

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Welcome to Write Your Novel, an innovative, write-along podcast series with me, Yvonne Battle-Felton. I'm a lecturer in creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University and also a writer.

This series gets under the surface of the writing craft through the insights of leading writers. As we explore this process of writing, we look at the decisions writers might make and how to make the most of the writer's toolbox. We'll be using the work of each writer to help shed light on specific narrative devices. So, apologies if there's the odd spoiler. And at the end of each conversation, there's a writing exercise to help you try out a new approach in your own writing. Funded by Arts Council England and supported by New Writing North, this series is very much for you, the writer. Let's get started.

The author, Pat Barker, joins me today. Awarded a CBE in 2000, Pat was born in Yorkshire, where she began writing in her mid-20s. Her trilogy of novels about the First World War began with *Regeneration*, which was later made into a film in 1997. And *The Ghost Road*, the final novel in the series, won the Booker Prize for Fiction. Today, we're talking about her latest novel, *The Silence of the Girls*. You'll hear more about it in a moment, but to help you get a sense of the story, the book is a re-imagining of one of the most famous conflicts in literature, the legendary Trojan War. When Briseis' city is taken over by the Greeks, her life is transformed from queen to captive, sharing the same fate as countless numbers of captured women and girls throughout history, her new role is as a slave.

There's a lot we could focus on with this book, but with a strong protagonist of Briseis, and complex characters throughout the novel, we're going to focus on developing characters. Complex characters help to engage readers, drive the narrative, and provide moments of empathy for a reader. Let's turn to Pat, where she reads out a passage of the book, to help to set up our discussion.

Pat Barker:

"Great Achilles, brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles, how the epithets pile up. 'We never called him any of those things, we called him the butcher.' Swift-footed Achilles, now there's an interesting one. More than anything else, more than brilliance, more than greatness, his speed defined him. There's a story that he once chased the God Apollo all over the Plains of Troy. Cornered at last, Apollo is supposed to have said, 'You can't kill me. I'm immortal.' 'Oh yes,' Achilles replied, 'but we both know if you weren't immortal, you'd be dead.' Nobody was ever allowed the last word, not even a god."

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

You read that so wonderfully and it just brings another dimension to the characters. You bring them to life. So, thank you so much for reading to us. Can I ask you, because I've been saying her name wrong in my head, I'm sure, throughout, and then I tried listening to videos to find out how you pronounce her name and they're all different. And so, in my head it's been Briseis.

Pat Barker:

Well, I say it, Briseis, but the fact is-

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Briseis.

Pat Barker:

... nobody's coming back to tell us we're wrong. So, we can just do what we like, I reckon.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

You know what, thank you so much for that. I think that's going to be my motto from now on, that if I mispronounce a dead character's name or a character's name, they're more than welcome to come back-

Pat Barker:

Yes, and protest.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Can I ask you about, how do you create, or how did you create all of the characters, that people ... This book, how beholden were you to either their original stories or other stories and other tellings and retellings about them? Did you have to stick to that, where were you free to roam?

Pat Barker:

I took it as being fairly free to roam, although, I did read The Iliad over and over again, I wasn't trammled at all in approaching Briseis, because she has scarcely any role in The Iliad at all. It's really no more than a couple of mentions. So, I was free to give her a voice of her own. And I always wanted her to be first-person, I wanted it to be her story that she was telling, because the whole point really, is that she is silent in The Iliad, and not silent in this book. I mean, it opens with Achilles and Agamemnon having a great quarrel over these slave girls and the slave girls say absolutely nothing. Their whole future is being decided, but they have no part in taking that decision, and no voice. So obviously as a woman, my first impulse was to give a voice to those silenced women.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

What a phenomenal cause creatively and-

Pat Barker:

Well, it's one that we're all involved in, in our various ways, aren't we? It's a thing that all creative women actually share in common, I think.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think you're right. I think what I found really interesting is the way that she tells it, it's not quite sugarcoated, it's, these are the facts, laying it out, not glorified.

Pat Barker:

And one thing that I think helps a little is to, when you're searching for the character's voice, which it can be almost immediate or it can be an absolute agony to find the voice. I think it

helps if you put that voice in, not antagonism, but in opposition to another voice. So, the book opens with, "Brilliant Achilles, courageous Achilles." Everything about Achilles is absolutely brilliant and good, and then Briseis says, "We never called him any of those things, we called him the butcher." And that establishes the fact that she is telling a different story, an original story, and you believe her because she has lived through it. She's talking to you about her own personal experience, which is different from the experience of the majority. And I think at that moment, you start to identify with her.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

There was that playing against her and Achilles and that insight she offers, but where were you free to stray or imagine, as far as her story, the story she wanted to tell, but also that way that she would get to tell it?

Pat Barker:

There's so little about her in The Iliad, she is mentioned, in a sense, she kicks off the plot, because Achilles and Agamemnon start quarreling about her, and they make all these brilliant eloquent speeches, go on forever, and she says absolutely nothing. She is not consulted about her own life, but that is also a problem because I do believe that some characters create energy, they give energy back to the writer, and they also give energy back to the reader. And the reader loves reading about those characters. But typically, these are the characters who know what they want, they are battling with the world to get what they want. The reader loves that.

But of course, Briseis is a slave, she's lost everything. She is totally a victim and a passive victim, which actually makes her more difficult to identify with. So, you have to find ways around that. When I got to the stage of editing the book, a word that came up time and time again was agency, does she have agency? And my reply was, "No, she bloody well doesn't have agency, she's a slave." And by definition, a slave is a person with no agency, a slave isn't just treated like a thing, it's internalized, a slave is somebody who starts to think of themselves as a thing. And Briseis has to really battle against that way of experiencing her own personality. It's a long movement back to being able to have agency and to be able to take decisions.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Because in saying that, I was curious about how quickly she seems to slip into that role of a slave and I wonder if part of that was her training until then. So, I'm struck by the relationship with her and her mother-in-law. And the mother-in-law doesn't like her, isn't pleased with her, Briseis hasn't been able to have children, but even before that, she just doesn't seem to like her at all. And yet, they're under attack and she goes to tend to her sick mother-in-law, even though she knows if she was sick, her mother-in-law would not spare her any kindness. So, there are moments when she does the thing that you either don't expect her to do, or she doesn't necessarily have to do. And I wonder if those are moments when ... For me, I felt like I could see her personality and get to start working out how she might think and how she might act. And I was curious what that writing was for you as well?

Pat Barker:

Of course, she hasn't lost everything at that point and when the Greeks break out onto the roof, she is still at that point, a queen, and she steps out in front of the other women, in a sense shielding them from the men who have come in. But that is the last time ... The next time she's seen in public, she's in the arena and she's a slave, and she's being awarded to Achilles by the army. And he turns her head from side to side to assess how pretty she is, and then he walks into the arena and says, "Cheers, lads, she'll do." And at that point, it's hard to fight back because she now has no family, she has no home.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

And I was struck by, she also seems to have so little hope as well, throughout, and yet there's these wonderful relationships that she gets to build with these other slaves, with these other women. And it was such a beautiful part of the book because I think it's something that we don't often get to see, especially in stories about war or about legends, we don't get to see that underside of just the caring and the ways that these women took care of one another and how that might've helped them to survive. How did you, I guess, decide to give us that?

Pat Barker:

Well, I just wondered, who is this woman going to talk to? Because the other women who belonged to Achilles of course, are potential rivals, and she doesn't in fact relate to them particularly, at all. She relates to the women who have been given to the other kings, the prizes, as they're called. And because they are chosen really on their beauty, they come from all walks of life. There's one very young girl who is a priest's daughter, there's another woman who we never are actually told, she was a sex worker in her previous existence, but it's quite clear the way she talks about men, that that's exactly what she was. And there's an older woman who has been in the past, a well-known healer, who acts as a mother figure for some of these women.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

So, you said that you had no qualms with creating Briseis. Was there anything that you were concerned about in creating and developing other characters or the story?

Pat Barker:

Well, yes, I mean, Achilles is a case in point because Achilles regularly chats to a goddess, because his mother is a goddess, and that makes it harder for the reader to relate to Achilles, who is actually a semi-divine being. And the question then is, how do you make this semi-divine being relatable? But there are all sorts of ways of doing this. Well, I was reminded of the first Terminator film, when the Arnold Schwarzenegger character goes to the men's toilet, and while he's there he takes out his eyeballs and gives them a quick rinse under the tap, pops them back in, nobody's relating to him at this point. But then, he does this thing with his hair, he smooths his hair back at the sides, and he looks like a man getting ready to go to the office or go out on a date. And at that moment, you actually warm to him. You relate to him.

So, the great difference always with characters is how are you building a bridge between the reader and your character? And a lot of books do it on relatability, on shared experience. Think of Bridget Jones's Diary, I mean, it was a huge success and it's brilliant, but it

depended on a lot of 30-something, single women reading this book in a wine bar with a glass of Chardonnay in front of them, saying, "Oh my God, this is just like me. I've done that. I've said that." And these ridiculous weight things that she does where she gains one pound, tragedy. Loses two pounds, hallelujah. But women recognise themselves in this.

But you try, as Hilary Mantel has done, to build a bridge between the reader and Anne Boleyn on the eve of her execution in the Tower of London. There is no recognition, none of the readers have ever been in a position, anything like that. And so, you have to find other ways of building empathy. I think ultimately, you build empathy between a character who is totally different, by almost getting down to the animal level. You ask yourself, "What does this person really like to eat? What would be the food they would turn to if they had a really, really horrible day, the kind of day we can barely imagine?" And we all need somewhere safe to sleep, to relax and let go. So, you need to see their safe place. You need to see them in their safe place, eating their comfort food. And at that point, however different their experience is, even if their mother is a goddess or they're a Terminator sent from the future, you can relate to them, you know what it is to want to do those things yourself.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

And I think in the book, you've given us so many wonderful examples of that, of each character being a bit vulnerable, but no matter how arrogant the character might've been, there was still a vulnerability, something that made them human and something that we could connect with. I wondered, how did you know when you had gotten it right? When the characters were as you saw them and they were rich and complex, how did you know, what was your process about, for either the drafting and the editing, and just knowing when yeah, this rings true to what I'm doing?

Pat Barker:

Well, some people say that when you're starting to write a novel, you should know absolutely everything about your characters, eye colour, hair colour, what happened to them in the playground on their first day at school, what their National Insurance number is, et cetera, et cetera, absolutely exhaustive. And I don't agree with that. I think you need a few things which are deeply emotional. You need to know where your character's safe place is. For most people, that's their home, but for Briseis, whose home has been burnt down, it can't be her home. And what she does is to find solace in very early morning walks by the sea. She can't swim, but she wades in. And of course, it's both an area of solace, because she imagines her brothers just out there, not very far away from her, and she's with her brothers. But of course, it's also a temptation, of course, to seek the ultimate safety of just walking in and drowning herself.

Another thing which I think helps is always food. What does this character like to eat? What is their favourite food that they eat when they're curled up in their safe place? Little things like this, they're the absolute animal things. We all need food. We all need shelter, somewhere safe to sleep. And if you're struggling to bring a character to life, you need to put them in that context. The other point I would make about bringing characters to life, and it may be quite a minor character you're having problems with, who isn't a viewpoint

character at all, but I would still say if you're having trouble, write a particular scene in the first-person, from that character's point of view.

That scene may never see the light of day and it may just end up in the wastepaper basket, but it will give you a perspective that you haven't had before. And of course, you've got to be very open in your first draft, you may decide at that point, this is the real viewpoint character, this is what I've been searching for all along, and change your entire plan for the book, which we always have to be ready to do.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Oh my goodness, that's amazing. Yes, that's all so empowering. And I think it's just that reminder that when we're drafting, we're exploring and we don't necessarily know where the story's going to go and it might change direction and be a better story for it. So, thank you so much for that.

Pat Barker:

I do think that if you're writing at speed and you're outpacing your inner critic, that is the moment when you get the really good ideas. You do not get the really good ideas sitting with a cup of coffee and a nice little piece of paper headed, "Synopsis." It depends on your temperament, you may need that to start with, you may need an idea of where you're going, but you have to be prepared to abandon it completely if a better idea shows up.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Oh, I love that. Absolutely love that. Thank you so much for that. Can you talk a bit about what made you write the book at the time and to tell it through Briseis', through her point of view, where did the idea come from to write in response or fill in the gaps of The Iliad?

Pat Barker:

Well, I was interested first of all, in the figure of Achilles, I think, and particularly there's a very famous American psychiatrist, Jonathan Shay, who wrote a book called Achilles in Vietnam. And his professional career was based on treating veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, but he was also a keen amateur classicist. And he noticed that a lot of Achilles' behaviour is the behaviour of a man with PTSD. The frenzies, the berserker moments, were familiar to him from talking to his patients. So once again, that is a link between that very remote past and the more recent past that the American and Vietnamese people lived through. So, I was interested initially in Achilles and I read The Iliad, and as I say, there is this amazing opening scene, the quarrel, in which the women whose lives are being decided, say nothing. And it was immediately obvious to me that my job as a woman writer was essentially to give those silent women a voice.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Oh, I absolutely love that. And I feel like you've 100% done that. And it's through their dialogue, but also through internal thoughts and we get so much access that we wouldn't normally have, it becomes a sort of testimony. What is your writing process like, your drafting process? Do you have a writing regimen, and if so, what does that look like? But I'm really curious how you know when the book is ready, when the manuscript is done?

Pat Barker:

Writing process, I try to write every morning. I have come to think though, that that can be quite a trap because if for some reason, you've got a dental appointment in the middle of the morning, it's quite easy to think, "Oh, well, this day is done as far as writing is concerned." So, I think it helps to be a little bit more flexible, and when I've forced myself to pick up the book in the evening, I find I can write. I'm just kidding myself, that I need to be in a particular place, at a particular time. And then, I try to write quickly from beginning to end. However, I'm a great believer in rubbish first drafts, because as soon as you've got this pile that didn't exist before, there it is and it's pretty awful, but it doesn't matter that it's awful because once it's there, it can be made better. You can't improve a vague concept which is floating around somewhere above your head. If it's a heap of the wrong words, in the wrong order, you can get the right words and put them in the right order.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that idea of it being okay to one, be tired of writing or to feel like, okay, you know what? I can't face this manuscript again. But also, I think so many of us do fall into that trap of thinking we have to write at the crack of dawn. And if for some reason something happens, then that day is done and you can't start again. So, I love that idea of just reminding yourself that it doesn't have to be done and you can just try to write at another time of day that might fit more meaningfully.

Pat Barker:

Yes. Yeah. Be as flexible as you possibly can. I'm in awe of people who write on the backseat of a taxi, but people do, and they write well. Yeah, I'm trying to make myself get over that and think, you don't need total solitude, you don't need total silence. It's just you and the pen and paper, that is all that is needed.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Thank you so much for that because so many of us I think, also look for that perfect writing place and space and time. And if all of these things don't align in order, for some reason, we keep holding ourselves back and thinking we can't write, and creating these barriers. So, thank you for that reminder to just be flexible and give it a try.

Pat Barker:

Yes. Yeah. Can I tell you about my best thing to actually get going? So, this is product placement. There is a tomato shaped food timer called a Pomodoro, and I've got one of those and I will set it sometimes for 10 minutes, and at the end of 10 minutes, it tings. And I just tell myself that for those 10 minutes, I am going to write something. Doesn't have to be good, it just has to be there on the screen or on the page. And you can't possibly say, "Oh, but I haven't got 10 minutes." And that is the thing, you are asking so little of yourself, that you really have to step up to the plate then, and actually do it. So, I would say get a tomato, that's the way to become a writer.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that. And you know what, right after this, I'm going to try to find this tomato and give it a try, because you're right, 10 minutes, it's so much easier to sit down and know that for 10 minutes, and even if it stretches longer, that's great, but knowing that it's 10 minutes of your day, you can do that.

Pat Barker:

Yeah, absolutely, you can do that. There's really very little excuse for not finding that 10 minutes. And once you're into it of course, you think, "Well, it's not so bad. That's an interesting idea." And you pursue it a little further, but even if you don't, it doesn't matter. You can come back to it later.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that. Yes, right after this, I'm getting myself a tomato timer.

Pat Barker:

And the other thing is that we're all told that sitting is the new smoking. In other words, sitting at your computer for long hours is going to kill you. So, you are meant actually, to interrupt your flow and get up and move around, and that overcomes all the negative effects on your health. So, the tomato is saving your life as well.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Wow. I love it. I'm sold. Thank you. Can I ask, a lot of times when writers are writing something that they have to do a lot of research to prepare for, or that requires research in other texts, how do you find balance between your researching and the writing and the balance of that?

Pat Barker:

I do a fair amount of research in a block at the beginning and then I try not to check. When I'm writing the rubbish first draft, which just has to be finished, I don't check on aspects of the research. I might scribble a note on it and say, "Check this. It doesn't sound right." But I don't actually break off and check it at the time. If you're always running back to your research, it hampers the imagination, because you can't write a novel out of research, you have to write a novel out of your imagination. And the only way to do that, in my experience, is to write at speed and switch off the inner critic, but also switch off the researcher as well.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that idea of switching off the researcher. I find even when I'm writing something, that I'll stop and be like, "Wait, was that invented then?" Or, "What does that look like?" Or, "How does that work?" But I like the idea of just switching that off a bit and writing forward, because I can always go back to it.

Pat Barker:

Yes. Yeah. And it also helps to, if it's a very research heavy book, it helps to have your main character first person. Because, what was the price of sausages in 1537? Doesn't matter if

it's first-person, she always hated sausages anyway. It's not the world at that time, it's the world that's experienced by this man or this woman, and that is easier.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Thank you. I'm definitely going to be leaning into that. Can you talk a little bit about what other research you did do to put into the book, besides re-reading The Iliad?

Pat Barker:

Almost nothing, apart from The Iliad. One or two books on Homer, I read the Odyssey, obviously. And the other thing I did always was to read about the experiences of women in contemporary wars, like the Yazidi girls who were kidnapped by ISIS and put in the slave market and sold, or women in the Democratic Republic of Congo. All the areas, and they are surprisingly common, where rape is used as an instrument of war, because this is what is happening to the women in The Iliad. The men and the boys, even the boy babies, are killed, the women and the girls are enslaved and impregnated. How do you kill a people? How do you commit genocide? You kill the males and you impregnate the females. At that point, a whole people has disappeared. And that is being done in the modern world.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

You allow the reader to enter into these conversations, into these global conversations, and local and regional conversations, theoretically from this point of fiction, but also weaving in these contemporary issues and looking at it and helping us to recognise ourselves and our fears and our concerns, and our stories within the world of fiction. So, thank you so much for that representation and that voice.

Pat Barker:

It was very important for me to weave in the present because A, it's very easy to say, "This is the remote past. Things are not like this now." But they are like this now. And the other temptation of course is to say, "Well, perhaps things are like this now, but not here, not where I live." And yet, there are women being trafficked for sex in the UK, in America, in other modernised democracies, women and children are trafficked for sexual purposes, and this is slavery.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

When you think about writing, and writing can be such an active form of activism and advocacy, what advice might you give to writers who are looking at the way the world is and there's issues and challenges and fears and things that we would like to change. And maybe, we want to write about it and explore it in fiction, what advice might you give for writers?

Pat Barker:

To try to be brave and to push yourself, but also you've got to have the faith to believe that publishers will recognise talent and originality. And unless you're writing bravely in your own voice, you can't offer them those things. I do think there are worrying signs that people are double guessing what other people will be offended by, and a form of self-censorship can very easily creep in. And of all the forms of censorship, of course, self-censorship is the worst of the lot, because no creativity is possible with self-censorship.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think you're right. And that advice to be brave, because I think it's right, how there are people who, when you want to have certain discussions with them, there is that idea of whatever that concern is, "It's not happening here. We're not a part of it." Or, "It doesn't affect us." When, you're right, there's slavery happening now and it does affect us and it is right where we are. And it doesn't go away if we don't talk about it.

Pat Barker:

Yeah, that's right.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

We're often told that each book teaches you something or teaches you how to write it. And you've written phenomenal books, and so I don't know if it remains true or something that continues to happen for you, but is there anything, and if there is, what might it have been, that this book either taught you about writing it or about yourself through the writing of it?

Pat Barker:

Yeah, all the way through my career, I've very, very rarely used the first-person, and I think it taught me that for this particular subject, which is the silences of women, the first person is virtually essential. It would have felt like another form of silencing if I hadn't given that woman her individual voice.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Well, Pat, thank you so much for giving her a voice and for this wonderful book. If I could ask for one tip that writers who are developing their drafts, and they're looking at how to develop a character, and maybe they're struggling with it, or they need to really get into there. What one tip might you offer writers looking to develop characters?

Pat Barker:

Ask yourself, "What is the relationship of my likely readers to this character?" Am I asking them to recognise their own experience in the character? Or am I asking them to exercise empathy by getting into the life of a character whose experience is different from their own? Because those are two very different sets of techniques. One isn't better than the other, but you do need to be aware of the difference.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Thank you so much, and for spending time with us to allow us to ask questions about your process and your craft. It's been such an honour to talk to you. Thank you so much.

Pat Barker:

And it's been a real pleasure. It's always good to be asked to reflect about your work instead of just going on and on. So, it's valuable for me too.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Inspired by the discussion with Pat Barker and developing character and *Silence of the Girls*, this exercise focuses on developing character. First, using a character you create for this exercise, one you've been writing or a character you want to know better, historical, fictional, mythical, et cetera, do a quick character sketch to explore their now. Where are they? What do they want? What stands in the way? What are they afraid of? What do you know about them? What are you curious about? This exercise might also include what they look like, their name, or anything you'd like to know. It can be as robust as you find useful.

Now, put them in opposition with another character. This character might be the antagonist or a minor character. What do you know about this character? What do they want you to know? What do they want? What stands in the way? Once you have this opposition character in mind, let them describe in first-person, your original character in their own voice. This description might include physical, emotional, and/or psychological description, discussion of class, personality, whatever the opposition character knows or thinks they know.

It'll be based on what the character has access to, their experience of your character, and their own perceptions. This is an opportunity to uncover insights into both characters. What do you find out? Once you finished letting them have their say, go back to your original character and let them respond. They might defend themselves and provide a counter-narrative, or maybe they'll use this time to describe the other character. You can find out a lot about a character by what they reveal and the secrets they keep. What do you find out about each character? What do you want to know more about? Whatever keeps you curious might be worth further exploring through writing.

That brings to a close our exploration of character development. Thanks again to my guest, Pat Barker. Her book, *The Silence of the Girls*, is available at all major bookshops and libraries. *Write Your Novel* was presented by me, Yvonne Battle-Felton, and it was produced by Candace Wilson. The music is composed by Joe Gardner. This is a Sonderbug production, funded by Arts Council England and supported by New Writing North. Next time, we continue dissecting the writing process when I'm joined by Sarah Moss, talking about how to use setting in your novel. See you there. And if you want to know more, you can follow me on Twitter @YBattleFelton. The conversation continues on Discord, on the Write Your Novel server. Head over to the New Writing North website for details on how to sign up.