thinking and ability. It doesn't matter in the end if it hasn't worked. It's a massive relief with this book that people are enjoying it and the best thing of all is that they're entertained by it, that they're laughing. 'cause that's a new thing for me, really to make people laugh. I love it. I love, the levity. And it's got all the usual.

**Parul - LWS:** There's, yeah there's a huge amount of playfulness

**Sarah:** There is. Yeah, there is. And there's there's some horror and there's some, graphic stuff and there's some sex, there's all the usual, stuff in there. But, moving into new territory, it's always a bit like, oh my God, is this gonna work? Are they, is it gonna work for people?





## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

So I honestly didn't know. I didn't know. And I'm still a bit like, I don't know, because this is one of my first events for the book. So I'm still picking up on what readers are thinking and saying about it and waiting like

**Parul - LWS:** because it's not out, it's not actually out [01:06:00] yet. It's not officially out for another couple of weeks.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that's right. That's right.

**Parul - LWS:** I look forward to hearing as more and more people read how they feedback, but it's such a wonderful example of. Writing, writing about a serious subject with such levity and

**Sarah:** you.

**Parul - LWS:** imagination.

**Sarah:** Thank

**Parul - LWS:** Maybe just one more question about Helm and just your writing. And then I wanna go to more broad questions about writing, and then I might have to hand it over to some audience questions. I wanna talk about endings because you talk about, you said it's about finding the right line, which has somehow caught the entire story behind it and can hold it all.

Having a kind of blithe gravity. If someone here is trying to think about an ending for their story, what else might you say to them about finding that right line?

**Sarah:** Yeah. Often, particularly with short stories. I my eye on where I think a story should end and I'm overthinking [01:07:00] it by a couple of sentences and sometimes I will have written a sentence that is the ending. So it's you you are moving, especially with short stories 'cause there's a kind of dramatic pace, often to a short story. Threw the finishing tape, before you realize that you've, you threw the finishing tape 'cause you've still got momentum. So your mind



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

still might have momentum as a writer. For me with short stories, it's sometimes helpful to think about that it's okay to have momentum.

It's okay to be thinking ahead. Maybe this is gonna end here. I need to aim for that point. Oh look, I'm already over. It's over. So sometimes I've then just looked back and thought no, it should finish about there. I think I.

**Parul - LWS:** And for helm. And

**Sarah:** Helm. Just once I tell this idea about, does the wind actually care that we're killing it?

It doesn't, no. Does it? That's the thing. But actually in my, I would like helm to be a personality and to just want to live like we all do. I suppose I've lost both my parents over the last few years. So I have been thinking a [01:08:00] lot about life while you have it.

And I'm a humanist, I'm a patron of the humanists. So I also think a lot about what do we do with this one chance? What do we bring to the world? How do we improve the world potentially and hopefully and so if Helm is a personality, and of course Helm isn't, 'cause it's a wind, what would Helm want?

Probably just to exist like everybody does. If you're really enjoying your life. It's lovely to be in it. So hel helm doesn't really care about anything so long as there's helm. It just seemed and what I, and I repeated it up at the it's in the front of the book, so Helm doesn't care which story is true, so long as there's helm, and towards the end without wanting to spoil it, Helm's speculating on all the ways of, that the, where the systems might break down and what might happen ultimately and what happens to helm after helm. Then it just seemed okay, there's something nice about that circular thinking Helm doesn't really care so long as there is still a helm, of course. And it just, I knew it. I just knew it, that was the last line for the book. Sorry. Anyone that [01:09:00] hasn't read it yet?

**Parul - LWS:** They'll, people will be able to read it in a couple of weeks.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Parul - LWS:** Maybe just, those are just some final questions on your writing process. I recognize every writer is different, but we're always curious to know what does a good day of writing look like for you?

**Sarah:** That's very interesting. While I'm always telling my students and friends that are writers particularly with novels, because it's so hard if you leave a novel, it is quite hard. It's such a big thing, a big animal that if it gets away from you, it can be quite daunting to try and remount it rero it, whatever you're doing.

I don't know. So I think just attending to the project every day and attending could just be reading something about it, making a note, a thousand words, a hundred words. Attending to it. And there will be days where you've written much more, but the quality might not be as good as the day when you've written a hundred words or made a little breakthrough somehow with where you want to go or come across a piece of [01:10:00] research that is brilliantly resonant for what you're writing. attending to it every day in some capacity, maybe even going on a walk and thinking about it. And I always try not to berate myself for if I'm not doing enough. I or, the days when you've written 2000 words are great. 'cause the thing becomes like a snowball. You know what I mean? You feel like, oh, the word count has grown, hurrah. But these days now, and especially, my life's changed. I'm a parent, I'm squeezed for time. It's difficult just attending to it, it meaning that it's still there. Still progressing somehow. Even the smallest amount, it's still progression of a sort. So that's what I always tell people.

Just, 10 minutes a day, attend to it, read what you've written, make a note one line, one line of description. It's okay.

**Parul - LWS:** I like that. It feels like my delicate tomato plants are a, I dunno, an animal you might have. I like that idea. [01:11:00] Just tend to it. Maybe one final question for me and then we'll hand it over to us. Some community questions that we have. What are you dreaming of next?



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

**Sarah:** Oh,

**Parul - LWS:** So obviously you've got this whole phase coming up where you're gonna be publicizing the book.

You'll be out and about talking about helm, but what else is on the horizon for you if you're able to share?

**Sarah:** I have a couple of short stories on the go, so I would quite like to go back to those and finish them up and maybe generate a few more. I'm signed up for a two book deal, so there will be another novel. I'd like to say coming soon, but who knows? And I, again, I've got a couple of ideas for that.

And I dunno which one will, I dunno which one will take priority, which is not what my publisher wants to take. 'cause obviously I've outlined another novel to them. Yeah, I, sometimes it's the side project that takes over for me. So I think I'm gonna write about something and actually the thing that I know less about is what I should be writing about and [01:12:00] inquiring into through literature. I'm not sure, I'm not sure what subject will be, I have a couple of ideas, but who knows?

**Parul - LWS:** Thank you for sharing. Sharing. All right, we have a few questions and in case anyone wants to just show their face, say hello to Sarah. You are invited to turn your video on and say hello. You might, you'll see a few popping up as they come through. Hello everyone. It's lovely to see you. Let's see if your camera is on, I will invite you to ask your question.

We start with Catherine. Catherine, if you'd like to ask your question, go ahead. You should be able to unmute yourself.

**Kathryn Lee:** Hi. Hi. Thank you very much for this great talk. Sarah. I really appreciate that. so my, my question falls into the category of convincing the reader. So my story is I live in Canada and I'm I'll just read. What I said. So half my novel takes place in ha present day Modern Canada, and the other half is alternates between 1894 [01:13:00] Morcombe Bay and Burnley.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

'cause I'm researching the matchless boat disaster that my great-great-grandmother drowned in. So I recently read I feel very not com. I just feel I, I'm very distant from in time and in place from writing about 1894 mill workers. And so I I recently read Angle of Proposed by Lauren Stagner.

And he, book, he talked about he was talking about speculating about his grandmother. So his voice would enter, so he'd write something about what his grandmother might've done and then his voice would enter and say that might've happened. It might not have happened.

So I'm playing around with how do I. How do I become a fantasist and just convince my reader that I know what I'm writing about and how much I feel like doing what he did might be copying out in a way. So I was just wondering if you have words of advice on that.

**Sarah:** Yeah. I always think if people are worrying about it, it means they're doing the due diligence on the research and everything else, and then [01:14:00] sometimes it can help to just think it's the past and it's history, but people were probably not so very different from the way they are now. Yes, there's new technology and our lives are different and we have different rights, but actually. In a physical sense, in a biological sense, I always come back to the human animal as well as the human being. You will probably know what drudgery is like, 'cause most people have had a dr. A job that involves drudgery. So just apply that to millwork, you've probably been ill at some point, and so you can apply that to, to, not being particularly healthy in millwork or, so there are always ways I think of, we said, taking from the well of the self and then applying it, watering, whatever it is you're trying to create. and I think you might, again it's not about perfection in the first draft. I think you just gotta allow yourself to write in perfectly as well, and then figure out what's working and what isn't working. And don't overthink the details of it. I think just basic facts can be helpful. And [01:15:00] then really you're allowed to make up whatever you want to so long as it's convincing for the reader.

I know, but I do, I rec, I do recognize that feeling of like, how do I do this? Can I do this? Is it okay to do this? I do think there's room for kind of sort of narrative interruption if you want there to be one, if it works, if it's in for a



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

*(Unedited)*

particular reason and not a reason of anxiety or justification. So in the Novel Light Years by James Salter, I dunno if you've read it, it's a brilliant novel about the breakdown of a relationship. And it's told in the, it's told in the third person about a couple in a marriage, and the marriage is breaking up and they're having affairs and they move on and it's really beautifully told, and there is one sentence in the novel where Salter writes, so he's talking about them breaking up and getting divorced, and then there's a line that says, I wish it wasn't so one sentence in the book where the first person is used and they, and it's like the author felt at this moment. [01:16:00] I feel for these characters. I love them. Of course, they're getting divorced 'cause they fucked up their marriage. I wish it wasn't and I was rea when I read, first time I read it, I was like, oh my God, you're allowed to do that. You've just done it and it's brilliant. And of course it's perfect. It's meaningful of course.

Like you can't possibly make up something and feel so little that you wouldn't express as the author your feelings for the situation or a kind of narrative author, your feelings for the situation. So I honestly think just find your ways of doing something that seems significant and right, for the piece of fiction.

And I think you can lean into what other people have done for a while or you can lean away from it. And it's okay not to get it perfect in the beginning everything, because novels are fixed in the macro edit and at those early stage edits, that's really where you hopefully, taking out the dead wood and kind of converting what isn't working as fiction into fiction. But I feel I'm absolutely positive you can do it. I really am.

**Kathryn Lee:** Thank you [01:17:00] very much. Thank you.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Parul - LWS:** Thanks, Catherine for the question. Thank you, Sarah. We've got another couple of minutes left and a couple of questions. ANNA asked submitted this earlier, how do you know when you're good enough to publish?



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

*(Unedited)*

**Sarah:** Maybe you don't, it's gonna be other people that, that encourage that. Again, I think once you've developed editing skills, you should be able to recognize when something is of equality because you've worked on it enough that you can recognize that. Again, it's not perfect, but, editors and agency used to reading imperfect work, but I think skills are not just there to improve your work to make it publishable, but they are. as tools to let you know when it's okay to turn something over to somebody else. And it's a difficult one because there are writers out there who are publishable and they're not getting published for various reasons. So it's not just about when the work is right and ready.  
[01:18:00] not, I still do believe that good fiction, good writing will come through, but there are all these tides in publishing.

There are trends, there are there's issues now there's all sorts of stuff that will make some writing more desirable in the moment or the era. But if you're working on quality and doing as much as you can to improve your individual piece of writing, that is all you can do. And it takes, sometimes it takes readers to help you out on those final stages and let you know that some trusted readers, good readers. Whether things are of equality, it's part of the skillset that you develop as a writer. I think just knowing that things are ready to go or good enough to go.

Good enough to go. perfect, but good enough to go. I,

**Parul - LWS:** Great. Thanks so much, Anna. Sarah.

Great. Thanks for the question. Thank you, Sarah. Final question from Chrissy  
[01:19:00] is, can a story be serious and whimsical at the same time?

**Sarah:** yeah. I think so. Life can, can't it, like I, again I psych the death of my parents. I was involved. That sounds bad. I was there for both of course it's one of the most serious moments in life. It's utterly heartbreaking and difficult. But I remember when my dad was dying. There were moments of levity in the hospital room. I remember feeding him a yogurt and he made some joke about it. And those moments of levity don't go away in the midst of life's grave nature. So I think they can work together and they can work well together and enhance





## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

each other. And we use humor for particular reasons, don't we? Or we try and we, as a coping mechanism sometimes think, I ha I've just written an article for The Guardian about this, about eco fiction and the kind of move into the move away from darkness and negativity and pessimism and doom and fatalism, and that we can do nothing because capitalism is this way.

[01:20:00] And we can't change what's happening if you don't tell stories about systems change and positive stories people can't imagine and then maybe help facilitate change. So I've had a big kind of. Not a reversal, but a big swing in my writing, environmental writing, because think it's important to, to contribute to systems change positively or try to. So I think in that way, helm had to have levity, it had to have hope, it had to have benign examples of existing with nature, good stories about us working with nature as well as the ruination that, that were undertaking. So yes, I think yes, and some subjects really lend themselves to it, and levity can function as a means to I don't know, like a joke is serious often, isn't it?

It's come from a serious place, it's, it resonates because it's actually touching on something that's really significant. Yes, I think the answer is [01:21:00] yes.

**Parul - LWS:** Wonderful. What a great question Chrissy. And thank you so much Sarah, and that brings us to an end. Thank you so much, Sarah, for this beautiful talk. It's been really such an honor to have a little time with you, to think about how you construct your work, and I love what you are bringing to the world.

Thank you so much for being here with us.

**Sarah:** you. It's been an absolute joy and so nice to meet people even though you're everywhere.

**Parul - LWS:** And what's the best way for us to keep in touch with you? Should we want to follow you, reach out to you.

**Sarah:** I'm awful 'cause I don't use social media that's terrible, isn't it?



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

**Parul - LWS:** I applaud you. No, that's wonderful. Good for you.

**Sarah:** so how a hundred letters.

**Parul - LWS:** Sounds great.

**Sarah:** Why are my agent that? I love that. Yeah. And then I like events. I love meeting people at events and I often tutor as well outside of kind of the work at Manchester. I do getting involved with workshops and, if you're part of groups, just invite me because I do like to come along and

**Parul - LWS:** Oh, excellent.

**Sarah:** people and talk

**Parul - LWS:** Beautiful. We would love to bring you back in for a [01:22:00] workshop.

**Sarah:** that would be great.

That would be great.

**Parul - LWS:** Wonderful. Helm is out in a couple of weeks. Go get a copy. Thank you so much for being here. Friends, please unmute yourself. Let's give Sarah a London writer salon on round of applause.

**Molly - LWS:** Yay. Thank you.

**Sarah:** Thank you.

**Janet Smith:** Brilliant. Thank you.

**Robyn SB:** Woo. Thank you.



## Sarah Hall - Interview Transcript

*(Unedited)*

**Parul - LWS:** Thank you. Thank you. Thank you everyone for being here. Love having you in the room. Thanks so much for your input, for your comments. The love for Sarah and Sarah. Thanks once again. You're such a star. Absolutely love your writing. We're all fans here. We'll support you and looking forward to Helm coming out.

**Sarah:** Great.

**Parul - LWS:** so much.

**Sarah:** Thank you everyone.

**Parul - LWS:** Thank you everyone, and we'll pro we'll process this recording and send it to you all. But if you wanna join us for writers out, there's one happening in just under 30 minutes. Take care everyone. Bye-bye.

**Di Hinds:** you. Bye

**Parul - LWS:** Cheers.