

ELLE Q&A

What was your inspiration for this novel?

In a word, complicated! It grew, very slowly, out of the first screenplay I ever wrote, 12 years ago, which ended with Mrs Ross and Angus emigrating to Canada as part of the Highland Clearances. I loved the characters and always felt that I would go back to them somewhen. At first, all I knew was that it was a story about Mrs Ross looking for someone in winter – that was the starting point – I didn't know who she was looking for, or why. And I have long had an obsession with cold climates, snow and ice (why? Good question...) and devoured books on the subject – the history of polar exploration, for example.

How did you research your subject? Did you travel to Canada?

No, I've never been to Canada! Until quite recently I was agoraphobic and couldn't fly (or even travel by train). But I live near the British Library in London, and so I read everything I could find on the Canada of the period – a lot of it written by Hudson Bay employees. In fact, the more I read, the more I became convinced that the Company had to be a part of the story.

Can you describe your writing process?

I try and keep office hours, but I'm not as disciplined as I'd like to be. I start out with research, then write some stuff longhand, often writing around the story – characters' backgrounds or particular scenes. I need to know (roughly) where I'm going before I hit the computer.

How did you keep track of all the characters?

It wasn't that hard. It seemed very natural to have a lot of different perspectives and I always knew exactly where everyone was. But latterly I did make a chapter plan with the characters colour-coded so that I could assess the structure and check I hadn't left anyone hanging around for too long. Some people (my mother is one of them) have suggested it would be a good idea to have a sort of cast list at the beginning, so you can check back – maybe in the paperback edition...

What were your feelings on tackling such issues as homosexuality, racism and sexism in 19th-century Canada from a 21st-century Scottish perspective?

Hmm. I'm not sure I had any particular strategy, and I certainly didn't set out to tackle any 'issues' as such; they just arose from the story. I don't think you can avoid tackling sexism if you're a female writer, whether writing about the past or the present – likewise racism if you're dealing with a culture-clash scenario. My feelings were always governed by 'how would I feel if I was in this situation'. In other words, I didn't try to remove my 21st century perspective – it

may not be the most accurate way to portray how people felt in the 19th century, but it was the way I wanted to write it.

What is your favourite part of the book and why?

I've got lots of favourite parts! I'm particularly fond of some of the back stories – eg Mrs Ross's time in the asylum, and Francis's memories of the relationship with Jammet. And I'm very proud of the ending.

Are any of the characters particularly close to your heart?

Mrs Ross, because it all started with her. Francis – who I loved writing - and Sturrock, probably because he first started out as a character in the original screenplay, who was then axed. A nice thing about writing is that you can bring people back from the dead! He's also the only character who's based on a historical person – an Irish journalist who wrote about the Highland Clearances in the 1840s. If Sturrock's life sounds far-fetched, it isn't half as extraordinary as Thomas Mulock's...

If you were organizing a book club reading of your novel, what are some questions you would like to see discussed?

That's a really hard question to answer! I don't think I'd want to impose an interpretation on anyone else. Whatever anyone takes from the book is valid. In fact I'd probably learn something...

What are some authors and books you're inspired by?

I love crime novels, particularly ones that push the boundaries of genres. For example the Swedish writer, Kirsten Ekman, who writes brilliantly about landscape and character. Someone I find hugely inspiring is Barry Lopez, the natural history writer. 'Arctic Dreams' is possibly my favourite book of all time. He somehow manages to combine history, philosophy and poetry with the migrating habits of musk oxen! He has taught me to see in a new way. In a different field I love the Aubrey-Maturin novels of Patrick O'Brien – there's a beautiful humanity to his characters, great wit and a mature wisdom about life – all allied to incredible adventure. Just wonderful.

Can you give us a sneak peek into any future projects?

I'm working on two screenplays at the moment – one, 'Nova Scotia', the aforementioned story of Mrs Ross in Scotland, is still 'live' and being cast at the moment. The other is 'Metal Heart', a road movie set in contemporary Lapland, but in summer, so there's no snow in that one. And I'm starting my next book, which I'm reluctant to say too much about at the moment! It also has a mystery – and a search - at its core, but in a very different setting to 'Wolves'.