

✧ The Story of My Book *Black Spring* ✧

It's hard to know when a book begins. Perhaps *Black Spring* began when I was six years old and running over the turf of the Cornish moors with my sisters. I remember the boundless feeling of freedom: I loved the wind rushing over the bare hills and the granite tors that thrust out of the ground. The moors were my favorite place in the world. Or maybe it began when I first read *Wuthering Heights* in my early twenties, and thought idly, I'd like to write a book like that one day. Or maybe it was in my early teens, when I first read Emily Brontë's poetry. Maybe a novel begins when you write the first words. They start with an image, a feeling, a voice, or a thought. I follow this for as long as it seems to last, then I put it aside and wait to see if it is actually alive.



Black Spring began like that. I was thinking about the story-within-a-story structure of *Wuthering Heights*, and I thought I would like to put that to use in a fantasy novel. When I started writing *Black Spring*, it had been several years since I had read *Wuthering Heights*. I wanted to write a book that paid tribute to Brontë but had its own autonomy and freedom as a story. I find that freedom in fantasy: it allows me to make my own world, with its own metaphors and laws. Some years ago I read Ismail Kadare's novel *Broken April*, a fictional account of the vendettas in Northern Albania. It was this book that sparked the world alive for me.

One day I thought of a narrator named Hammel, who, like Brontë's character Mr. Lockwood, rents a house in the wilds, goes to visit his landlord, and has an alarming experience. Hammel recounts why he is visiting the Northern Plateau and describes the world in which he lives. It's a nineteenth-century sort of world that is remote from the imperial centers of civilization, rural and wild. I left Hammel alone for a year or more. There things stayed until 2009, when I went to England on a reading tour I was awarded by Poetry Australia. I was staying in Grasmere in the

middle of the Lake District. Aside from a couple of reading commitments, I had a whole week in which I could do whatever I liked. I was put up in a beautiful lodge: an old house with wooden shutters that was not far from the village. It was autumn, and the leaves were turning. Perhaps it was the misty tors, the fact that it rained every day, my morning walks past damp sheep, the constantly changing colors of the hills. . . . Whatever it was, I ended up

working on *Black Spring*. I can't write a book unless I hear its tone and diction and in this case, it was the characters I needed to hear. After I returned home, I spent the next five months finishing the book.

Black Spring is, in many ways, a love letter to Emily Brontë. I even included some lines from reviews of *Wuthering Heights* that came out when it was first released, but that was just for my own fun. I like to think that somewhere Brontë is chuckling sardonically.

Half of the time I spent writing this book, I really enjoyed it. When things went bad, as they were always going to in a book like this, it became more difficult. It sounds ridiculous, but I suppose that when you write fiction, you have to imagine what it is your characters are feeling as well as thinking. You have to be at once inside them and outside them. And with this book, I really had to grit my teeth to finish it. It's a book about extreme emotions, extreme people. Anna, my main narrator, is the only sane character in the book. I found her a joy and relief after the passions of my other characters. Also, among other things, it's a book about injustice and hatred of women, and in order to write about those things, you have to go there. You have to pull on things you know inside yourself that maybe you'd rather not know.

The real pleasure happens when you actually hold the book in your hands. I always feel a faint astonishment, as if I can't quite believe that I wrote it. But there it is.

