

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. 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.

In this episode, I'm joined by writer and academic Sarah Moss. Three of her books have been shortlisted for the Wellcome Book Prize, and Sarah's 2018 novel *Ghost Wall* was longlisted for the 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction. Born in Glasgow before moving to Manchester, her childhood was spent visiting rural Yorkshire and climbing mountains in the Lake District. It's said that these are the landscapes which feel home to her; something which is apparent through her body of work. Today we're talking about her latest novel, *Summerwater*.

The novel follows multiple complex characters over a 24-hour period. What connects their story is where they all are: a cabin park in the remote Scottish Highlands. But as we see glimpses into their stories, we explore the idea of connectivity even further against the backdrop of the divided society they live in. The area of focus for our discussion is on developing setting. Setting can develop character, tension, narrative, pacing and plot. First, Sarah reads out a passage of the book to set up our discussion.

Sarah Moss:

This is Justine setting off for her run.

Both hands to ease the door handle, stop at the children's door to unravel two sets of breathing. Dither about whether to take the one key, leaving them locked-in and needing to go through the windows in a fire.

The windows being low and easy to open, and there being no plausible cause of fire just now, or leave the key meaning that she can't lock the door, and there were three beloved souls sleeping undefended in the woods, or at least two beloved souls and one mostly tolerated one.

Fire she thinks is more likely than murderous nutters. You do hear of psychopaths hanging out in Holiday Parks, but only in America. And the good thing about being at the end of a 10-mile single track road is that the getaway options are crap. Unless of course, the nutter plans to hide in the woods until dark. But it's not much dark this time of year. Wouldn't the police bring dogs? Or he could swim across the lock, at least if he'd thought to bring a wetsuit, or she. Women can probably be serial killers too. Wasn't the one in Japan? Though that was life insurance fraud more than sadism, not that it makes much difference to the victims. Though a fraudster probably kills you faster than a sadist, so maybe it does.

You'd need to get into the wetsuit before embarking on your murderous games. Not something you want to be doing between committing a crime and leaving the scene. Even

worse than putting on a sports bra. Jesus, look at that rain. There's almost no point putting clothes on for that. If she'd brought a swimming costume, she'd wear it.

One thing, it can't keep up like that all day. There can't be that much water up there. She sits on the veranda to fasten her shoes, to adjust her armband and choose her music. She should probably run mindfully here, listening to the wind in the trees and the lapping of the lock, and any birds deranged enough to attempt flight in the deluge. But fuck that. She needs music for her feet. Music to connect her feet to the ground so she doesn't have to think about it. It's not, she sees, even half five yet. She can have two hours if she wants them, get in a quick 20K. Though if she does that, she'll be eating all day and the kids wanting a snack every time they see her. But she knows she's going to do it anyway. She's got four peanut protein bars tucked into her packet of sanitary towels in the suitcase, the only place no one else is likely to look. And she's not too proud to eat them in the bathroom if she has to.

And off. Feet pattering, heart and lungs surprise to laboring, cold water on bed warm skin. And why is she doing this again, exactly?

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

You start with that setting right there. I know for me, I was hooked. I was intrigued. It's so vividly descriptive. You capture this place, and I'm going to use quotes. So, "Where the sounds of water on leaves and bark, on roofs and stones, windows and cars become as constant as the sounds of blood and air in your body." We meet Justine, and she's unable to sleep. She's tucked inside the cabin in bed with the wall, quote, "Less than a foot from her face," lying next to a man she, quote, "settled for." She can't sleep, she's restless.

Then early in the morning, she's stepping over cracks, so she doesn't wake up her husband who will whine and want to have sex. There's something about her learning the sounds of the cabin, to navigate her way through it, that suggests something about Justine and her relationship with Steve. Throughout Summerwater, the characters are cooped up and trapped in one way or the other, in their cabins, in their relationships, in their routines and circumstances. I'm curious, how do you approach the setting in terms of place and what comes first, the idea of the story, the characters, the place in their situation?

Sarah Moss:

I always start with a place. I think all of my books have started with a place. I know when I go to a place, if there's a story in it. There's something about particular places. I mean, I don't write novels for all of the places that have novels in them. But I have this sense of kind of, "Oh, yes, there's something." It's almost archeological. There's this stuff here that I could find or that will come out or that will come to me if I work on it.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

So I'm curious. What's possible here in these cabins, in the woods, with the rain, and the rain and the rain? Where people, they're isolated, they're on holiday. They're in and out of various stages of relationships. What's possible here that isn't possible in Manchester or London or New York?

Sarah Moss:

That's such a good question, and not one anybody's asked before. I think what's possible is for the characters to have encounters with themselves and each other. Because what I've done by putting them in that setting, and particularly taking away the internet and the phones, is to put them in a situation where a lot of the usual distractions or ways of soothing ourselves are gone. You force people to confront themselves and to confront their immediate relationships without any of that scaffolding that we usually have. I think that's something that would be very hard to do, not so much in a city, but in a place where people are at home and surrounded by their usual resources.

I remember discovering the first time we tried to go on holiday with babies that - I remember my husband saying, it's exactly as difficult as normal life, except without any of the things that make normal life possible. There's no childcare. You can't go to the swings, you don't know where to buy nappies at 2:00 in the morning. All of this stuff that enables function in the early days of parenthood was just gone. Then we were supposed to be having a nice time, and it wasn't at all. I think to some extent, holidays are always like that. That's what makes them interesting that you're actually not comfortable. I mean, you go there with this idea that it's going to be pleasurable and fun. But you've taken away a lot of the things that would bring you pleasure and fun.

So I think that's what's going on there, having removed them and isolated them, they don't have their friends. I mean, it's a bit like lockdown. They can't get away from each other by going to work or going to school. If somebody is cross they can't just, I mean, they can go out for a walk. But the cost of doing that in the rain on your own, in an unfamiliar place where there's only one road is much higher than if you can just go stomp around the block for bit.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

That makes complete sense because it was such a part of the book, of the experience. It was so woven and layered. It does seem like you know how sometimes you read something, and it seems like it could be anywhere in the world. This story feels like it could be right here where it is. We meet Justine. She's quite interesting to me. She's in the cabin, she's about to go for this early morning run. The prep, it's really detailed. So in some levels, it's really humorous. In some ways, it's also kind of sad.

Then she's considering whether to leave the key and risk a serial killer murdering her, quote, "three precious breaths or two precious breaths and one tolerated one." Then during this, she wonders if that's actually only in America. Or if she's to take the key and risk a random fire raging through the cabin with her family stuck inside, trying to escape through the window.

She's facing this torrential rain. Then she's constantly engaging with the world around her. It develops Justine, the narrative and the tone. I'm curious, how do you balance what you know is there so you know there are things that she doesn't engage with. Maybe there's a kettle, and maybe there's a TV, maybe there's ... And she may not engage with that in certain ways. So knowing what you know about that space, how do you balance what you know is there with what the readers need to know?

Sarah Moss:

It's not conscious. I'm absolutely not thinking what am I trying to tell the reader here and what is Justine not thinking about? I suppose I'm kind of in character. So when she's thinking

about the noises the cabin makes, I'm very interested in writing setting without depending entirely on sight. That's something I'm very often pushing students to do, try and write with your ears, try and write with your nose, try and write with your fingers. Because we know the world through all of our bodies, not just our eyes. I suppose in Justine's case, and what I'd say now returning as a reader, is that she's not at all interested in the kettle or the television. She's not in kitchen mode at all. She's getting out for her run.

So she's very focused on her body and how that... What's on her skin? How do her clothes feel on her? Can she get to her shoes? Can she get to her phone. I mean, she is escaping. I think it's the way you would escape in a fire. You'd be thinking, if it's smoky over there, and it's hot over there, can I get through? Can I get under? What do I need to get out of here. That's what she's thinking about.

The rest of it is going to wait I mean, she's going to have the rest, another 24 hours before she can go running again. So there are going to be kids, and there's going to be breakfast and meals and laundry and all the rest of it. But for now, she just needs to get out of there. So that's what she's looking at. That gives the reader a sense of her. But also I think, for many readers, an unfamiliar sense of what it's like to be in a place. I mean, from what people say, that chapter works if you're a runner and if you're not a runner. Because if you're running, you recognize it. If you're not a runner, then you're being invited into a different kind of bodily experience.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think you're right because I'm not a runner, and I still felt like completely engaged and immersed. I could see and feel and hear what this is like for this character.

Sarah Moss:

Good.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

So thank you for the invitation into that world because I will not be entering it otherwise. So speaking of this world, so there's a complete world around them. There's the woods, lock, the nonstop rain, the geography of it all. Then also the political setting, and Brexit, the hostile environment, climate change, their own relationships, and all these things contribute to the setting, the tension. What is your process when it comes to how your characters engage with that wider world and how your readers engage with it as well? You invited us to think about quite a few things.

Sarah Moss:

I just think about how those things affect individual lives. I mean, if I wanted to write about the hostile environment or climate change in a persuasive way, I wouldn't choose a novel. I don't think didactic novels are ... I was going to say I don't think they work - that's probably too sweeping. I don't think they work for me, I don't want to write a novel that's explaining to people why they ought to care about the environment or why they ought to go campaign. I mean, I do care about the environment, and I do campaign. But I think that's separate from the work of writing for me.

I mean, given that that book was... I wrote it, what, a year and a half ago, a year ago, set in the present or the near future, those concerns were all very alive and very much part of our lives at the time. So I didn't think now, let's get the hostile environment in, and now I need to say something about Brexit. But the reason some of those characters are there in that Holiday Park is because of Brexit. They're not going abroad seeing that they can't afford it, they don't want to or whatever it is. And they're a little bit sad. Some of them are sad because they feel as if they've been cut off from Europe and from places they would have liked to go. And some of them are happy about it and want more of it and think it hasn't gone far enough. That just seemed to me to be what it was like living in Britain in those months.

Also one of the things I'm interested in in this book is what happens when people are forced into community. I thought about it a lot more during lockdown, but lockdown meant that we absolutely had to forge ways of supporting each other. It was the question Summerwater asked that in some ways COVID answered. In an emergency, is there enough community left among people who were arbitrarily put next to each other in the UK? Not is there enough community left among the people we already agree with? Because we knew that the answer to that one was yes. But come the emergency, come the fire, come the plague, come the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, is there enough fabric of civil society left that people who disagree with each other radically over all sorts of hugely important issues, can make enough common ground to survive the emergency? That's really the question of Summerwater. But it became a much more urgent question with COVID.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love how novels can answer or can be used to explore these questions, both for the writer and for the reader. Can we talk about ... So you have these enriched or these full, robust, complex human characters, and you also have ... So there's the land's story and nature's story. We get to see these glimpses, these entire stories, and often one page of the animals as it moves through day to night, and their anticipation of something's about to happen, and the effects of the rain, and the hunger. It's just absolutely beautiful and is quite powerful. I felt like as a reader, it reminds us that these places, they have stories that predates us, and our imagined usefulness. Can you talk a bit about your decision to give us the story in the setting, and the characters in that way to explore the land?

Sarah Moss:

Yeah, that's another lovely question I don't get asked as often as I would like to. Those little bits, we ended up calling them the interstitial bits, nobody quite had a name for them. They were part of that serious play in that experiment. I've always been a bit worried by writing about animals because the thing animals don't do is write. I mean, that given that the whole difference between humans and animals is about the use of language, I find that trying to write from an animal point of view is just fundamentally flawed from the beginning. It's a failure to recognize the otherness of animals, which is why writing about animals is always actually writing about people, because you can't write from a hare's point of view because hares don't have words. However they're experiencing the world is not accessible to us.

But at the same time, I was thinking about human bodies as part of the ecosystem, which we are. I always find it very odd when people talk about nature writing or they say, "Oh, you write about the natural world." I think, well, what do you think we are? Are we not natural?

Are our body's not part of the natural? Is a pandemic not part of the natural world? The idea that nature is somehow beyond us and outside us and is just about cute dolphins in the water, or donkeys in a field. It's our food, it's our bodies, it's the beating of our own hearts and the exchange of gases in our own lungs. So I always find that division really odd. And I was thinking - it's partly a running thought and partly a running in the rain thought - about the water passing over your body and the water moving around within your body. I was thinking about the water cycle and about water that runs, comes down through your hair and runs over your body and into the earth, and then down through the aquifers and into the lock and out to sea, and then the sun shines, and it goes and comes around again.

You're such a tiny part of that. Or even if you're not out in the rain, you drink the water, you pee, it gets purified, it goes out and it comes back around again. The same with air and food. Everything that we need is passing through us as part of a much bigger cycle. I was thinking about the movement of mountains and rocks because they are always moving. I mean, we think of them as permanent, but they're not. They're just moving very, very, very slowly.

Of course, there were stories; what I found is that I can't actually sustain that writing for more than a couple of paragraphs because what animal lives lack really is a plot. I mean, the water cycle is the extent of the plot of the raindrop. You can do the water cycle in about three sentences. So those bits had to be short, but I just wanted there to be these eruptions of the real world, of the things that are bigger and smaller and faster and slower than the humans, in and around the human stories.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

It was absolutely beautiful. It's interesting that you wouldn't want to write a longer I guess piece just like with all of that because I could read that from you like all day long. It was absolutely beautiful.

Sarah Moss:

I don't think I can. It just doesn't stay interesting.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Fair point. I found it lovely, but I wasn't the one writing it.

Sarah Moss:

No, no. I mean, it doesn't stay interesting to the reader. I mean, I can do it forever because I love it. But there just isn't enough plot.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

But some of them, they were so ... I don't know. They were so poignant though. One of them, I guess being concerned or wondering - I think it was the vixen - about if I don't get hit by a car and if this doesn't happen, if this doesn't, then I'll come home to feed them or she'll come in and make it back to feed them. I mean, I was crying at those parts of it. But if we go back to some other parts, there's beautiful description just throughout. I had to say one of my favorite ones, and it's a quote again, "There are some small boats of boys in every century who never came back home, and the water holds the hand stitches of their clothes,

and the cow ghosts of their shoes, and the ambulance that did not help when they were needed." It was just like, wow.

So is this place based on a real place that you've been to, that you've seen?

Sarah Moss:

Yeah, it's unusually autobiographical for me. It's actually one of few places I've been back to throughout my life. I've moved around a lot nationally and internationally. I don't normally go back because every time you leave a place, you leave a life you're not living. I find it quite hard to go back and find the ghost of the version of myself who stayed. So usually I don't. But this place, my mother says I learned to walk there, which can't be true because it's these huge, stony beaches. I mean, these really bad places where walking, particularly if you're very small. But I certainly learned to swim in that water as a baby. I've been back every, I don't know, every couple of years ever since. I now have very good friends who live near there. So when I visit them we go. So it's one of few places that I've really returned to and grown from my entire life. So yes, it's real. The last time we went, it was almost autobiographical. We took the kids. We had a holiday in Scotland that year, and we rented a cabin in this holiday park, and it rained the entire. Well, I keep saying it rained for seven days. But I don't know because at the end of six, we reckoned we made a pretty good job of it and left.

I looked around these cabins and thought, "Why has nobody written a novel set in a caravan park? This is such an obvious thing to do." Because we were all watching each other. Well, I was watching everybody. I'm sure everybody was watching me. It was the only thing to do really. I told the kids there was going to be WiFi, I thought there was going to be WiFi. Then we got there and there wasn't. And you could get it - if you stood right at the end of the jetty, you could sometimes pick up a couple of bars of mobile phone signal. But otherwise that was it. It was in a black spot. These teenagers, it was a really, really bad thing to do. Then it rained all the time. So at least I got a novel out of it.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I feel almost bad for laughing. But it does. It sounds like it would inspire a horror. On one hand, I'm thinking, poor you, poor the children, poor your partner, just all of you, and everyone else of course that was there. I love that it inspired you to write a story just based on that experience. I'm curious, so this Summerwater in your story... how close to that? How much does that resemble the real place? How important is or isn't that that it does?

Sarah Moss:

Much more than in any of my other books. I think almost all of the others have started with a real place that I knew. But then I've fiddled with it and I've moved things around. Certainly in Ghost Wall, I had to rearrange the geography of Northeast England really quite fundamentally because I needed to see, basically I needed Newcastle not to be there for that novel to work. So I just fictionalized the geography of Northeast England to take Newcastle out of the way.

I mean my neo Victorian novels are both set in Manchester, which I knew intimately. I didn't change it at all. But I did of course remove 150 years of history from it. So mostly, I've changed things quite a lot. With this, one very little actually, to the extent that I did wonder about just using the real names. I don't know there's something about actually saying it's

here, here it is, find it on the map, go visit it, that makes me really uncomfortable with a novel. So I didn't and I'm always a bit cagey about exactly where it is. People who know Scotland I think will know where it is. But yeah, I don't want to put a pin in the map because I wanted to retain that kind of fictional existence as well.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that extra layer too, that people who know Scotland will know where it is. It might feel like okay, this is the place. So it just seems like it's that extra level or layer of intimacy with the reader. I also like that permission to change things, so you erased 150 years from history, where we do that in our drafts all the time, don't we? We change things, and we move things around. So doing it historically, now that you say it, you're like, "Yeah, you know what, sometimes the past is inconvenient." So thank you for giving I think all of us that spark and that permission if we needed it to make those changes.

Sarah Moss:

I think it's the joy of fiction. You can of course write very grounded fiction. I mean, think about Hilary Mantel, you can write kind of archivally correct fiction, but I also think it's fiction. You can do everything from turning the sky purple to erasing Newcastle, if it's getting in the way, it's fine. As long as it's fiction and you own it as fiction.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think that's wonderfully ... I think it just feels right. But it also feels like something that I personally needed to be reminded of because I do look for ... when I'm writing, I do look for the logic of it. Is this clear? Does this ring true? I know when I was writing *Remembered*, and I was trying to find a condition, a medical condition. I'm not a doctor, and medical conversations make my own body hurt. But I was looking for something that my character might have that was going to be genetic, and all these different things. I was on this forum for for medical doctors. One of them was like, "You're a writer. Couldn't you just make it up?" I was thinking, I mean, I could. Why did I want it to be real? It's not even like, I wanted people to try this herb I was making up so they could see if it would kill them. Because I mean, if I was right. So you're right, that it's fiction. At some point, it's I guess taking ownership of it's fiction and letting it go, where it's going to go.

Sarah Moss:

There's something really interesting though about what you can and can't invent. Because when you were talking about finding a medical condition, I would think, "Yeah, I've absolutely phoned up my friend who's a GP and said, okay, I need an illness that fits the following criteria." I've never invented an illness, but I will quite happily invent geography. I mean, the other thing is I invent songs in the book that I'm writing, the one that's coming out in November. I've got a character dancing to some 70 songs. In the draft I sent to my editor, I'd quoted them, and she kind of went, "Do you know how complicated the permissions for this are going to be?" I thought, "Yeah, yeah, it's going to be really complicated." Okay, fine. I'll just write some 1970s rock songs, it's not difficult. That was what I did. So I'm perfectly happy to do that. I wrote about them as if these were the iconic ballads of the hour and fine, because it's much cheaper than quoting the iconic ballads of the hour. But I don't know why I'm willing to invent things that were in the top 10 in the 70s,

but not an illness. I guess different writers have different, yeah, a different sense of power there.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think you're right. I wonder for me if it's because I do have an aversion to medical conversations. So maybe I feel like it's someplace I wouldn't comfortably have tread anyway.

Sarah Moss:

Yeah, that's interesting because I'm fascinated by medicine and biology, and I always have been. I like knowing a lot about it. So that also means I'm perfectly happy to read medical journals and badger doctors until I've got the right illness because I'm just really interested in how the body works and how it doesn't work.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I was also curious about ... What is your writing, I guess, your process like? You have fantastic book after book after book. Then how do you maintain that writing rhythm or momentum?

Sarah Moss:

I was thinking you haven't seen the ones I didn't publish. [laughter] Nobody ever will. The writing of a first draft is pretty quick. I mean, I write quite fast, but I edit very slowly and repeatedly and carefully. I will go on editing for as long as anybody will let me. I mean, eventually, my editor has to say, "Okay, come on. It's time, it's time. Give it here, give it here. I'm taking it now you've got to stop now." Because I'll go on moving commas around and taking an adjective out and putting it back in again, and taking it out again, and changing which to that for as long as anybody will let me do that. But I can write 2000 words in a day quite easily when I'm doing it the first time. But then I might cut loads of those words later.

So I have a thinking-research-discovery phase, which is about... I'm always aware when I'm out and about in that mood that I'm much more sensitive to what's around me. There's a sense of patterns coming out. I mean, you know this. If you're looking for a pattern, they start appearing, right? Writers are partly pattern spotters and pattern makers.

So when I'm in that mood, I notice patterns and plots and stories and places in a way that I don't once I'm already committed to a particular fictional world. That's quite an exciting phase. Then I will work out what kind of thing ... I mean, if it needs research, there'll be various elements to that research. For Summerwater, I was looking for books set in one day, books with multiple points of view, whatever the issue is, books about the experience of dementia.

It's this kind of magpie, "Okay, what are the questions I'm trying to answer here? How have other people answered them? What can I learn from the ways other people have answered them?" Then just what stimulus do I pick up while I'm doing this? Then there's the right, okay, let's write the first draft weeks, which are often quite short for me because that's just messy. That's just getting the thing so that it exists and so that I can start working on it.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I'm curious about the editing, just your writing process in general, what was the editing and drafting the book like? How many drafts did you take overall? Then I have a really specific, like how many drafts did that first page take?

Sarah Moss:

I don't know. My drafts are always uncountable, because I just go over and over and over and over. I only ever have one version of the document, which is partly because my version compliance is terrible. If I have more than that, I'd end up not knowing which one I was working on, and it would be disastrous. So yeah, I erased the previous draft as I go, there isn't an archive of drafts. There's only though the one, because I erase everything as I go along.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I might try that.

Sarah Moss:

It works very well for me. Some people find it horrifying. If you're good at saving things and knowing which one you're working on, it's probably fine. But I'm not at all.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I feel like I want to try it. But then I feel like there's this little voice going, "No."

Sarah Moss:

Is that because of the possibility of going back though? Is it the idea that you could restore it to its previous form if you don't like the current draft?

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I'm not sure. I was thinking about this the other day. I was writing. Well, I was writing and I was taking out chunks and like sections of it, and putting them into each book or story has like a bloopers file. So I was putting it in there. I was thinking, "Wow, why are you doing that?" Because I had a whole other version saved with it, like in that format. When I look back at it, my poor laptop, I have multiple files. I have some from in the summer. So by month, and I don't know if I'm thinking one day, I'm going to finish it and then be like, "You know what was a lot better? The one five drafts ago." Going like voila, here it is.

Sarah Moss:

Yeah, you can keep them in order. You can keep them kind of archived.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

So far I can. I don't know how long my laptop's memory will let me do that. So there is that. But I think what I'll do, I think I'll try it with a short story.

Sarah Moss:

Yeah.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Then if that works, I'll try it with two. Then if that works, I'll gradually work my way out.

Sarah Moss:

That sounds like the way to change that kind of thing. Yeah.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that. I think I'm going to be using that. I try to look at drafts as places where anything is possible, and where it's okay if it doesn't yet make sense or come together.

Sarah Moss:

Yes. Yeah. Because it's like building the road in front of you or walking on very thin ice or something. You only find out whether the ice will bear your weight by walking on it. Sometimes it won't. But if it does, you'll get to somewhere you wouldn't have gotten to any other way.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that, and also how you don't talk about what happens if you fall through.

Sarah Moss:

Well, you won't drown. They're only words, you're going to have to go back and start again.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

That's true. I think that's right. It takes a lot of pressure I think off of the writing of it and lets you enjoy it and experiment.

Sarah Moss:

Yeah. I'm always saying to students, "Think of it as serious play." I mean take your writing seriously, because it's a serious endeavor, and you're devoting serious time to it. But within that seriousness, there has to be play. That's difficult teaching because people who've come through school and even often into university, have been set up, "How do I get the marks? What do I have to do? What are the assessment criteria? How can I tick the boxes? Which hoops do I have to jump?" That's not how you make art of any kind.

See, you have to flip that. I tell students I'll give them good marks for interesting failures. That you'll actually get a better mark if you take an experiment that goes pear shaped than if you don't take the experiment at all, because that's the only way within that environment, you can get students to play and to experiment, to dance and see what happens, and mess things up in an interesting and creative way without hating themselves for it. You just have to leverage the marks the other way.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I absolutely love that. Can I ask, you've given us so much advice even in there, that we can take from it. For someone who's listening who's grappling with setting and maybe it's not working or they're not sure where to start, what advice might you give them?

Sarah Moss:

If there's a place that you that you're basing your setting on, go there as many times as you can, at least some of the time without a notebook. Be there and think about your senses. Don't just think about what it looks like. Close your eyes for as long as you safely can. Think about what it sounds like. Think about what it smells like. If you can touch things, go and touch things. Lean on walls, touch leaves, whatever you can do. Know it with your body, not just with your eyes. If it's an invented setting, you can still do that. I mean it won't be a physical outing, but really in your mind, move around it with your eyes closed. Think about what you can hear, think about what you can smell, think about how it feels. What is it like on your skin? What is it like under your feet? What is it like in your hair? Whatever it may be. Know it quite separately from the story so that you're not thinking, "Okay, what does Justine see at 5:00 this morning?" Because then by the time you get to thinking what does Justine see, you already know. You don't have to think about what do the walls look like or is the kettle plastic or metal or whatever that might be because you already know.

I think for me in a first draft, there might be extraneous stuff that can come out later. But I think writers do things differently... I mean, some people are very slow to write. But once they've written, that's kind of it, and it's staying that way. Other people are very fast, messy, splashy writers who cut a lot and change a lot and delete a lot and generally make a mess, which is me. I don't think there's a correct way of doing it. It's very clear that different ways of doing it work for different people, and probably for different books as well.

I mean, yeah, that's certainly true in my experience. Some books are much more planned, and some books are much more winged. So I think with every book, what you have to learn is how you write this book, which may not be how anybody else would write it or how you write anything else. You have to come to that kind of open to, to what the book wants and what you can do. I think that's as true of setting as of anything else. But the better you relay, the closer your knowledge of the setting, the less you're going to have to worry about it when you're actually writing because it will be there.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

That is such wonderful, generous advice. Thank you so much. It has been an absolute privilege and delight to talk to you. Thank you for your generosity, of course, for this beautiful book, for the characters and the story, for making us think and feel, but also letting us see and hear and imagine this beautiful setting that you've dropped us in. So thank you so much.

Sarah Moss:

Thank you. You have such great questions. I really enjoyed that.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Inspired by Sarah Moss's *Summerwater*, this exercise will begin to help you answer the question, "What's possible here?" This exercise should take about 30 minutes. You might do this all in one go or return to it. You may find that it takes you longer or shorter. That's fine.

Let's start this exercise with a place you know. This might be where you live, a place you visited, a place you keep going back to or an imagined place. Now make a list. Go through

each of the senses to explore what the place sounds, looks, feels, smells, and tastes like. Be as descriptive as possible. Remember, this is a draft.

Be lush and bold. Take risks, make up words, use words you like the sounds of, that convey the sound you want to evoke. Take your time. It might be useful to draw comparisons to other places, objects and things. Write in sentences or bullet points.

Next, what is it like to be in this place? This might include the geography, but it might also include technology, society, politics, the place's history and more. Knowing what you know about the place, what might happen here? What stories does this place lend itself to? You can go back later to research things like what did happen, if that's useful. But for now, it's just you and what you know already.

Later, it might be useful to add sketches, pictures, and other details to bring the setting to life. A setting is something we return to; characters engage with it throughout the story. A smell might trigger a memory. A sound might make an awkward conversation necessary. An enclosure might change a heated debate to a whispered one. We engage with different elements of a place, at different points in the draft. This exercise is to help you lay the groundwork, focus on setting and create a resource you can return to as you develop your draft and answer the question, "What's possible here?"

That's it for setting. So thanks again to my guest, Sarah Moss. The book, *Summerwater* is available at all libraries and major bookshops. Write your novel was presented by me, Yvonne Battle-Felton. It was produced by Candace Wilson. Music was by Joe Gardner. It was Sonderbug production for New Writing North with the support of Arts Council England.

Next time, Irenosen Okojie joins me to talk about using description when writing a novel. See you there. If you want to know more, you can follow me on Twitter, @YBattleFelton. Don't forget 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.