

Date: 29/01/16
Author/Interview subject: Marcus Sedgwick
Interviewed by: Janice Forsyth
Other speakers:

JF A huge welcome to Authors Live. So glad, wherever you are, that you are watching; you're in for such a treat today. I'm not here alone. I have some brilliant pupils from three schools in Scotland: from Wood Farm High School and Eastwood High School in East Renfrewshire and St Aidan's High School in North Lanarkshire – have a look at them – rather lovely, aren't they? Give them a wave: go on, they're all watching you. Yeah, brilliant.

Today we are so lucky to be joined by one of the most highly regarded writers for young adults. Let's have a big cheer from there and here: Marcus Sedgwick. Yes!

Aud (Cheering and applause).

JF Now, Marcus's work is just fantastic. It's gripping, thought-provoking, challenging, takes us to places that we might never have even thought about before, let alone visit. And all of that is true of his latest novel, *The Ghosts of Heaven*, which Marcus will be talking about today. Now, we will ask Marcus some of your questions. This is so important – I've got tons of questions I can ask Marcus – much more important to hear yours, which are, frankly, much more interesting and original. So lots of you have got them in already. If you haven't, the great news is, you still have time, and you can do that if your school or class has a Twitter account. So think up your questions, get them in now, or while Marcus is talking. He might say something that inspires a really good question. The main thing to do is tweet us, okay, but use the hash tag, which is very simple: it's Ask Marcus Sedgwick. Okay, have you got that? Fantastic, thank you very much indeed. So without any further delay, you and you are here to cheer, clap, and anything you like, for the fabulous Marcus Sedgwick.

Aud (Applause).

MS Thank you very much. Thank you very much, those of you here and watching, wherever you may be on line. I like an audience that claps before I've even done anything: that is enormously kind of you. Now, I'm going to talk to you today about my most recent book. It's called *The Ghosts of Heaven*. And the talk that I want to give to you normally takes about an hour, but we've got 28 minutes, so I'm going to be speaking quite fast, because there's a lot of stuff that I want to rattle through. And also, I'm going to waste a couple of minutes now by talking about something else entirely different, which is this: about two or three weeks ago I received...I was about to say I received a piece of fan mail, but it would be closer to say it was a piece of hate mail. One of the things that's changed in the time that I've been a writer is now anyone in the world is free to get in touch with you through social media, through one's website, and so forth.

So I had an email, and the email was about this book. And I think it's safe to say that this girl – she was a teenage girl, I worked out – she didn't like the book very much at all. In fact, she said it was the worst book she had ever read. She was so angry that she had read this book that she wrote me an email that was this long to tell me why it was so bad. One of the things that she said about this book was that no teenager could possibly be interested in the subject of this book. And I found that statement ironic because I had the idea for this book when I myself was still a teenager; so I know there's at least teenager in the world that's interested in the book; i.e. me from 30-something years ago.

Anyway, I'll come back to that later on. This is a slightly strange book, I will admit it, because it isn't one book, it's actually like four books in one; there are four stories within this one book, and those four stories take place in completely different times, in completely different places, and I won't go through all of them in much detail. But just so you know the kind of things that are happening in this book, roughly, I'll tell you very quickly. The final part of the book takes place in deep space, and it takes place aboard a spaceship that is going to go and settle a new planet, i.e. a planet other than Earth, for the very first time, and it's, kind of, a ghost story in space.

The third part of the book takes place in a place like this. Now, this is a photograph of what we would now call...these days we'd call this a psychiatric hospital. In the time that the book, this story, is set, we'd have called it an insane asylum or a lunatic asylum, and it takes place in an asylum in New York, Long Island New York. This is a rather beautiful spiral staircase from one of these now derelict asylums. Three summers ago, I think it was, I dragged my wife all round North America visiting deserted insane asylums; you can bet how delighted she was about that! And this photograph comes courtesy of a really amazing website

called AbandonedNJ.com. If you like this kind of thing, then go and explore these old derelict buildings and take really amazing photographs.

The second part of the book takes place during the English witch-hunts, the witch trials in the very early eighteenth century, which was towards the end of the witch hunt era. And I'll just point out a small technical historical detail here: you can see that these witches are being hanged, therefore we know that these witches are not Scottish witches; we know that these witches are English, because in England we hanged our witches. Up here where we are, north of the border, you preferred to burn your witches – some choice.

And the final – or I should say, the first part of the book that I'm going to talk to you about this morning – takes place in the Stone Age in the very, very dim and distant past. It takes place in an era that's called the Neolithic; that is to say, very roughly, about 10,000 years before the present day. And in this part of the book there is a girl, teenage girl, and she's about to make a very important connection. She's about to make the connection between the spoken word and a written mark, whether it's a charcoal mark on a wall, or something. When she makes that connection, she will have effectively have invented writing, or invented the beginning of what will become writing. So it's a very, kind of, big moment for our species, if you like. And this is the bit that I'm going to talk to you about this morning.

Now, the only thing that links these four stories, that you might have had a little bit of a clue about, so far, the only thing that links these four stories is the image of the spiral: the symbol or image of the spiral. And I'm going to talk a little bit about spirals and explain why they're in the book. This was the thing that had upset this girl who wrote to me, so much. She said, no one can possibly be interested in a spiral. Well, I am, sadly.

Here's a nice spiral. Just gaze into this for a minute or two, while I talk to you. You might want to just gaze into the centre of this revolving thing. Find your happy place. I don't know if this is going to work in a classroom at home, but in the studio here, just gaze into the middle of this spiral, and when you feel ready, just repeat after me, 'I will buy all of Marcus's books.' No, don't do that! I will get in big trouble: I'll be sued. The BBC will throw me off their... Spirals, I think, are very beautiful. They are also, kind of, quite mysterious things. We often use them, these, kind of, swirling things, to imply something that is mysterious or unknown; but they appear all around us. A spiral like this, which is genuinely moving – look at another spiral here, and this spiral isn't moving, but somehow seems to, kind of, move. They have this, kind of, innate energy in them. But as I said, spirals are all around us in nature. We live in a galaxy that has spiral arms.

DNA that makes up our genetic make-up, that is twisted spirals, helixes. This is a fossil shell, a fossilised shell cut in half: you see a perfect spiral. The head of a sunflower – that spirals, and you might, at first, think, where's the spiral in that? But actually, you've got two sets of interlocking spirals, one going clockwise, one going anti-clockwise. And Man has also been very good at using spirals and building spirals; so here, this is a very beautiful spiral staircase in Venice, Italy. This is the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Manhattan; and this is an observation tower in Lausanne, Switzerland. We love spirals: spiral staircase is the most common, but once you start looking for them, they are all over the place.

Now, let's go back in time. Let's go back about 20, 30,000 years and to some of the first instances, the first, kind of, recorded instances we have of people making their mark on the world. These are paintings from a cave called Lascaux in France, and these are paintings from...even older paintings, again in France, from a cave called Chauvet. As far back as we can trace mankind, we have been making art, we have been making marks: we have been trying to leave our impression on the world. These paintings here are thought to be about 30,000 years old. That's, kind of, almost unimaginable. And there are some caves in South Africa where there are paintings that are perhaps even older than that: tens of thousands of years older than that. So it seems that, as long as we have been around and existing on this planet, we have been trying to draw things, to make things, but not yet to write things. As I said, at this part of the book there is this girl who is about to make this connection. She's about to, kind of, effectively invent writing. This isn't writing, and nor is this; but this is...one of the other things we see in this very old, prehistoric art, are either, whether it's carvings like this, or paintings with charcoal, or whatever it might be – ochre – symbols, very primitive symbols. These symbols here, this triple spiral, this is actually relatively recent; this is Celtic, which makes it a couple of thousand years old, not much more than that. Some people think this Celtic triple spiral has a meaning, and that what this Celtic triple spiral means is, it means fertility. So we're starting to see a connection between a mark and a meaning, but it's not yet writing.

And we have to come forward in time from those early cave art to about 6,000 years ago. Primitive marks like this, that were made, these are the kind of marks that you find in caves all around the world, whether you're talking about Australasia or Africa, or wherever you might be. The first marks that were made on cave walls tend to fall into these six categories: and you'll be pleased to see – I was pleased to see – that one of these six categories that archaeologists have decided upon is the spiral – but there are six of them in all. And the funny thing is, they're the same all around the world, so people who were living at other sides

of the planet were creating these same six kinds of marks. There's a strange reason behind that: it is thought that – I don't know if you've ever sat in a completely dark room, being completely blindfolded so you cannot see any light at all – it's a strange thing to do. If you wait long enough, your eye, your brain can't stand not seeing anything, and your brain starts to fire off random signals generated by your retina; and these are the patterns that you see. Archaeologists think that is why these were the first marks that people in dark caves started to paint on their walls.

This still isn't writing, however: this is just random marks. And we have to come forward to about 6,000 years ago, and we come across things like this. Now, these are symbols, they are called the Vinča symbols; they are from South-eastern Europe, and there are lots of them. We don't know what these mean, what these mean. No one has deciphered these, or decoded these; but it is thought that these start to have a meaning. Now, some people say – linguists, who are people who study language – they say this isn't writing. They call it proto-writing, which means stuff that came before writing. But I say, supposing – and here, look, here's a spiral symbol down here – I say, supposing this symbol here, supposing that means danger; that mark has a meaning, and therefore, to me, that is the beginning of writing.

Now, I'm going to move back to the cave with the hand. This is a lovely image that was lent to us to use today by a man called Pablo Humanes. It comes from Argentina, where there is this very beautiful cave with these hand prints around it. And as I said to you, the story, this part of the book, features a teenage girl. She is on the cusp of inventing writing. Why did I choose a teenage girl? Now, you might say to me, well, you chose a teenage girl for your book because you're writing a book for young adults, predominantly. That's why you chose a teenager to be the protagonist in this part of the book; and the answer to that is no. Actually, all the other characters in this book are all either adults or young children. She's the only teenager in the whole book. And the reason I made her a teenager is for a very specific reason I want to talk about now.

Archaeologists have now worked out that lots of these hand prints weren't all made by men; they weren't made by the kind of artist or shaman or painter figure in society. Lots of them were all made by women, and lots of them were made by children and teenagers. And I thought that was a really interesting idea, that it wasn't just, like, the, kind of, old figure in the tribe who made these paintings, but everyone was doing it, including, as I say, teenagers.

Now, I don't know how you feel about being a teenager. I remember being a teenager very, very clearly. But one thing I think is true, is I think our society –

and I'd really love to know what you think about this, online, perhaps, later – I think our society gives teenagers a really rough time. We really talk down to teenagers. We patronise them, and if you ever hear about a teenager in the news, it's because they've done something bad. It's because they've mugged a grannie; it's because they were having sex under-age; it's because they were doing drugs behind the bike shed. And unfortunately, I think that bias that we share in society about teenagers even extends into the scientific community. So when this news article was released, that teenagers had been making this art, this is how the scientific community reported it: there were articles like this. 'Ancient cave art full of teenage graffiti' – or even better, the article from *The Independent*, which is a pretty serious newspaper – 'Cave paintings are graffiti by prehistoric jobs.' So you can't get a break, you know; here we are. We think teenagers are making art, but no, they're just saying, oh, it's just graffiti, it's nothing sensible or intelligent.

Now, that really, kind of, bothers me, I have to say. One of the things that has been changing in recent years, one of the things that has come to us because of the way that we can now study the brain in much more detail by using MRI scanners – we can study living brains as they are thinking, as they are working – and a lot of the research, therefore, that has been done into the brain has been done, also, into the teenage brain. And scientists have established that lots of the things that we think of as typical teenage behaviour – I'm generalising here, but I'm sure that you know the kind of stuff I'm talking about; the stuff that parents moan about, the stuff that teachers moan about: being impulsive, being experimental, taking risks: even the fact that often, as teenagers, we need to sleep until midday – I mean, I remember having to sleep for hours and hours and just not being able to wake up, as a teenager – all of that stuff has now been explained by scientists as a function of the way the teenage brain works differently from the child's brain and from the adult's brain.

And I see teenage-hood, if you like, as this bridge between being a child and becoming an adult. And I think it's a difficult journey, to be honest, but I don't think we're being served very well by articles such as this one: so here's an article, scientific article: 'Adolescent risk-taking, impulsivity and brain development – implications for prevention.' They don't want you to have any fun at all. They don't want you to do anything impulsive at all; they want you to be nice and behave; and why can't you just be like us adults, who, you know...it's not as if adults never do bad things, is it? Crazy!

So this bias, as I say, extends into even the scientific community. And I'm now going to draw to the defence of the teenager this man here, who you might

recognise: this is Charles Darwin. You, I'm sure, remember Charles Darwin came up with his theory of natural selection, the survival of the fittest. He developed this theory of evolution. And my argument goes like this: I don't think there's anything in us human beings that isn't there for a reason. Evolution has put it there, if you want to put it like that, for a reason. So I say, if teenagers, to generalise, take risks, are impulsive, like to experiment, it's there for a reason.

And I think this is what the reason is. Let's go back to that Stone Age society 10,000 years ago, or much longer ago. Think about life expectancy at that time. You probably didn't even survive past being a teenager. A few people will have become adults. We have rare skeletons of people who were 50, 60, 70 years old, but they are very, very rare. Therefore, if you think about it, the bulk of our population, our adult population, is effectively teenagers. You guys are in charge. Now, some people might find that a scary thought. I think it's a really powerful thought. If it is true that teenagers like to take risks, and experiment, and be impulsive, it's there for a reason. I think it's probably because it helped us evolve; it helped us survive; it helped us experiment, and it helped us out-compete all the other human species – because there were other competing human species at the time – so we were the ones who dominated and came to prevail. Therefore, I thought, if it's anyone who invented writing, it's going to have been a young person. Perhaps it was a teenage girl who invented writing; and that is why it's a teenage girl in my book who makes this decision – not because I'm writing a book for young people. This is what Charles Darwin had to say about that.

So this is all very well: at this point I've decided I'm going to have this section of the book, there's a girl, she's going to invent writing; she's living with this tribe; they're going on hunting expeditions. That's all very good, and I was about to start writing it, and then I thought, hang on a minute; there's a problem. There's one big problem with this, and the problem can be summed up most ably like this. This is a film poster from a film I think released in the year that I was born, i.e. 1968. It's a film called *One Million Years BC*. Have a look at this. You might be able to see that there are a couple of things wrong with this. I count roughly 15 things wrong with this poster from the mere fact that here is a Brontosaurus eating someone. Well, (a) we know Brontosauruses don't exist; that was the news a few years ago; (b) if they did exist, they were vegetarians, and (c) they died out 63 million years before Man was around.

So, added to the fact that she appears to have lipstick on, we've got problems. What I'm trying to say to you here is that it's really, really hard to write realistically about a time that we simply know next to nothing about. What do we know about

the Neolithic? Very, very, very little. And I thought, you know, whenever you see depictions of the Stone Age, it's always either something like this, or you get characters' names that always have at least one 'K' in them – names like Kodak and Tupak, and things like that – well, you know what I mean – but lots of Ks, as if the language is always hard and brutal because the life was hard and brutal. We don't know that. For all we know, the world that they lived in, the language they were using, was a very beautiful language, a very soft, beautiful language.

So I thought, how do I write about this, when I don't know what the language was like, when I don't know what speech was like? When I don't know what people's names would even have been like? The solution I came up with was to write this part of the book as a poem. It's a rather strange kind of poem: it's what we, writers, like to call free verse or blank verse. You might have done this in English: you may not have done. It means it doesn't have to rhyme, which is great. It means the sentences don't have to be the same length. But I chose it because it helped to, kind of, provide the, sort of, distance. It helped make it more mysterious, I felt, because as I said, we know so little about this time. So I'm going to read you a tiny bit from the book. It's at the end of the section. And what's happening: this girl, who doesn't really have a name, she's gone into a cave with the man who is supposed to be making the art to bring luck to the hunt that is going on at the time, but there's been a rock fall. The man has been killed, she's been cut off, she's completely in the dark apart from a torch that is slowly going out – an oil torch that is slowly going out – and then I'll pick up from here.

'If there was a way, she thinks, to make a mark in the sand, and that mark to be known by all, and that mark to have a meaning – a meaning known to all – there could be different marks for different meanings. There could be a mark to mean "go" and one to mean "follow", and one to mean "find" and one to mean "help"'. And then she thinks, 'There could have been a mark to mean "run"; and if she had made that mark in the sand, then her people might have seen it and run, and not died in the sand by the dying fire. Now that she understands, it seems so easy, the marks in the sand. They could be charcoal on rock, or charcoal on deer's dried skin. They could have been...used them to say, "Go here; do this; I am there.'" They could even be used, she thinks, to dream. But this is an idea that will die in the dark before it even leaves the mind of she who goes ahead when others fall behind. She who goes ahead when others fall behind moves on through the bone, through the black marrow of the earth, towards the end. She reaches it just before her torch fails for good, and there, high on a wall, she sees the uttermost secret of the innermost cave. This is the divine heart, soul, fountain face, where the blinding light takes us and saves us all, and upon it, a final mark, giant and high, black on the moon milk. She stands and stares, trying to

understand it: the turning circle, the circling line that never meets its end. Then, the light is gone. The last beat of flame flutters out and is gone. She sits down, places the torch on the ground, stares into the blackness. Slowly, she thinks: I will die slowly in this time where this space does not move, in this space where time does not move.' She does not fear, she does not cry out. She thinks only one thing: if I could do it again, I know what mark I would make in my hand. And as she stares, her eyes show her things that are not really there: lights flicker and fizz across her mind as her eyes try to see where there is nothing to be seen, here in the space where time does not move. Bright colours flicker and fizz: lines, dots, crosses, hatches and spirals: spirals like the one that hangs above her head, invisible.

'The cave had waited for them to come, and eventually they came. They came and made their marks in the dark, and long after people stopped coming to make their marks, long after the world grows empty and quiet, long after everything has stopped walking or sliding, or even crawling, long after all that, the cave will still be there, waiting. Now, here is nowhere; the nowhere where she lies in the dark, and here, though she is in the place where time does not move, her life moves regardless. So then it is time for her to go ahead through the gate and into the void that lies beyond. She goes.'

Now, I'm just going to finish up with a couple of remarks. Let's leave this here, for a minute. This girl who wrote to me and said that this book was terrible, and she hated it so much – I have no problem with that. One of the things you have to accept, as a writer, is that not everyone in the world is going to like your book. And if ever I'm speaking to a group of people, an audience of 100 people, I think, if ten people here like what I'm saying, that's fine by me. You can't expect everyone to like what you're saying. I had slightly more problem with some of the language she chose to use about the book – some of the words that I won't repeat, since we're on the BBC today. But the thing that really upset me about it, was that she seemed to disprove my idea about teenagers: that teenagers are ready to experiment and take risks, and be impulsive; because she just didn't seem to be open-minded enough to think that someone else might like this book, even if she doesn't.

Perhaps she did prove me right, because she was rebellious enough to write me an aggressive letter; so perhaps that rebellion is in there after all, though as I say, I'd rather she'd have used different words to do it. And if you think this story is sounding, kind of, familiar, this is a very old story; and it might remind you slightly of another story, a story that you'll have studied when you were, or read when you were at primary school, or had it read to you. You remember the story of

Theseus going into the labyrinth to slay the Minotaur? This is the same story; this is our hero going into a dark space to face, what? A monster, danger, death – will they survive, will they not survive? And there's a name for this story: it's called catabasis, which is a Greek word that just means, going into the dark, going down below to face whatever might be there. And if you think about it, a story like the one I've been describing today, this girl going into a cave, it must be one of the very first stories that we ever told – before we even had writing to write these stories down, long before that, our early ancestors trying to find a new place to live – there's a cave; someone's got to go inside; will they fight a lion or a bear or a wolf? Will they triumph and come out a hero, or will they die in that cave?

And I really love to think that these stories, we've been telling them for, literally, thousands and thousands of years; and good stories survive. To mention Charles Darwin again, just before I conclude: I think stories are prone to natural selection in the same way that animals are, in the same way that all species are. Good stories survive because we like them so much, because they mean something to us. We tell them to our children, and they get passed on for thousands and thousands of years. Bad stories, we don't like them; they die out. So there we are. Let's go into a dark cave. Thank you very much.

JF Thank you very much indeed, Marcus. And I think we need a huge round of applause for Marcus. That was so interesting.

(Applause).

JF You have all sorts of writers doing Authors Live, and all sorts of audiences here with us, but I don't think I've ever seen an audience so spell-bound; because there was a lot of information there, but it was really interesting, wasn't it? Anybody fancy writing your own stories – possibly inspired? Yeah, some vague nods going on. Now, we have lots of questions for you, Marcus...

MS Yeah.

JF ...starting with someone right here. So we'll get the microphone to you. And first of all, we're going to go to this girl: so if you would tell us your name and your school before the question.

Girl I'm Carol-Ann. I'm from St Aidan's.

JF Great.

Girl And my question is, which authors inspired you to write?

JF That's a very good question, and one that I'll try and answer relatively swiftly, because the answer is, a lot of authors. When I was young, there were two or three authors in particular. There was a lady called Susan Cooper. I read her when I was your age and a bit younger. She is now 81. I finally got to meet her a couple of years ago; we've now become good friends. It was a wonderful thing, because I admired her so much when I was a young child. And she wrote a wonderful series called *The Dark is Rising*. It's still in print; it's very spooky and atmospheric, and I urge you to read it if you like fantasy fiction at all. And I think she's a big part of what I do now, because I really like the sense of mystery and atmosphere that she put in her books.

There was another writer at the same time called Peter Dickinson, who wrote similar-ish kind of stuff. Peter is still working, too. And then when I was a bit older, I really liked a writer called Mervyn Peake; and you almost certainly haven't heard of Mervyn Peake. If you've heard of Tolkien, you really should have heard of Mervyn Peake, but he's, kind of, forgotten these days. But he was writing around the same time, and I really loved his writing when I was around your age, and a little bit older.

JF Great. Thank you very much, Carol-Ann. And we have another question here from the front row. Again, if you could tell us your name and the school that you're from.

Girl My name is Miriam, and I'm from Eastwood High School. I was just wondering, how much research do you do for your books?

MS How much research do I do for my books? Well, that varies enormously from book to book. Some books there is almost no research and you just, kind of, make it all up. However, I do like doing research, and for several reasons: (a) it can just be fun; (b) it can take you very interesting places that you can call work, but actually you're having a nice holiday somewhere. Most importantly, however, you come across ideas that you would not have thought of yourself; and, you know, a lot of the stuff that I was talking about today in this presentation, all this stuff to do with prehistory, for example, I did a lot of reading about these things, these hand prints and things. I was reading about tribes that still do that today: in some of the remote parts of Indonesia, for example, there's a tribe where they do a very strange thing. They cut off a knuckle every time they have a bereavement in their family. So some of the old people in the families have just got, kind of, knuckles like this, now – no fingers left. They deliberately do it – very strange thing – I worked that into the story.

But yeah, research can make your life easier, and it can also...as I say, you find things that you didn't know you were looking for in the first place; and writing a book is a very hard thing. I was having this conversation with a lady just behind you just before we started. She said, how do you write a book? It's a very hard thing, to write a book, I promise you. It's a very hard thing to even write a bad book, never mind one that might be good enough to get published; and you make your life easier, I think, so much easier by finding things from history, from art, from culture, from music, that are interesting enough to bring your book to life, and you haven't had to think of them yourself.

JF Is there a certain point where you just have to say, okay, now we have to stop all of that and get on with the writing of the novel?

MS Yeah, that can certainly happen. I can remember one book from a few years ago: a novel called *The Foreshadowing*, that's set in the First World War. Now, the First World War is an enormous subject; there are so many things to read about it. And I've read a stack of books, literally this high off the floor, about the things that I was interested in. I could have gone on reading forever. And there came a point where I thought, actually, I'm just procrastinating. I'm keeping on reading because I don't want to start writing a book, because I'm scared to start writing; and yet, you have to say...plus, you know, if you've got a contract, there's a deadline approaching rapidly, so it's time to stop researching and start writing.

JF It's good to have a deadline, isn't it?

MS It can help, yeah.

JF It doesn't seem like it at the time, but it is good. Now, we have a final question from our audience, if we can have...have we got the microphone? Yay, here comes Steve with the microphone. Thank you. Again, tell us your name and your school.

Girl I'm Katie, and I'm from Wood Farm, and I loved your book, *Midwinterblood*, and I was wondering where you got such an unusual idea for the book.

MS Okay. So this is a question about this book that I wrote two books before *Ghosts of Heaven*. It has a similarity, in a way, in that *Midwinterblood* is seven stories in one book; but the seven stories in that book are much more connected than the four in this book. And it came about because – you were just speaking about deadlines, Janice – it came about because I was enormously late for a deadline, by which I mean, about a year. It's not like handing your homework in a day late, is it? I was about a year late, and I really just did not have an idea for a story. But I was spending some time – that summer I was living on an island off the

coast of Sweden, outside a city called Gothenberg – and one day I took the train from Gothenberg over to Stockholm to meet a friend of mine who was living in Stockholm, and we went to this art gallery to see this painting, and...Katie, isn't it? Katie, you'll know the painting I'm talking about, because it's in the book. This painting is an enormous thing; it's as wide as the studio we're sitting in. It's a huge work of art that shows a sacrifice from Swedish prehistory. They're about to kill their own king because they have famine, they have hunger, they have disease, and they think sacrificing their own king will bring food and safety and health back to the tribe.

And I saw this painting, and I stood in front of it, and I just went, wow! I want to write a book about this painting. But I didn't think...I thought it would be too boring just to tell that story that you could see in that painting, and so what I did instead was to tell the story seven times in seven different ages, but in that book, all on the same island. So all the stories take place on the same island, and we meet these two characters who reincarnate through the years as they try and meet and re-meet down the ages. So there, as briefly as I can make it, is where *Midwinterblood* came from.

JF And can I ask you, Katie, what was it about the book that you loved so much? If you could speak into that.

Girl Just that it was really unusual.

JF Yeah?

Girl I just really liked it.

JF Fantastic.

MS That makes me very happy to hear that, because I think, to hear someone say, I liked it because it was unusual...

JF Yeah.

MS ...because that's exactly what I wanted to read when I was young. It's still what I want to read, now. I don't...it's so boring to read what we know.

JF Yeah.

MS You know, I think we should be trying to push ourselves and find, explore new things. So it really makes me happy when you use a word like that, Katie.

JF Hurray! Well, Katie looks happy; you're happy; it's going well, so far. And I wonder, that moment you said you were standing in front of that huge painting – I

want to write about it – then you come up with the idea of seven ways. Is that like a light bulb moment, you know, that whole cliché of the light bulb?

MS Yeah.

JF Or does it take longer than that?

MS Yeah. The cliché light bulb thing is interesting, because that's the only time in my writing career that that has ever happened to me. Normally it's a very slow process. In this case, as I said, I had this idea about writing a book about spirals when I was 19. I wasn't even a writer then; I never even thought I was going to be a writer. It took 30-something years to get to that point, to write this book. With *Midwinterblood* the day after I'd gone to see the painting, I was back home on my island, cycling round the island – no cars: very nice place to be – cycling round the island, and it was, just literally, bang: I'm going to do it seven times. And this got me out of a massive hole. I didn't finish, really, the story that I was saying – I was so late for my deadline – but it meant I was able to write that book so fast that a month later I had delivered the full book.

JF So cycling is good for inspiration?

MS It's very good, yeah.

JF Getting away from your desk.

MS Yeah, yeah.

JF Actually, I'm sure that's true.

MS That's true, yeah, yeah.

JF Thank you very much for those questions – really brilliant – and thank you very much for getting in touch via Twitter. I've got some to relay to you, Marcus, from St Margaret's Academy.

MS Okay.

JF Thank you very much. Hello, St Margaret's. Very, very simple: we've already answered in terms of some of your favourite writers.

MS Yes.

JF It's just a simple question: is there one favourite book? I mean, if you were on a desert island with the one book...

- MS Yeah. I hate to be painfully obscure, but I'm going to be painfully obscure. My favourite book is called *The Magic Mountain*. It's by a German writer called Thomas Mann. It was published in 1927, I think, from memory – somewhere in the mid-20s, anyway – it's 700 pages long. The first time I finished it, I went straight back to the beginning and started reading it again.
- JF Wow!
- MS And if I could just...if I was forced to only read one book ever again, it would just be that book.
- JF And why?
- MS Why? Oh, that's a tough question. It's an enormous book about all sorts of things. It's about a young man...in the first part, it's 1907 the book starts in. He goes to visit his cousin in a hospital. His cousin is in hospital. In those days tuberculosis was very common; people would go up to the high mountains because they thought the high mountain air was good for the lungs. So people who had tuberculosis, had problems with their lungs...and he goes to visit his cousin, who is suffering from a little bit of tuberculosis, and he thinks he's going to stay for three weeks, and he ends up staying for seven years. And the book is the seven years that he spends there, and it's just mind-blowing.
- JF And it sounds to me, possibly, that that book, you not only love it, but it might have had an influence on you, in terms of the ambition and the scale...
- MS Yeah...
- JF ...the different subjects you're covering, and the years involved, maybe.
- MS Yeah. I mean, it's one of those books, the ambition...you always have the ambition to write the best book you possibly can. I think that it's one of the greatest masterpieces of world literature. I would never dream to think I could write something like that. It's one of those books you just wish you had written, and know you never will, but it doesn't stop you trying.
- JF I think you're doing a very good job. Rachel and Jay, via Twitter, hello. Now, you've covered this, again, in a way, but...which is, where do you get your ideas for your books from? But it sounds to me like – I mean, you mentioned there you were at a gallery – it sounds to me you're somebody who enjoys different aspects of life, not just reading, and that maybe you get inspiration from all of that?
- MS Yeah. No, I mean, it's a very good question. It's a question you get asked a lot, as a writer, obviously, and the simple, one-word answer to where do you get your

ideas from is everywhere: anything and everything can be the starting point for a book. But look, the way I look at it is this: here we are, human beings, dropped onto this planet: what mystery is that?

JF Yeah.

MS You know, where do we come from? Why are we here? Why you, me; why am I...why are you you, why am I me...you know what I'm trying to say: why am I me? It's just the biggest mystery that there is, to be alive.

JF Well look, believe it or not, the time has flown by. It's the mystery of life and time, Marcus. Thank you very much indeed. And just to say to people, thank you very much for your questions; thanks for watching, and of course, you can watch this again via the Authors Live website, which is authorslive.com/...Scottish Book Trust.com/authorslive. Yes, you know it better than I do. And you can sign up to watch future ones and look at all of the ones that we've done before, which have just been great. Today's has been outstanding. Marcus, thank you very much – truly fascinating. Can we have a huge round of applause – and cheering, possibly. Thank you very much indeed, thank you.

Aud (Applause).