



words terri-jane dow  
photos terri-jane dow and amber carnegie

We've been reading Daisy Johnson's Man Booker-nominated debut novel, *Everything Under*, hosting book clubs in London, Liverpool, and Sheffield. Loosely based on an ancient myth, the novel follows Gretel - a lexicographer - as she returns to the river she grew up on to unravel the characters of her childhood. →



## #ohcobookclub

*Everything Under* is a slippery sort of novel, defying genre and flitting between strange magic and bleak realism. Weaving ancient myth into a modern setting, Johnson tells the story of Gretel, a lexicographer, as she traces her own history back to her childhood on a river boat, where she lived with her mother until she was 13. Disconnected from society, Gretel and her mother created their own language, communicating between themselves in words not understood by outsiders. As an adult, Gretel realises that she was the outsider. She remembers Marcus, a strange boy who came to live on the boat with them one summer, and as her mother's memory deteriorates, Gretel pieces their stories together. Daisy Johnson's writing is strange and sad and, as the myth unravels, the novel becomes more unsettling.

### What we thought

Our book club meetings discussed the strangeness of the setting, the blending of myth and 21st-century life, and Daisy's prodigious talent.

"I had dreams about it, it really got in my head."

"I thought it was going to be too 'clever' for me, but it was really readable."

"I think the strangeness of it made it less bleak than if it was told straight."

"It was such a strange theme to then thank her parents in the acknowledgements."

"Is Sarah trying to lose both children like Hansel and Gretel?"

"There was such an unusual focus on food!"

"The storytelling mimics the behaviour of the narrator."

"How on earth do you pronounce 'Bonak'?!"

"You cannot trust any of the narrators, all their memories are regressing. Almost tripping themselves up."





## Meet the author

Terri-Jane Dow chats to Daisy Johnson

Daisy and I discussed the internet and how we communicate with each other, as well as talking about rivers, writing and the sort of stories that surprise us.

**T:** Terri-Jane: A lot of your fiction writing centres around these folklorish, mythical worlds – is it easy for you to find those settings to build your stories around?

**D:** Daisy: Particularly for *Everything Under*, it was quite hard. I wanted it to feel like it was our world, but that weird things could happen. I wanted readers to be convinced that the things that were happening, could happen. I think that came from finding the right setting. It took a lot of drafts to set it on the river. My partner and I borrowed a canal boat and were driving around Oxford, this tangle of rivers where people live entirely disconnected from the rest of the world, and it felt to me like this was a place where strange things could happen. It was finding the setting which made that possible, I think.

**T:** What other settings did you try out?

**D:** It was in Oxford for a while. I'd written *Fen* [Daisy's 2016 short story collection], which is set in the Fens, in the countryside, and I wanted to write about the city, but it didn't work there. I moved it to Wales for a bit, and then eventually it landed up on the river, which is where it should have been all along.

**T:** What is it about those liminal settings that attracts you?

**D:** I think probably growing up in the

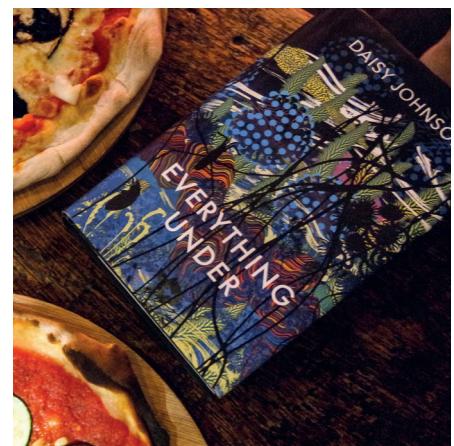
countryside means that it's always been important to me. Nature always feels a little bit out of control, and there's something quite uncanny about it. We've made our homes in nature, but it's never very homely. I've tried to write about cities and it hasn't worked yet, and I wonder if it's something that will happen when I've been writing for a lot longer. Maybe I'll be more comfortable in that setting. But, there's so much of the landscape to explore. I'm excited because every place you go is so different, and feels so different, so I'm happy to keep exploring.

**T:** It seems like there's more space in the countryside for something unexpected to happen...

**D:** I agree and I think it's also probably a marker for the reader. When you have a character going into a forest, or into the water, there's already something there that suggests that something strange might be about to happen. We have these myths set in the wilderness already in our heads.

**T:** Was the experience of writing *Everything Under* very different to writing *Fen*?

**D:** It felt very different. I lived with it for a lot longer, too. The main ideas in *Everything Under* are things I was thinking about while I worked on *Fen*, so it was maybe around four years from conception of the idea to the final edits. Just living with something for that long, and living with those characters, and trying to hold the whole story in my head was very different to *Fen*. I think a novel is



just a different beast. I'm very admiring of writers who can do novels and short stories, or stories and poetry. I think it's very hard to turn your head from one to the other.

**T:** After four years, it must be strange to not have to keep it in your head any more...

**D:** It's a strange feeling. It's so interesting hearing people talk about it, and have different ideas about it. I suppose it's a bit like a child you've sent out into the world, and you feel a bit anxious about. There's also a relief to having it be out in the world, though.

**T:** *Everything Under* focuses on the use of language. Have you ever made up a language of your own?

**D:** Maybe accidentally? I'm a little bit →



dyslexic, so I sometimes forget how to say words, or what words actually are, and certainly when I became a writer I found myself making up language. Sometimes editors have pointed it out to me, saying "this isn't actually a word". Obviously, I've chosen to be a writer, but I do sometimes feel a bit outside of the language that other people use. I also find it incredible that a two year old can have her own complete language, she'll be happily chatting away, knowing exactly what she's saying, but it makes no sense to anyone listening. I think that's amazing, these

body's automatic reaction to the fear of some or all types of vaginal penetration], I talked to a lot of friends who had gone through it, I talked to doctors who didn't really understand it, and I wanted to break the silence about it. I'm always a bit nervous when something I've written goes out into the world, but I was nervous in a way that I never really have been before. I feel like it changed the conversation about me as a writer a little bit. People always presume that fiction is autobiographical (and to some extent it is), but there is always a distance, and

**"I'm a little bit dyslexic, so I sometimes forget how to say words, or what words actually are"**

different languages you create for yourself as you grow up.

**T:** You've also written non-fiction too, with a recent piece, *The Meaning Of Trauma Is Wound*, for the Wellcome Trust. How different is writing non-fiction?

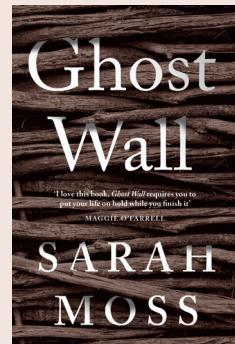
**D:** Very, very different. There are a couple of other non-fiction pieces coming out later in the year, but none of the other things I've written were quite as personal as the Wellcome Trust piece. It took me quite a long time to write that essay. I knew that I wanted to write about vaginismus [the

that's not the case at all with non-fiction. It's much closer.

**T: What are you reading at the moment?**

**D:** I'm working on a horror novel at the moment, so I'm trying to ingest as much horror as I can. I'm having really bad nightmares. I've just finished reading *The Upstairs Room* by Kate Murray-Brown. It's completely terrifying. Less frighteningly, I'm also reading Lauren Groff's *Florida*, and I also just finished Sarah Moss' *Ghost Wall*.

**T: That's our next book! ♦**



For our next  
**#ohcobookclub**,  
we'll be discussing

*Ghost Wall* by Sarah Moss

Teenage Silvie is living in a remote Northumberland camp as an exercise in experimental archaeology. Her father is an abusive man, obsessed with recreating the discomfort, brutality and harshness of Iron Age life. Behind and ahead of Silvie's narrative is the story of a bog girl, a sacrifice, a woman killed by those closest to her, and as the hot summer builds to a terrifying climax, Silvie and the bog girl are in ever more terrifying proximity...

**Come join us**

Our London book club is held at Housmans bookshop, London's oldest radical bookshop (and bargain basement heaven). Pop in and mention #OhCoBookClub to pick up a copy of *Ghost Wall* with 20% off. We also have regular meet-ups in Sheffield and Liverpool, keep an eye on our social media for details. If you'd like to host an #ohcobookclub meet-up, get in touch with our Book Club Editor, Terri-Jane, at [ohcomely@icebergpress.co.uk](mailto:ohcomely@icebergpress.co.uk).