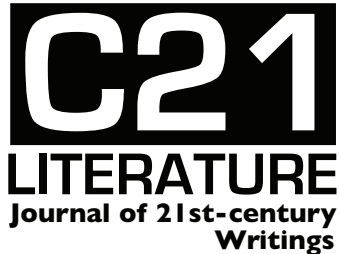




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Interview

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INTERVIEW

Something Wicked This Way Comes: An Interview with Katie Lowe

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In conversation with *C21 Literature* Katie Lowe considers how and why her experience as a literary critic of contemporary writing has led to and influenced her own creative practice and perspectives on the contemporary themes and concerns directly addressed by her debut work *The Furies* (2019).

Keywords: The Furies; Katie Lowe; Young Adult; YA; Novel

Very few contemporary literary critics have gone on to become contemporary literary sensations, and even fewer have achieved this by their early thirties. Katie Lowe graduated from the University of Birmingham with a BA (Hons) English Literature and an MPhil in Literature and Modernity, before embarking on a PhD. It was during the initial stages of her PhD study that Lowe began blogging under the name 'Fat Girl, PhD'. Using the blog to explore her experiences of weight loss and self-image, she created a separate sphere for her writing, away from the confines of academic study, and towards a popular, broad audience of female readers. Although the audience for her blog was initially 'my mum, dad and sister', within months her readership had grown to over 100,000 unique visitors and the blog achieved 300,000 views from across the globe.

During the twelve months she spent writing the blog, Lowe lost almost half her body weight and gained a new perspective on debates in feminism and the real-life challenges facing her female readers. As a result of tackling issues like self-esteem and body confidence, the blog gained critical acclaim and commercial attention, with several requests for Lowe to write longer pieces on feminism and health for national newspapers and media sites including the *Huffington Post*, *The Guardian* and the *BBC*.

The blog is currently on 'hiatus' while Lowe pens the follow-up to *The Furies*. She has also resumed work on her PhD examining representations of female rage in literary modernism and contemporary women's writing at the University of Birmingham.

Within 18 hours of its submission, the manuscript of *The Furies* was subject to an intense bidding war between publishers before being signed by HarperFiction for a rumoured six-figure deal. Beyond the UK, the novel was subject to a further six-figure deal when St Martin's Press bought the North American rights, and it has gone on to be pre-empted across the world. Lowe described the publishing fury around her debut novel as a 'surreal experience, and one I never would have dared imagine at home writing at weekends and in spare moments here and there. To have received such an amazing response – and so quickly – truly has been beyond my wildest dreams'.

Set in 1998, the main action of the novel takes place in Elm Hollow Academy, an all-girl's boarding school located in a sleepy coastal town, with a long-buried grim history of 17th-century witch trials. A new student, Violet, joins the school and soon finds herself invited to become the fourth member of an advanced study group, led by the alluring and mysterious art teacher Annabel. Annabel does her best to convince the girls that her classes aren't related to ancient rites and rituals, and that they are just mythology. But the more she tries to warn the girls off the topic, the more the girls start to believe that magic is real and that they have the power to harness it. When a former student is found dead, Violet begins to question her new friends and the lessons that the past can teach us about the challenges faced by women today.

Billed as *The Secret History* meets *The Craft*, Lowe's novel draws on literary Gothic influences, and a pervading concern with both the power and vulnerability of young girls who are confronting a confusing contemporary society. Deliberately putting a group of angry young women centre stage, the text mobilises its cast of dynamic female characters to undertake a critical exploration of the dark, dangerous and violent shadows of the past on the choices faced by young women today. Offering a mediation on the haunting persistence of the past on 21st-century realities, Lowe's novel interrogates toxic female friendships, grief and the power of narrative to heal the past and change the future.

In conversation with *C21 Literature* on the eve of its publication, Lowe considered how and why her experience as a literary critic of contemporary writing has led to and influenced her own creative practice and perspectives on the contemporary themes and concerns directly addressed by her debut work.

**What made you decide to embark on a PhD in Literature?
At what point did this get put on hold and why?**

To be honest, at the time it was the only thing in the world that I wanted to do. I've always felt more comfortable writing *about* books than writing books themselves, and so the idea of moving into academia was, at that point, my dream job.

But – and I know this will be familiar to most people working in the arts these days – funding isn't easy to come by. I tried to pay my way on a part-time basis for a year and a half, but it was directly after the financial crisis – so earning enough to pay rent, let alone tuition fees, in that economy, was tricky enough. In the end, I couldn't make it work – so I took the decision to withdraw and follow a path into an entirely different sector altogether... Though always with the goal of eventually finding my way back.

In hindsight, it was a stroke of luck – though it didn't feel like that at the time. But I think my understanding of the world, and the research areas I'm interested in, have been helped by time and experience, and I certainly never would have found myself writing fiction without the series of accidents that got me here – so now, I'm returning to the University of Birmingham at the end of 2019 to give it another shot, this time with a new topic: an exploration of female rage in literary modernism, and how that reflects the current, post-#MeToo era.

**How did you navigate the differences between writing as
a critic and writing as a creative?**

I never really considered myself to be much of a creative writer, up until about five years ago – when my brilliant agent suggested I try my hand at writing fiction. I thought I'd be horrible at it, and for a good four years, I was. The two are *very* different, in my experience, at least – but I do think that each can feed well into the other.

The hardest thing, I found, about creative writing, is having *nothing* to start with. Working critically, you're drawing something out of texts that already exist, and there are certain parameters that you have to work within – so, for instance, you can't say something without having the evidence to back it up. That, for me, is what I love about critical writing – formulating an argument out of evidence, and facts, and turning a messy, nebulous idea into something clear, well-reasoned and cohesive – and hopefully contributing something to the wider conversation around those texts.

Fiction, for me, was the other way around. You're starting completely from scratch – with characters and situations that do not exist, and for a long time, barely feel real, even to you. It's obviously a lot more freeing, in that you can do whatever you want – in terms of plot, character, style and so on – but at the same time, that much freedom has the ability to be paralysing.

For me, the only way through this is to start out with a set of 'rules' for the book – so, for instance, with *The Furies*, I had the opening scene, with the dead girl on the playground swing, before I had anything else. I had no idea who she was, or how she got there – only that the narrator knew her, and felt responsibility, but not remorse, for her death.

All the way through writing the novel, I didn't let myself change or deviate from that, even when it seemed like I couldn't, practically, make it work. It was almost like having a central thesis – an argument I *had* to prove (or, depending on how much fun I was having, a mystery I had to solve) – and the challenge, then, was forming everything else around that.

Has your academic writing and study of Literature influenced your work as a creative writer?

Well, on a very practical level, I studied at Birmingham from undergraduate level, and anyone who's spent any time there will spot certain features (the looming clock tower, the domed redbrick buildings and the mermaid statue, to name but a few) from the campus, transposed into the world of the book. As T. S. Eliot said, 'good writers borrow, great writers steal' – something I've taken very literally, when it comes to the world of this book.

But in terms of the literature itself, there are a couple of texts that bear more influence over *The Furies* than anything else.

One is Walter Pater's *Conclusion to Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. I found the idea of his students being 'corrupted' by his emphasis on subjective experience a fascinating concept, when I first came across it as an undergraduate. The girls in the book, too, are influenced and corrupted by their study of Literature and Art – or rather, their teachers' interpretation of the works they study.

It was actually Pater's work, too, that made me settle on the late 1990s as the period in which to set the book. The influence of his work on *fin de siècle* writers – with the moral ambiguities of the Decadent movement, all excess and sickness – seemed perfect for the end of another century, with another group of pleasure-seeking young people.

The other is Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* – the book, really, which made me love literary modernism, and pulled me into the academic world. There's a reason the character in *The Furies* who seems to drive all action forward is called Robin; and the toxic relationships that characterise *Nightwood* are some of the most intense, I think, in literature. I wanted *The Furies* to have a similar effect – with characters who are, for the most part, hard to like, and an ending that leaves a distinct thud of horror in the chest.

What other contemporary writings and cultural texts did you draw on while writing *The Furies*?

I would struggle to list all of the books I tore through, or that had some influence on *The Furies*, while I was writing it – I was living alone, that year, with no TV and a haphazard internet connection, so it was a *fantastic* year for reading.

I did approach it, however, like a project – I knew I wanted to write something with a gripping plot... A 'page-turner', in the very real sense, but with careful prose and some kind of theoretical structure underpinning it – essentially, the kind of book that I wanted to read. So, I studied. I read everything by Gillian Flynn, Patricia Highsmith, Stephen King, Donna Tartt, Shirley Jackson and every other writer I could find who seemed to master the aspect of fiction I found most difficult to achieve: plot.

But they weren't all – I also devoured books by Carmen Maria Machado (*Her Body and Other Parties* is the kind of book I'd sell my right arm to write), Jesmyn Ward, Lauren Groff, Maggie Nelson, Rebecca Solnit, Kamila Shamsie, Meena Kandasamy... As I write this, I realise it's largely women writers – and while that wasn't a conscious decision, it *is* a thrilling time to be reading women – and I think the writing being published in those months leading up to the mainstream emergence of #MeToo really shows that (and *certainly* had an influence on my work as a writer, then.)

A major other vice of mine while writing, though, is music. When I'm actually putting the words down on the page, I work in silence, but thanks to the wonderful world of streaming, I'll almost always have a number of specially curated playlists that help me stay in the mood of the book, which I flick on whenever I'm not actively writing.

Which is one of the reasons *The Furies* was so much fun to write. It was a year of indie, rock, trip-hop and dance – Placebo, Suede, Radiohead, Nirvana, Portishead, Prodigy... And so on. Alongside the back issues of *The Face* and *NME* that I accumulated over the course of the year, I threw myself wholeheartedly into nineties culture – and it was glorious.

How important was your blog in establishing the writing practice that went on to inform the book?

I think it was probably more important than I've given it credit for, honestly – though I hadn't thought about it until you asked this question. But after I finished my PhD, I stopped thinking of myself as much of a writer. For about a year, updating the blog was the only writing I did – it was a kind of release, each week, to write *something*, even if, for a long time, the only people who read it were my family and a few close friends.

But it grew pretty rapidly – and the joy of blogging is that it's a conversation. In the years I was writing there, I learned a *lot*, largely thanks to the generosity of strangers on the internet. I'll admit that I was a worse feminist before I began writing there (I'd like to think I've still got room to improve – we all have) – but posting

online gave me a chance to work through my own thoughts and hear responses from other people whose ideas made me realise the limitations of my own.

It was invaluable, to me, as a writer, to keep engaging and thinking critically about the world around me, while I was outside of academia – and also to have a link, still, to writing, to keep those muscles working, even if only for a few hours every week.

Still, I didn't consider myself much of a writer until I met my brilliant agent, Juliet Mushens, through the blog – she actually signed me, initially, with a view to writing non-fiction – and so, without that, it's entirely possible none of the rest of this would have happened. If there'd been no blog, there might have been no agent; no suggestion of trying my hand at fiction... And probably no sense of myself as someone who really *could* be a writer.

But it laid the groundwork for everything – learning the conditions in which I write best (coffee, and silence); the art of discipline (or, the pain of logging off Twitter to get something done); and the need to be critical about my own work, in order to make it better.

How did you juggle working at Mash and writing the book? Did you learn anything that you have taken forward in writing the following book?

Well, I've recently left my permanent job at Mash, though I'm still working with them on a freelance basis. It was a tough decision to make, because I *loved* the job, and leaving now meant walking away at a real high point in their history, something I'm really proud to have been a part of – but juggling a *very* demanding career alongside the very real deadlines and commitments that come with a book contract just wasn't practical for anyone involved.

With that said, I know myself well enough to be absolutely sure that the idea of being a 'full-time' writer is not an attractive one, for me personally. I spent *years* romanticising the idea of being able to devote my whole life to writing, and last year, I took a month off to do just that – but after three weeks, I realised that just isn't how I work.

I need to walk away from the novel, sometimes, and do something completely different, to exercise the other side of my brain. I think it's the old 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' idea – I'm happiest when I'm desperate to return to a novel after a break, rather than free to work on it whenever I like.

So while I'm looking forward to having *more* time to write, I'm really excited to be starting my PhD in September, as well as taking on the occasional freelance project here and there. I love writing fiction, and when it's going well, there is no better feeling – but I think to write well, I need a balance between the creative and the more analytical.

Have you engaged in reflection on your work, and your writing practice, with other people? How has this fed back into your writing practice and your awareness of your approach as a writer?

Oh, definitely. I'm *very* lucky to have hit the jackpot with both my agent and my editor, Natasha Bardon, both of whom are very much available and open to chat about any ideas I'm working on, or struggling with. And I do have a number of friends and family who are also writers, and who 'get it' – I'm so grateful to have them, and to share both the highs and frustrations of the process with them.

Unfortunately, I'm the kind of writer who doesn't like to talk about exactly *what* I'm writing (in fiction, at least) until it's finished – the idea of someone taking a look at a half-finished manuscript is my personal definition of hell, not least because I am an extremely *messy* writer, on the first, seventh and fifteenth pass – so while it's a comfort to know I *could* bat around ideas with them if I wanted to, it's even more reassuring to know that they're there, and that they understand.

With that said, I'm definitely more aware of the *way* that I write, now – and I'd say I'm better able to pinpoint what works for me, and what doesn't, because I've *had* to put my writing practice into words. I imagine that's probably one of the really valuable things about studying creative writing – learning how to articulate what your approach is, and how you could improve upon it, in a critical way. It's been a bit of a surprise to have to do that – to speak critically about my *own* writing – but it's

something I'm becoming better at, I think, now I'm making headway with the follow-up... Which at least offsets the fear that it's a fluke!

What drew you to write about this particular subject?

There were a few different subjects I wanted to write about initially: toxic friendships being one; the potentially 'negative' consequences of learning being another. But the book really came to life for me when I found myself drawing on the idea of witchcraft as a form of rebellion, and a way of reclaiming power.

The idea of women's perceived power and independence being a thing so feared they'd have to be put to death, so as to prevent them from disrupting the 'natural' order of things – that's something I've always found fascinating about the seventeenth century witch trials. And I think there's something in that that resounds with women now.

The return of witchcraft in millennial culture – through art, fashion and spirituality – I think has a lot to do with the wider discourse around what it means to be a woman, now. There's a proud independence, a kind of rebelliousness, that comes with calling yourself a witch – and I think a lot of women are increasingly choosing to do so because it's a way of situating themselves within a tradition, and a long and complex history – while choosing to reject the traditional, patriarchal order of things. To be outside of, and opposed to, the way things have always been. With *The Furies*, I wanted to take that to a more literal extreme – to situate the 'witchcraft' the girls *think* they're doing as a way of rebelling directly against specific instances of control; and to exact revenge on the men by whom they feel they've been wronged.

In terms of genre, I didn't set out to write a YA novel – and I've been surprised (though of course delighted) that so many YA readers have been open to reading it, given the dark subject matter and angry mood of the book. But I'm *incredibly* grateful that it's managed to crossover and reach readers in that area – because I think some of the authors writing YA at the moment are doing really exciting work, with books and characters I *wish* I'd had access to as a teenager.

What I *did* want to do, when I started this book, was write something that would fit into the very broad category of the *commercial* thriller. I'd spent the years beforehand playing around with a very literary novel, which was satisfying enough, in its own way, but is probably doomed to be locked in a drawer forever. I've got a huge amount of respect for what's classed as literary fiction, and it's something I'll always read for pleasure – but I'm also very interested in the craft behind storytelling.

From school through to after my MPhil, I worked at WHSmith – and so, while I was studying a lot of heavy-duty, highly literary texts, I'd find myself sneaking off on my breaks with one of the Richard & Judy Book Club picks, or whatever was at the top of the charts that week, and enjoying them *far* more than I was, at that time, prepared to admit. It's always been a kind of fascination for me – the way certain authors can construct a plot that's so taut and gripping that you find yourself completely unable to walk away. It's an incredible thing to do with just words on a page, really – a kind of magic.

And I'm not saying *The Furies* necessarily does that – though if it does for *one* reader, I will consider it a success – but it's one of the things I wanted to aim towards, while I was writing it.

Do you have a clear reader in mind for the novel?

It's probably incredibly self-absorbed to say it, but I wanted to write the kind of book *I* wanted to read. There have been so many times in my life where I've been completely absorbed in a book – stealing *Carrie* from my parents' bookshelves at 11 years old; reading *Nightwood* by the river as an undergrad, jealously writing sentences in my notebook; losing myself in *The Goldfinch* after a really nasty period of depression at 27... There are so many times when I've been grateful for books to get lost in – and it was these moments I had in mind, rather than a particular type of reader, when I was writing the book. I think anyone who loves reading has their own versions of them.

Was it a conscious choice to have a female protagonist in her teenage years, and predominantly female leading characters?

It was, to an extent. I'm obviously conscious of the way male voices are prioritised in literature, with men's writing taken more 'seriously'. It's said often that there's no male equivalent for 'Women's Fiction', and it's been interesting to me that so many

people instantly assume *The Furies* is *purely* YA as soon as I say the protagonist is a teenage girl – I do wonder whether that would be the case, say, for a coming-of-age story about a boy, by a male writer.

Teenage girls so often aren't taken seriously, or have their experience satirised or scorned by the wider culture – and yet, when you look at teenagers now, they're so smart, and they know exactly what they want the world to look like, and to be. So many of them are activists, in ways both large and small – and yet they're often dismissed as being vacuous, or for enjoying, say, certain types of music or culture.

I'm not saying that any of the girls in *The Furies* are like this – they're certainly not aspirational characters, by any means. But I wanted to write a book driven by teenage girls with agency, and passion and anger – something that shows them in a light that's perhaps not flattering, but which takes their feelings seriously, and treats them with something like respect.

Has it been harder to write the next book in the series, or is your writing practice now more refined?

A little of both, I think. I'd say at this point – a year into writing the second book I've finally found my rhythm, but it's been a bit of a circuitous journey. I was proud of *The Furies*, when I'd finished it, but my expectations were low – so I was a little shell-shocked by the response I received from my agent, and from the various publishers who took it on within days of it going to market.

As a result, I spent the first few months – probably about eight or nine, if I'm honest – with my writing practice thrown completely off. It wasn't that I wasn't writing – if anything, I was writing *more* – but I think in trying to make room for the idea of myself as a capital-W Writer, I'd found myself writing a lot of things that didn't sound like me, or that I simply didn't *enjoy*.

Fortunately, over time I've found my way back to the same things that worked while I was writing *The Furies*. I needed to recapture what I'd loved about that book – the thrill of creating suspense, of making a mystery, and of creating characters that, if not likeable, were at least interesting (to me, at least). I had to face the fact that I am, and always will be, a compulsive rewriter, and that for every 10,000 words that make it into any given book, there'll be 20,000 that have to go. It's spectacularly inefficient – but unfortunately, so far, I'm yet to find a better way.

I suppose that's the biggest realisation, though, for me, personally. You can always try to write like someone else, or adopt someone else's way of doing things – but in the end, the only way that works is the one that's right for you. Accepting that, and learning to trust my gut with it, has made writing the second easier to write – at last.

How does your choice of reading now influence the kind of writer you would like to be?

I think the fact there's so much amazing writing being published right now is very motivating, as a writer. There's a real culture of incredible women's writing – and for me, personally, it's something that makes me want to continue to work towards being a better writer, by reading widely, and constantly looking to learn.

It's also part of the reason I wanted to go back into research, alongside writing fiction – because while I want to continue writing what I *hope* will be pretty good books, there's so much else happening in the literary world at the moment that I find myself desperately longing to work critically with it, too.

What are your hopes for *The Furies*, and the book that follows?

To be honest, the response to *The Furies* has already vastly exceeded any hopes I could have had for it – I've been so lucky to have the support of such brilliant publishers all over the world. But I'll admit that the biggest thrill has been those instances of reader feedback – when someone takes the time to send a tweet saying how much they enjoyed it, or shares a photo of themselves with the book on Instagram... It's amazing to have that connection with strangers through writing, so I'd hope that, once it's published, it'll find its way into more readers' hands.

For the second book – getting it finished would be a *very* good start...!

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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