

## ON WRITING OF 'THE TENDERNESS OF WOLVES'

I didn't have to go far to research my novel 'The Tenderness of Wolves' - it was a 20-minute bus ride to the British Library and all the material I could have wanted. But it took me two and a half years to get there.

From the time I left university I was agoraphobic, and any form of transport – other than being driven by someone I knew and trusted - was indescribably frightening. The first panic attack hit me – that's the best way to describe it – while I was squashed into the back of a car, and from then on, any form of travel, even going on a short bus journey, would trigger another violent attack. Despite various forms of help, my ability to travel shrank to, at its worst, a couple of miles from home, and it has taken me years to reclaim my freedom.

An agoraphobic panic attack is a very hard thing to describe to anyone who hasn't suffered one, because it simply doesn't relate to anything else I can think of. The panic attacks I experienced (and it's not the same for everyone) were violent, bewildering, crippling and horrific. I knew an attack wasn't physically dangerous, but I still felt as though I was going to die. Once the panic kicked in – the best way I can describe it is as a massive, unexpected blow to the kidneys – my faculties of reason would shut down, my body would lock into a foetal crouch and I wouldn't be able to move until it passed – and I could never tell how long that would take. This would be accompanied by a racing heart, hyperventilating, sweating, crying and a feeling of utter dread. When you're in that sort of state, being told to relax just isn't going to work. I was never afraid that there was going to be an accident or that something awful was going to happen outside myself; I was afraid of the panic itself – it's simply the most frightening thing I've ever experienced.

When I started writing – it being one of the few jobs relatively unaffected by travelling foibles – I became fascinated by what would have happened to someone like me in the nineteenth century, before the age of therapy and relatively safe

sedatives. It seemed to me that I would have sought help wherever I could find it, and so the idea for Mrs Ross - a character addicted to laudanum as a result of panic attacks – was born. She first appeared in a screenplay about the Highland Clearances, but I loved the characters and setting so much I always felt that I would go back to them. By the time of 'The Tenderness of Wolves', she is in Canada, 'clean' but still showing agoraphobic symptoms, and the one thing I knew about the novel before I started was that she was going to go on a journey, and that journey would be incredibly hard for her as a result.

So it wasn't apathy – or even poverty – that stopped me going to Canada to research what I was writing; I didn't really have a choice. Although, to be honest, when I began, it didn't even occur to me that writing a novel set in a country I had never seen was a problem. In the first place, I didn't think it would get published – I didn't tell my agent I was writing it, because I didn't think I'd ever get to the end – and secondly, for a screenwriter, winging it is par for the course. (Post-apocalyptic dystopia? No problem.)

I would have felt much more nervous writing a contemporary story. A historical setting confers a kind of immunity – after all, no one is ever going to say, 'I've just got back from 1867, and you got it completely wrong.' So that was my safety net. And once I'd finally mastered the London buses (that's the thing that took two and a half years), I read quantities of contemporary accounts, many of them written by employees of the Hudson Bay Company. They're not just detailed and fascinating accounts of their daily lives; some are also beautifully written.

Many people have commented on the importance of the landscape to the story, and perhaps this is down to my phobia. It is easy to imagine that, if you cannot travel, reading about travel is some sort of substitute; and I certainly did read, especially where the subjects were harsh, difficult, cold landscapes. Different people are drawn to different places – some are fascinated by deserts, some by mountains. For me it was always snow and ice. Partly because of its beauty; mainly, perhaps, because of the danger. Everyone knows the vicarious thrill of stories of endurance –

for me, maybe there was an even stronger desire to confront my fears in a safe way. I think this inability to go to faraway places was why I was so fascinated by them – especially cold, snowbound Northern landscapes, which are seductive and terrifying in equal measure.

Any novel is set in a place of the imagination, even if it takes place down the road. And everyone's experience of a place is different, just as everyone's perception of colour is unique to them. Of course I was nervous when publishers started reading the manuscript, and wondered if – or when – I was going to be exposed as a fraud. I'm sure that someone, somewhere will take issue with something I wrote. But it was a wonderful moment when the novel sold to Canada (by pleasing coincidence, it was bought by an ex-employee of the Hudson Bay Company) and they expressed their disbelief that the author wasn't Canadian. I think that says less about my writing than that places in fiction exist in the mind, and if the story works, you accept the setting, whatever it is. The difference between fantasy and other forms of fiction is not so great.

And the phobia? I don't think I'll ever be 'normal', if there is such a thing, but I have, finally, learnt how to manage it. And now that I can fly again, I am convinced that there wasn't a quick way to get over something like this. I tried all sorts of therapy – individual, group, behavioural (a total waste of time!), hypnotherapy, flying courses, drugs... and I can't say that one thing helped me more than any other (though some were more interesting). Things take the time they take, and you need the right combination of circumstances to propel you over the edge into a cure. Perhaps boredom is as important a factor as any – you get so sick of your own limitations that you have to find the courage to overcome them.

My first flight PA (post-agoraphobia) was amazing. Few people – myself included – believed I would manage to get on the plane. It was terrifying, but I did it. And once we were up there, looking down on clouds that looked like a vast plain of snow, I found I was enjoying it. Losing the ability to do something, and then finding it again, is an incredible rush. I don't think I'll ever take it for granted.

At the same time, it occurred to me on one of my early flights that flying was boring, and I wondered whether boredom was the polar opposite to terror. I was on a research trip to the Arctic for a screenplay set in Lapland – and this would be first time I had ever done field research. While we were there, and while I was attempting to extract some sort of magical inspiration from the landscape, I kept thinking how familiar things looked – how the landscape brought back childhood memories of the north of Scotland, for example. I was almost shocked by how normal everything appeared when, to me, the Arctic had always seemed such an alien world. I took notes, describing things and my feelings about them, always seeking the unusual angle; the unique essence of the place. And afterwards, while writing, I wondered whether anyone would notice. I don't know. I have a feeling that no landscape is so strange, and so vivid, as the one in your imagination.