

words terri-jane dow
photos alice snapé

For this issue, we've been reading Sarah Moss's latest novel, *Ghost Wall* and held book clubs in London and Liverpool. *Ghost Wall* follows 17-year-old Sylvie and her family as they join a group of students re-enacting life in an Iron Age settlement. →

Set in Northumberland, Sarah Moss's sixth novel opens brutally with an Iron Age sacrifice; the story of a bog girl killed by those she trusted and who were closest to her. Fast forwarding to the early 1990s, Sylvie and her parents are joining a professor and his class of students in an archaeological experiment. The group are living in a recreation of an Iron Age settlement: eating only what they find or catch, using the sun as their timepiece. Sylvie's father, Bill, is an amateur expert in ancient Britain, and takes the trip very seriously. He's also abusive and controlling, and unwilling to see Sylvie grow into a young woman. As the field trip progresses, the dynamics of the group gradually begins to shift. The role of leader tilts toward Bill instead of the professor, culminating in an extraordinary display of masculinity and power.



What we thought

Our book club meetings discussed the parallels between Sylvie and the bog girl, issues of masculine dominance and the book's striking relevance to what is going on in the world today.

The setting made it feel a bit stifling

I felt like the boys were the least interesting characters, but that reflected Sylvie's lack of interest in them

The parallels with today were really striking

It was frightening in a way I wasn't expecting

I thought we'd find out more about the girl at the beginning

Sylvie seemed younger than she was, but she's been very sheltered

There were so many divisions in the book: north/south, wealthy/working-class, educated/not.



Meet the author

Terri-Jane Dow chats to Sarah Moss

I spoke to Sarah Moss on a dark, chilly evening; the perfect setting for discussing morbid obsessions, bog bodies and Brexit.

Terri-Jane: What was it that initially drew you to the Iron Age as a base for *Ghost Wall*?

Sarah: I think because it's a strangely late silence in Britain. By the Iron Age, there's writing in Ireland and across Europe, because of course the Romans had been there and writing for centuries. The more east you go, the more entrenched writing and literacy are, in Greece and Egypt, but in Britain there's this late prehistoric silence, which lasts until the Romans. It's interesting to me because in some ways, it feels like a very familiar era – people were making beautiful art and musical instruments, and the clothes are quite sophisticated. If you look at some of the burials of that era, such as a child found buried with three apples and a toy, you can see exactly what the parents were thinking. But then there are these impossible things as well, sacrificial objects in bogs, terrifying instruments. I like the contrast.

T: The sacrifices themselves were pretty bleak. It's not a nice way to go...

S: Well, the victims probably had some drugs, which would have helped. Hopefully some of them were knocked out, too. Some of the reading was quite disturbing.

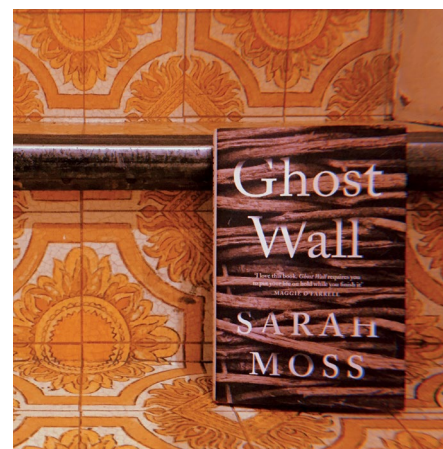
T: The opening of the book is quite disturbing. It was interesting to have that there, both as an introduction to the world

that the experiment is taking place in, but also because after the introduction, it follows Sylvie so closely instead.

S: I wanted that opening to be there to haunt the reader as they read. I wanted it to follow the reader through the book.

T: Why did you choose to set the story in the '90s?

S: I was thinking partly about my generation's experience of borders and boundaries. When I was coming up with the book, I was by Hadrian's Wall, and in 2016, it was kind of impossible not to think about "where is the edge of Europe, of England, of Britain?" and I kept thinking about the Romans coming from Europe, and whether they were colonising Britain, or introducing civilisation. Are the barbarians the Romans on the south side of the wall, or the Picts on the north side? Through the centuries, it remains a boundary between the Scottish and the English, and I think that for people born in the mid '70s there's quite a distinct relationship with those ideas. My generation was born after the UK went into the European community, and my experience at school was that we were part of Europe, and it was important to learn languages and participate in cultural exchanges. And it's now clear that some of us had worlds opening up, and some of us didn't. Then all of the walls started to come down; the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Bloc opened up. It wasn't a golden age by any means – I remember what was



happening in Yugoslavia – but it was a time of rapid progress that seemed to be towards a European future. So watching the walls go up again, and the British relationship with Europe plummet quite so catastrophically, is very strange, and quite hard.

T: You wrote the book in the aftermath of the referendum. Would the book have been different if the result had been different, or had something already been exposed?

S: Absolutely there was already something. I think there's a rising kind of masculinity across Europe and America, so even though Brexit was at hand, I could have told the same story pretty much anywhere in Europe at the moment, about nationalism and masculinity and nostalgia. →



T: Those displays of masculinity are very different to each other in the novel. The characters seem fractured even within their divisions of gender, education and place.
S: Well, men have intersectionality too.

T: It was a really interesting aspect of Bill's character, his desperation for an impossible authenticity. I felt some sympathy for him, in that he feels he should have been able to move through the world differently.

S: He needs something, because he's so angry. He feels so betrayed and abandoned. I didn't want him to just be a monster.

“I think there's a rising kind of masculinity across Europe and America”

It's easy to tell stories about monsters, but it doesn't actually help. Sylvie is the scapegoat, but if you decide that the people who behave appallingly are not really human, not really like you or I, it's a way of denying social responsibility.

T: He has to have reasons that make sense to him, even if they don't to anyone else.

S: Yes, but he needs them. Some of the characters know that it's not a true re-enactment – they know that they're playing. The professor is the least bothered by authenticity; he knows that it's impossible.

T: Bill's attachment is to something false.

S: And it's always born of need. Engaging with it as if it's a rational interpretation of history isn't really engaging, because obviously it's not. Everybody knows British history is immigrants all the way down. How far back do you have to go before it's not? And the Iron Age isn't the answer – they were Celtic. It's pointless engaging with nostalgic nationalism, but it's nonetheless a powerful argument. So you have to look at where it comes from, and why people feel this sense of rage and betrayal. That's what I was trying to do with Bill.

T: That beginning section really felt like a current running underneath everything else. At the end of the novel I had similar feelings about Sylvie and the bog girl. Sylvie's resignation to what is happening felt just as frightening as the sacrifice in the beginning.

S: There's nothing else she can do at that point. I wanted that to be the frightening thing, rather than what Bill is doing. There comes a point where fighting will only lose you your dignity and not change the outcome, and I think that's what it might have been like with the bog people. ♦



For our next
#ohcobookclub,
we'll be discussing

The Natashas
by Yelena Moskvich

The lives of Béatrice, a solitary jazz singer, and César, a lonely actor, are drawn into a surreal world, taunted by a chorus of women, trapped in a windowless room, who all share the same name... Natasha. This startling novel recalls the unsettling visual worlds of Cindy Sherman and David Lynch and the writing of Angela Carter and Haruki Murakami.

Come join us

Our London bookclub 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 *The Natashas* 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.