

HANNAH Richell

The Inspiration behind The River Home

'Where does your inspiration come from?'

I think this might be the question I am asked most as a writer, though strangely, it's also the question I find hardest to answer.

A novel begins with a few loose threads – a glimmer of an idea – a smattering of thoughts. By the time it is complete, however, a writer will have woven a fabric of many lives, settings, layers and stories into a bigger whole. What might have started as a simple, nostalgic recollection from childhood, or an observation of a group of strangers, an overheard fragment, a whispered secret or a news story that grabs hold and refuses to let go, can soon spiral into sprawling and surprising new territory. Things rarely unfold in the exact way you imagine when you first tackle the blank page. Characters have an uncanny ability to take on a life of their own and mess with the most meticulous of plots. A narrative can veer off course, or sprout new and intriguing limbs. By the time a novel is published, remembering what those initial early threads and ideas once were can be a difficult, forensic process.

Casting back, I remember *The River Home* began with the desire to write something life-affirming and uplifting. I realise that this might seem a little strange to some readers who have reached the end of the novel and travelled through the various traumas and tragedies that the Sorrells experience, but my intention was to write about a loving, dysfunctional family reuniting for a big, joyful wedding. I had been through my own personal sadness after the sudden death of my husband in 2014, and after a long, deep period of mourning, I felt ready to focus on the joys of living. What could be more uplifting than writing about a family reuniting for a celebration of love?

A compelling story, however, needs tension. Where is the drama in everyone getting along and having a wonderful, happy time? Of course weddings, with all their high emotion can be pressured events; and not every family delights in the idea of reunion, but I started to think about writing a novel where the wedding wasn't just a 'normal' wedding? What if there was another, more urgent reason for it to take place?

I realised, as I thought more about the Sorrells and their reunion, that there were things I had learned through my own process of grieving that I wanted to write about. There were things that I had learned about learning to live with loss and pain that I wanted to explore.

It was this thought that started me thinking about Lucy and her journey and that pulled me into the darker chapters of the novel with Kit and Margot. Families are complicated, ever-shifting, emotional structures. As human beings, we all feel love and joy, but we will also most likely face loss and pain at some point in our lives. Some of us will face sickness. Some of us tragedy. Some of us betrayal and loss. I realised, as I plotted and planned, that what I most wanted to show through my characters was that how in learning to live with the most painful chapters of our lives, while challenging, can often help to illuminate and enhance the more beautiful ones too. To bury pain, only seems to make it fester and deepen.

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It seemed increasingly right to offset the more painful revelations in the novel with a big, beautiful (if slightly chaotic) wedding because these are characters who, while facing pain and sadness, fundamentally are tied by deep bonds of love. In juxtaposing the light and the dark against each other, I hoped the love would shine a little brighter, the connections feel a little deeper.

Sense of place will always be important in my writing. I love to read novels where the location often feels as much as a character of the story as the people moving through it. The riverside house that the family inhabit, its grounds and surroundings, while fun to conjure, was an important device to pull everyone back for the gathering. I liked the idea of Ted and Kit stumbling upon the old farmhouse with all their hopes and dreams intact, and taking the reader on a sprawling family journey through its dusty corners and shifting landscapes.

The idea of 'home' became increasingly important as the narrative unfolded. How a place can nurture or betray its inhabitants began to preoccupy me. No matter how far the Sorrell family tries to run or hide from the pain in their past, they are each drawn back to the river and the home that once sustained them.

Windfalls and the village of Mortford that it sits within are fictional places, but they are inspired by areas I know and love well in rural Somerset. I find that the plots of my novels are often informed by the landscape. This proved to be no exception in *The River Home*. These days, I live close to the River Avon, and walking its paths in all seasons certainly helped to shape and inspire the novel. As I wrote, the river gradually unfurled through the novel like a ribbon, tying the characters and their actions together. It became a central motif, both physically and metaphorically. It came to clearly represent different things to the different characters: inspiration, joy, freedom, pain and shame, but ultimately, the river came reinforce a central message: that no matter what we face in life, life goes on, a constant, relentless flow that we must learn to embrace.

Since finishing *The River Home*, I continue to learn and think on these lessons. Recent events, both personal and on a wider global scale, have made me reel at times with the uncertainty of what will unfold next. I have been reminded, once again, of that undeniable truth I learned in difficult times: that life carries with it pain and sadness and that it is only in the acceptance of this fact that we can learn to carry the weight of it. It is in the acceptance that we can truly appreciate the beautiful and more uplifting moments of our days – the ones that give meaning to the fabric of our lives and make us feel most present and alive, that can bring us to those moments of sheer joy and affirmation ... like two little girls skipping down a pavement together singing ... or Lucy, floating on the surface of her beloved river sighing to herself, 'Here I am ... Here I am.'

Hannah
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