

The oh comely book club

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photos cathy mckinnon and amber carnegie

For this issue, we've been reading Nell Stevens' *Bleaker House*. We've hosted book clubs all over the country – well, London, Sheffield, and Nottingham, to be precise. And we also chatted to Nell about the difference between creative writing and non-fiction. →

Our London book club met at our new regular home, Housmans radical bookshop in King's Cross, to discuss *Bleaker House*, which sees its author, Nell Stevens, go on a trip to the Falkland Islands, where she plans to spend three solitary months writing a novel. She sees herself as a kind of writing machine from which her novel will pour forth, fuelled by the landscape and rationed boxes of raisins. This does not happen. Instead, Nell cannot get her novel to work, she is hungry, and lonely, with just Bleaker Island's penguins for company. What results from her trip is not the novel she expected, but instead, an auto-fiction/memoir about her time on the island.

What we thought

Our meetings in Sheffield and London discussed how men's and women's non-fiction writing is treated differently and we also debated how long we thought we could survive on Bleaker.

"Some parts seemed to be self-indulgent, but maybe all writing is self-indulgent?"

"It reminded me a bit of *Walden*; the idea of escaping society to write."

"Women writing personal non-fiction seem to be more readily dismissed than male writers doing the same thing, and I wonder if that's criticism Nell faced."

"I enjoyed the fiction parts, especially the very short story sections."

"I just couldn't grasp how she managed so long without wine!"

"Why was each bit of fiction so different? Were they written while she was in the Falklands or after?"

"It reflected that writing isn't an effortless task, it takes sacrifice, time and determination but could still not turn out the way you thought it would."

"Are you a writer because you write, or because someone else gives you the title of 'writer'?"





Meet the author

Terri-Jane Dow speaks to Nell Stevens

Nell Stevens' debut novel, *Bleaker House*, is not entirely a novel. That is, it's partly a novel – the novel Nell set off to Bleaker, a tiny, barely inhabited island in the Falklands, to write – and partly a memoir of Nell's time on Bleaker, and the things she learned about herself while writing it. I caught up with Nell on the hottest day so far this year to chat about Bleaker, Nell's new book *Mrs Gaskell and Me*, and the merits of fiction versus non-fiction while we sipped homemade lemonade in Drink, Shop, Do in London (the coffee machine hadn't woken up yet)...

In *Bleaker House*, we read how the novel that you went to the Falklands to write doesn't work out – how does it feel that the book you left Bleaker with wasn't the book you intended?

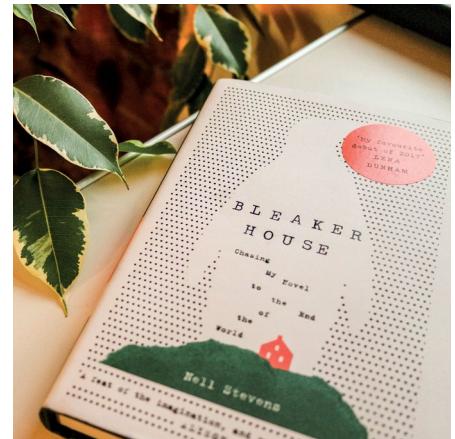
In the end, I wrote a book for which I didn't have any expectations. I'd always submitted a novel to this same competition every year and never got anywhere, and then I submitted a very scrappy piece of what would eventually be the prologue of *Bleaker House* to them, and forgot about it until they asked for a full manuscript within a week. I had this amazing week of pulling all these different bits together, and there was no pressure whatsoever, because I was working on something that might be interesting, rather than something I had high expectations for. *Bleaker House* was kind of an accidental arrival that was free of that pressure – at least, for a very small period of time!

Do you think that *Bleaker House* changed your expectations of yourself as writer? Yep, 100%. It was a process of me learning how to write as myself, and learning what I can do. If it's easy, that means that it's good. If you're really struggling, then something isn't right. If it's boring or difficult to you, that's going to show. I think that because I didn't have much time with *Bleaker House*, I fell back into something that I didn't know was my default, and that turns out to be where I'm at home as a writer. I didn't know that, because I thought that writing was supposed to be this laborious, hideous process. The joy that I feel in writing helps it come alive in a way that the prose I was writing before wasn't.

I actually wrote *Mrs Gaskell and Me*, which is being published in September, before *Bleaker House* came out, because I was so scared of reviews. I knew that I'd have a different relationship to my writing once I knew that people were reading it, and fortunately there was a long time between selling *Bleaker House* and it coming out, so I had this massive confidence boost, and then lots of time where there wasn't much to do! I had a lot of fun with it, because I just let that voice do the work.

Do you think you'll venture back into writing fiction?

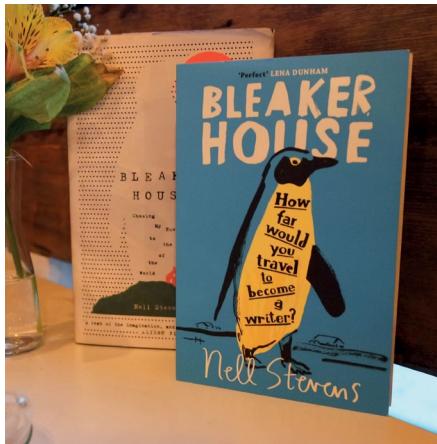
I am trying to write fiction. I don't know why I still prioritise it, that there's still an idea that fiction is "the best" and I don't know why I feel like that, but I still just want to



write a novel. Writing a novel is such a specific skill. I'm trying to use the lessons I've learned from my non-fiction and take that into fiction writing. I would never have used first-person before, I wasn't really using my own voice, and I think now I'm trying to do that more. I also write a lot and very quickly, and *Mrs Gaskell and Me* really does take us up to date in terms of my life, so I need to have more odd experiences to write about before the next non-fiction book.

I saw that you recently responded to a review of another book that criticised creative writing courses, and especially critical of debut authors who've done creative writing courses.

I think that I jumped to the defence in →



part because I had what felt like a very mean review when *Bleaker House* first came out. At the time I was so busy licking my wounds to respond, so this time I thought, 'No!' I wish that we had a slightly more rigorous culture of declaring conflicts of interest that are always there, and just being more honest about that, because it's unfair to readers – as well as writers – who are unaware that it's just crossfire in an ongoing spat about teaching creative writing.

On the upside, I know lots of people who bumped the book up their to read lists

"Bleaker House was kind of an accidental arrival that was free of that pressure"

because of that review.

Oh, in the end it played out wonderfully, especially as the author [of the book, not the review] was so gracious about the whole thing.

Speaking of debuts, I was also thinking about a part of the Joan Didion documentary, *The Center Will Not Hold*, where they're talking about her first novel, *Run, River*, and Joan herself says that she's glad "not many people read it". That seems to be kind of a luxury, to have a debut novel that maybe isn't that good,

that isn't a big statement of who you are as a writer.

I think about it a lot because when you're outside of the world of books and publishing, it feels impenetrable, and then every step you make towards it feels like "yes, I'm a writer now;" when you finish a draft, when you get an agent, when you sell your first novel, but actually, those things might go nowhere. It never actually ends, you never feel like you can relax.

I wrote a book as an undergraduate, a novel, that I was completely obsessed with. It found an agent, and it was sent out

everywhere, and I remember feeling so disheartened by the rejections, because I thought I'd made it. Ten years later, I'm so relieved and grateful to every editor who said I wasn't ready, because I wasn't, and I couldn't now stand by that book, it would be mortifying.

Of course, it's the same for the novel I was writing in the Falklands – it wasn't the right book. And now I see it as a way of screening you, it's a blessing. Those people do know better. It can be a perfectly competent book, but if it's just not your voice, people know. ♦



For our next
#ohcobookclub,
we'll be discussing

Marlena by Julie Buntin

Everything about 15-year-old Cat's new town in rural Michigan is lonely and off-kilter, until she meets her neighbour, the manic, beautiful, pill-popping Marlena. The two girls turn the untamed landscape of their desolate small town into a kind of playground. Within the year, Marlena is found dead. Now, decades later, when a ghost from that pivotal year surfaces unexpectedly, Cat must try to forgive herself and move on, even as the memory of Marlena keeps her tangled in the past.

Come join us

If you're outside of London and you'd like to host an #ohcobookclub meet-up, get in touch with our book club editor, terri-jane@icebergpress.co.uk. Our London bookclub is held at Housmans, London's oldest radical bookshop. You can also pop in to pick up a copy of *Marlena* with 20% off if you mention #ohcobookclub.