

Q&A with Stephanie Merritt

What inspired you to write *While You Sleep*?

I've always loved ghost stories, but the kind that interest me most are not outright horror, but stories where a lot is left to the reader's imagination. I felt there was a cross-over between that kind of story and my interest in psychological suspense, where there's ambiguity about how much is the character's paranoia. I think this happens especially with female characters, because of the whole history of gaslighting and women being used to not being believed, so I had films such as *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Babadook* in the back of my mind.

The McBride house and its surroundings really come to life – did you have a specific place in mind while writing? Are the Scottish islands a part of the world you know well?

I have family who live in the Western Isles and I've always been fascinated by the landscape and folklore of the area. I haven't spent a huge amount of time there myself but I wanted a setting where the main character could feel really solitary and isolated, in a place that was both bleak and beautiful. The Western Isles seemed the ideal location. The island in the book combines elements of various places and I didn't name it because I wanted it to retain an element of the imaginary.

Throughout the book there are question marks over what is actually happening, and what might be supernatural. Do you personally believe in things we can't explain?

I think the way the human brain makes sense of our surroundings is fascinating and vastly more complex than we understand. When people report experiences of supernatural encounters or unexplained phenomena, it's often to do with the way our brains are processing

what we see or hear. I found Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence* fascinating on this subject (the novel's epigraph is taken from it). And I think so many cultures have ghost stories because it's also a way of dealing with loss and grief.

But of course there will always be experiences that defy our understanding and I like the idea of keeping an open mind!

Zoe is a very complex character. Did you know all the details about her past and personality before you started writing, or did she develop as you continued writing?

I've been writing (as S. J. Parris) in the voice of a male character whose life is very different from mine for a long time, and I really wanted to tell a woman's story, from the perspective of someone whose experience I could identify with more closely. So Zoe came to me very fully-formed, as a woman preoccupied with aspects of motherhood, the failure of a relationship, her relationship with her own sexuality, a desire to make a drastic change – all the things that happen to many women as they pass forty. Both Zoe and Ailsa McBride in the book are mothers of only children, sons, as I am, so I was interested in exploring the ways that often intense relationship can turn out. But I wasn't sure how the story would end for Zoe – that developed as I went along.

What is your favourite scene in the book and why?

There's one scene that takes place when Zoe is alone in the McBride house which seemed to unfold as I wrote it, and I actually scared myself. The aim with a book like this is to create an atmosphere of fear for the reader, but as the writer you're usually looking so closely at putting the pieces together you don't see the whole picture until later. I can't say which one as I don't want to spoil it, but it made me shiver as I wrote it and I was very happy about that!

What was the most difficult scene to write and why?

I always find the endings of books hardest – you want to resolve the questions of the story in a way that's satisfying to readers,

but without necessarily resolving every last thing. And I wanted a dramatic climactic scene that would not seem overdone, so that was a challenge.

For readers who have enjoyed *While You Sleep*, what other book would you recommend to them?

Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger*; Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*; Julie Myerson's *The Stopped Heart*. All stories of hauntings in the broadest sense; all properly chilling.

What are you working on next?

I'm finishing the next historical crime novel in my Giordano Bruno series, and then I'll be starting another contemporary psychological suspense novel in the same vein as *While You Sleep*.