**Writing Between Settings**

Philippa Holloway’s novel *The Half-life of Snails* is a tale of territories defended and lost to nuclear power and nuclear disaster, and is set as a contiguous narrative between Anglesey in North Wales, and Chornobyl in Ukraine. In this exclusive article for Writers & Artists, Philippa explains her research in both landscapes, and her writing process of weaving together two places in a way that reveals how important home is, and how narrative can emerge from all around us.

When I started my novel, I knew I was taking on a complex and vast topic. How does nuclear power and nuclear disaster affect individuals and communities? What is the legacy of Chornobyl in the world? How do echoes of past events effect the present? I knew of my own experiences, my childhood memories of the disaster in 1986 and fears at the time, my anxiety of being sent to work in a nuclear power station many years later. But I wanted to explore these issues far beyond my own experiences and test out fictional, but still realist, responses. I wanted to push the boundaries of where these issues intersect.

There are already stories covering the Chornobyl disaster itself, and I was drawn to its legacy, not just in Ukraine, but in a landscape far away from the disaster that had been affected at the time through the travel of radionuclides via weather systems, and which was still grappling with its own relationship with nuclear power. Bringing together the landscape of Chornobyl, which at the time was a Dark Tourism destination, and the landscape around Wylfa Nuclear Power Station, which is now no longer producing power but may host a new power station on adjacent land, allowed me to explore the complexities of emplaced behaviour within a structural narrative boundary. Using these two places as contrasts and mirrors for one another meant I could identify unifying threads of imagery, meaning, emotion and action. Fears from the past and fear about the future are evoked as the characters move through the landscapes themselves.

Structurally, I begin the novel in one place, Anglesey, with the family at the heart of the story close together. Helen, who is a single mum working her parents farm and opposing the plans for the new power station which threatens her land and ancestral home, is preparing to visit Chornobyl to help her confront her nuclear anxieties. Fearing she has cancer, she is also using this as a chance for her son to spend time with her sister, to prepare him for the worse. Her sister Jennifer is pro-nuclear, works at Wylfa with her husband, and so tensions run high. This is where the narrative splits, with Helen leaving, and so the story structure becomes two alternate threads: Helen’s experiences in Ukraine, facing her fears and testing her survival skills, and Jennifer’s experience at home, seeing her local landscape anew and reassessing her own relationship with nuclear power as she cares for Jack and learns more about her sister in her absence.

To ensure I captured not only the concrete details of place, but the emotional and behavioural response to each landscape, I spent time in both, walking, looking, smelling and feeling the varied ambiences and spaces I was permitted to venture into. I spoke to residents of both communities, at one point spending a day with one of the self-settlers in the Exclusion Zone, sharing food and stories. I documented textures and feelings, intimate details and grand vistas, with photographs and notebooks, and through these observations found the connections both physical and thematic between Wylfa and Chornobyl. I was able to ‘revisit’ my time there by using notes and photos to reignite my feelings and sense memory. During both the fieldwork and the deskwork, I kept my half-formed characters and plot ideas with me, testing out what *they* would do/think/feel, and why, as I went. In this way it was as much *their* responses to landscape I was documenting as my own.

As Helen journeys into the Exclusion Zone and challenges her nuclear anxieties head on, she is testing her mental and practical survival skills, and learning in the process about why she carries these fears, what her limits and strengths are. In this new territory, she is reminded over and over about her life back home, and incidents that have informed her life choices. Eventually, she is able to communicate in raw honesty to a friend she has made, someone who is himself carrying the legacy of displacement and loss due to Chornobyl, and whose safety and home is threatened again due to the Euro Maidan Crisis of 2014, when the book is set.

Back home, Jennifer is forced to view her homeland and workplace from a new angle. As she learns more about her sisters fears and preparations for disaster through little Jack’s behaviour and searching her sister’s house, she also realises the fragility of the system. A simple misjudgement at work leads to her recognising the human error at the heart of both nuclear disaster and family dissent. Her landscape is defamiliarized: pylons become towering symbols of networked control, the power station becomes a site of conflict, and her home both a refuge and a prison.

By taking an intensely personal approach - where rather than tackling a vast narrative I focus on one family, a few characters, and their intimate stories - I was able to achieve my goals for the book: these small, focussed interactions and experiences refract the bigger issues for the reader to contemplate beyond the borders of the book. I offer no answers, just a series of truths presented through fiction. At the heart of it all is ‘home’ – the need to protect, to claim, to return to and defend home. This is deeply rooted in both landscapes and community, where displacement, disaster, and power (of many kinds!) has/is threatening those who just want to live in their homes. This core dynamic became a structural thread tying the two settings together – as Helen wanders through evacuated houses in the villages around Chornobyl, her sister watches neighbouring cottages being torn down by developers, spends time in a house left still furnished by a family friend in their rush to take the high price offered. Each space is defined by absence, by homes lost or taken by external force, by the ghosts left behind. The connections between these landscapes are woven through the text as it unfolds.

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Just before the novel was launched, Russia invaded Ukraine, and millions more people were displaced and threatened, homes destroyed, and families separated. I still don’t know if some of the people who helped me with my novel are safe, but I am doing all I can to help. If you want to help the residents of the Exclusion Zone, the children and animals of Chornobyl, please join me in donating to https://www.cleanfutures.org/

*The Half-life of Snails* is available from Parthian Books.

Hardback edition: https://www.parthianbooks.com/products/the-half-life-of-snails-hardback

Paperback edition: <https://www.parthianbooks.com/products/the-half-life-of-snails-paperback>

You can follow Philippa on twitter @thejackdawspen

Philippa Holloway is an author and academic, teaching Creative Writing at Staffordshire University. Her debut novel, *The Half-life of Snails*, is out now with Parthian Books, and her short fiction/non-fiction is published internationally and in the UK with Litro, Nightjar Press and Comma Press among others. She has been recognized in literary awards including the Rhys Davies Short Story Prize and the Writers & Artists Working Class Writer’s Prize. She is the co-curator of a global writing project responding to the pandemic and the collection *100 Words of Solitude: Global Voices in Lockdown 2020* (Rare Swan Press), and is currently co-authoring a textbook on Creative Writing and the Anthropocene.