

Interview with Sarah Moss

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. Today, I'm talking to Sarah Moss about her book GHOST WALL, which is out now in paperback from Picador. As usual, you can find a complete transcript and a list of all the books mentioned today linked in our show notes. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:36] **Kendra** Welcome to 2020, friends! Welcome to a new season of Reading Women. We have so many wonderful things planned. I spent the break talking to everyone and talking about new books and planning our reading, which is always very exciting. So we are well on our way. But to start us off, I'm gonna be talking to Sarah Moss.

[00:00:59] **Kendra** When this was pitched to me by the publisher, I was like, "Of course I want to talk to Sarah Moss!" She is very popular over in the UK. We only have about two books of hers out here in the US. One is by Europa. This one is now out from FSG in hardback, and paperback is out from Picador. And I'm so thrilled that Sarah Moss is finally coming to the United States. There is now an audiobook of GHOST WALL. As you know, I love audiobooks. So all of this is very exciting. And so today on the podcast, Sarah and I talk about her novel, what the inspiration was for that. We talk a lot about northern England and what stereotypes might be found there. But most of this book deals with the intersection of class and gender and what that looks like in a very interesting way she tells the story. This book is a novella, and so it isn't very long. And so it was very difficult to be able to talk about the book and not give away spoilers since it is so short. So forgive my vague questions, but I wanted to make sure that this was a spoiler-free conversation. So without further ado, here is my interview with Sarah Moss.

[00:02:16] **Kendra** Welcome, Sarah. Welcome to the podcast. I am so thrilled to talk to you today.

[00:02:20] **Sarah** Thank you.

[00:02:23] **Kendra** GHOST WALL is . . . did it come out last year in the US?

[00:02:27] **Sarah** In the US? Yes, it did.

[00:02:30] **Kendra** So what number of novel is this for you? I know you've written a lot more that just haven't come out here.

[00:02:36] **Sarah** It's number six.

[00:02:38] **Kendra** Wow. Oh, my goodness. I first heard about your writing from a lot of UK booktubers. And I went to try to find your books, and they weren't available here. So I was so thrilled when GHOST WALL was going to be published here in the United States.

[00:02:54] **Sarah** Yeah. It's really exciting to have it in America with FSG.

[00:02:59] **Kendra** Has there been a different kind of reception that your work has received in the US compared to how your work was received in the UK?

[00:03:06] **Sarah** Maybe a little. I think in the UK it's been read as a bit more of a Brexit book, and it was quite nice to see other things being picked up in the US because . . . I mean, maybe it is a Brexit book . . . but that's not all that it's doing. And I think even to the extent that it might be about Brexit, it's really about nationalism and ideas and racial supremacy and, kind of, background Brexit ideology that applies much more widely.

[00:03:33] **Kendra** There's so many things I want to ask you. But before I get ahead of myself. . . . GHOST WALL is about a young woman named Silvie. So who is Silvie? And what were some of the key things that you knew heading into beginning to write this story?

[00:03:52] **Sarah** Silvie is seventeen, and that age really interests me because it's just on the cusp between childhood and adulthood. And she's kind of poised to look out from her family world into imagining her own future. But her sense of what she might do is limited by social class and by region. She lives in quite a poor part of northern England, in a town that people tend not to leave very much. And her background is working class. It's by no means taken for granted that she's going to go on to any kind of higher education. So she's really poised at a moment of uncertainty and fragility. And that's a really interesting narrative position.

[00:04:41] **Kendra** Yeah, I immediately was drawn to this story, and we talked about it on the podcast for a theme we did on working class stories. And my co-founder and another one of our co-hosts were all from working class backgrounds. So it was really important for us to see this kind of story. This is, I mean, this is set in the UK. SO it's a little different from our experience here in the US.

[00:05:07] **Sarah** Yes.

[00:05:08] **Kendra** What drew you to this story? Why this story? Why now? And is it something that's been ruminating in your mind for a while?

[00:05:16] **Sarah** That's a set of big questions. Yes, probably has been forming in my mind for a while. I started with a place actually. I always start with place rather than character or plot.

[00:05:31] **Kendra** Oh, that's interesting.

[00:05:33] **Sarah** So it began in a writing residency in Northumberland, which is right at the northern edge of England, up on the Scottish border by Hadrian's Wall. And I fairly often get invited to take residences. And I never can because they always say, oh, you know, come and stay in our beautiful castle for three weeks or six weeks, and we'll cook for you, and we'll organize everything for you, and there'll be no Wi-Fi, and you can just read. And I think, well, yes, that would be very nice. But I have a full-time job and two children. And whose life is it that works so that you can just disappear for three weeks? Or six weeks? I mean, those are clearly meant for people who have no caring responsibilities and no paid employment. And really nobody relying on them for anything as far as I can see. And this time it was New Writing North. They're a literary organization in the north of England. And they said, "Oh, yeah, you're right actually. It's really exclusive to do it that way. What if we break it into sections of two or three or four days? And through the winter, you can take a series of these short residencies." And that was so lovely for me because I can't take three weeks out of my family life for my working life, but I can take two or three days here and there.

[00:06:46] **Sarah** And it meant that I'd go and be there quite intensively for a short period. But then it would fuel me and sustain my thinking through a few more weeks. And particularly in winter here, you know, it's dark and it's cold. And I mean, I'm a university lecturer, so it's always working all the time from September to June. And it was so lovely to have those periods of a few days. And it gave me space to think about place and to move over London, to talk to people in a way that I can't normally do when writing's running along with everything else in my life.

[00:07:20] **Kendra** You know, I'd never thought about how residences are more catered to people who don't have families or full-time jobs. And most writers have full-time jobs.

[00:07:29] **Sarah** Yeah, many have families.

[00:07:30] **Kendra** Yeah. I particularly find fascinating that you start with place. And for me, place is incredibly important when it comes to a book. And you mentioned that this novel is set in the north of England and a poor, poorer area of northern England. I was talking to our co-host, Jaclyn, whose family is from northern England until they moved to Australia. And so when she read this, she said that there hadn't been a novel that really captured that area where she's from as clearly as this book. And we were discussing it. And she and I both live in the American South. And in a lot of ways, I feel like a lot of the stereotypes that people have about the American South are very similar about northern England.

[00:08:17] **Sarah** That's really interesting. I hadn't thought of it, but I'm sure you're right.

[00:08:21] **Kendra** Yeah. I feel like, since I'm not from England, it's trying to like, "Okay, what are the stereotypes? Like, what are people's perceptions of northern England?" And then going into the book kind of like that way.

[00:08:33] **Sarah** Yes. It's been really interesting thinking about that as it's been translated into other languages because thinking about how to translate the dialect means you have to think about which regions of each country are the equivalent of the North. But of course, in America it doesn't explicitly have a translation. So we didn't exactly have to do that. But when it's going into French or German, the translator really has to work out which accent to use.

[00:08:58] **Kendra** That is fascinating. I'm sure I could fall down the rabbit trail of linguistics forever talking about this. But now that we've kind of situated our listeners, like an equivalent, as it were, obviously not a direct translation. What were some of the stereotypes that you wanted to look at with this book? Since you started with place, was there something in particular that you wanted to write about the north in that way?

[00:09:22] **Sarah** I grew up in the North. And when I moved to the south to go to university, it was the first time I really saw the North because, of course, if you grow up in it, it's normal. And we never went to the south of England, never saw any reason to go to the south of England. So I spent my adult life being called a northerner, but I didn't know I was a northerner until I left the North. And I wanted to write a book that had that perspective that was centered in the north and wasn't always comparing the north to the south or making some great issue of northern identity, that simply took for granted that there were narrative positions of northerners. There aren't very many books, not very many novels, recent novels . . . set in the north maybe isn't quite fair . . . but with northern narrators. I mean, there were a few, and they're very good. But something I've been asked a few times

in England is, "Now it's really interesting that you don't set your novels in London. Can you talk to us about why you don't set your novels in London?" I mean, why would I set my novels in London? I've never lived in London. I mean, I go there from time to time to enact business the way anybody might. But it's not where I live. It's not where I've ever lived. Why can't there be stories from other places?

[00:10:39] **Kendra** We have the same feelings about novels set in New York City.

[00:10:43] **Sarah** Yes.

[00:10:43] **Kendra** And I'm just like, Okay, guys.

[00:10:49] **Sarah** Yes.

[00:10:49] **Kendra** I'm from Appalachia, which I guess if there is an equivalent, it would be.

[00:10:52] **Sarah** Yes, it would be. I've read stuff about it.

[00:10:55] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah. I've also seen like comparisons to Wales as well because there's a fair amount like, you know, hilly, mountainous, whatever. And there's lots of coal and other things. And I felt very similar when I left Appalachia. I didn't realize I lived in Appalachia. I'd never thought of myself as Appalachian. But you leave and everyone is like, "Where do you come from? Do you marry your cousin? Do you know what a computer is like?"

[00:11:21] **Sarah** Yes. Yes. When I got to university, it was just assumed that having got there was some spectacular achievement, and we probably didn't have indoor plumbing. And I went to a reasonably posh private girls school and did Latin and went to the theatre and generally had most of the accouterments of a middle-class life. But that just didn't gel for people. They couldn't imagine that that kind of life existed in the north.

[00:11:49] **Kendra** Did you find yourself trying to even out your accent? I know England has way more distinct accents than the US does, but there's still always that pressure to like try to be the most normal sounding.

[00:12:01] **Sarah** Yes, absolutely. I've lost it. I used to sound northern. And my husband, who is a posh Southerner, says he can still hear northern vowels. And it comes back a bit when I go north. My husband and my kids tease me that there's a point driving up the M1, which is the big motorway heading north, where my accent shifts even if we don't get out of the car. But yeah, I mean, for all intents and purposes now, I've lost it. I just sound generically educated, a bit posher than I am.

[00:12:29] **Kendra** So one of the things I think that really drives this book is Silvie and her experience. And the set up for our listeners is that she is on this archeological dig that her dad is helping this professor and his class move through. He's kind of like a local guide. And so he brought Silvie and her mother along. And there is an obvious class difference immediately, as soon as you see on the page. And there's a lot of assumptions that they have about Silvie's dad. But he's actually very learned. And you can see their stereotypes there.

[00:13:08] **Sarah** Yes, he's an autodidact, I mean, he's a bus driver. And in England, in some parts, there still is this exam called the eleven-plus. And you take the exam when

you're ten. And if you do well, you go through one sort of school, and if you do badly, you go to another sort of school. And that means that people are divided into, well, it used to be professional and manual work at the age of ten.

[00:13:32] **Kendra** Wow.

[00:13:34] **Sarah** And that was normal. I mean, in some ways it led to a lot of social mobility because if you went to grammar school, you could go to university. And there was no money involved at any stage. The grammar schools were free, and the universities were free. So for working-class kids who passed that exam, it was the key to post-war social mobility. But for those who failed, of course, it was the key to post-war social stagnation.

[00:14:00] **Sarah** And Silvie's dad is one of the ones who failed it. And in the area to the north of where I grew up, it's mostly mining country. It's parts of the country where, traditionally, men did hard manual labor. And when the book is set in the '90s, that manual labor has gone. The coal mines have closed. The factories have closed. So for men whose masculinity was defined by work and physical strength, over a very short period of time, there's nothing to do and no way to prove yourself and no way to be a man. And he's very badly caught by that. He's put on this scrap heap as a child, offered another form of masculinity, a way to matter. And then that's taken away from him as well. And he ends up devoting himself to studying Iron Age in Roman Britain and imagining that period as a time when he would have been all right, when his masculinity would have been valid. And the skills he has, which are all to do with surviving on the land and moving on the hills and understanding the natural world, would have been enormously important. And then he comes up again to the professor, who is middle class and has a lot of degrees and finds his own power in expertise and formally recognized kinds of knowledge. And they're both invested in certain kinds of masculine power, but they're on a collision course.

[00:15:28] **Kendra** And that dynamic and the tension that you build . . . and I don't think we've mentioned yet, but, you know, GHOST WALL is not even 200 pages long. So you do that in such a short amount of space. I think the US edition is just over 130 pages. But the way that her dad comes onto the scene . . . and it's almost like as soon as you read about him, it's like he's just, you know, jumps off the page. And there's that tension there. And I feel like I have met him so many times in the fact that you see this person that is very different from you, but yet so familiar was just such a . . . I don't know. It kind of struck me in the face a little bit. And that was a very powerful character.

[00:16:11] **Sarah** Yeah, I think we've all met him: men carrying anger.

[00:16:16] **Kendra** For our climate, the way it is both in America and in the UK, he is definitely someone that we've seen. Even if we haven't met him, maybe we live in a more urban area or whatever it might be. But yeah, I mean, he is everywhere. But I do feel like he's become more prominent in recent years at least.

[00:16:36] **Sarah** Yeah. But I wanted him not to be a monster. That was really important to me because when we decide that the angry men are just monstrous, we let off the hook the structures that have put them in that position.

[00:16:51] **Kendra** I definitely see that on the page. And even if we don't agree with him, I feel like there's definitely an understanding of why he feels that way. Even if you're like, well, you know, dude, this is not excusable.

[00:17:04] **Sarah** Oh, yeah. No. The way the way he behaves is monstrous. But he's been created in a context that leaves him . . . makes him feel that there's nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. And that behavior has also been permitted and tolerated by his own community. I mean, these people don't come out of nowhere, and they're not sustained by nothing.

[00:17:29] **Kendra** One of the strengths of the novel is that intersection of class and gender in how you see so many different types of that intersection because you have both men and women who are middle class or being educated intersecting with Silvie and her family. There's just something about that. It's almost as if like sexism transcends class in some ways.

[00:17:54] **Sarah** Yes. Yes. Well, it does.

[00:17:59] **Kendra** Yeah. And we'll be back with more of Reading Women after a word from our sponsor.

[00:19:44] **Kendra** So with this story, we see Silvie and her family. And she comes into contact with these students, and she sees a different way of life, a new possibility for herself. And it makes her see herself and her family in a new light. It's almost like her coming of age realization.

[00:20:06] **Sarah** Yes, but she doesn't know what to do with it. And she's scared and slightly hostile to it because she can sense that to agree with them or to join them would be to betray the way she's grown up and to betray her parents. And she wants to do that. But she's also quite defensive.

[00:20:24] **Kendra** It makes me think about how . . . we were just talking about it with accents . . . like to rise up in class means that it's almost like you have to leave where you came from behind.

[00:20:35] **Sarah** Well, I think generally it's hard to have spaces for people who are being both of anything, particularly where those identities are so fiercely opposed.

[00:20:43] **Kendra** I just keep thinking about Silvie at the camp. And you see her interacting with other women. And you can see that they also face sexism because they're women and aren't taken seriously often times in this class. But the same time, you know, they bring with them a lot of stereotypes about her father. And there's some complexities about her relationship. How did you work out those very well-drawn dynamics? Was there a process of figuring out how you wanted to tell Silvie's story? Or is it something that just unraveled as you were writing it?

[00:21:18] **Sarah** I think that just unraveled. There were some parts of wanting this I planned very minutely and other parts where I just trusted to the process. And I think, at the level of character and interaction, I trust the process. I almost feel as if I think too much about those, they might not work. If I look too closely at how I do it, it might stop happening.

[00:21:40] **Kendra** It's like something magical happening. You're afraid if you look too closely, it'll not be real anymore.

[00:21:46] **Sarah** Yes. Yes.

[00:21:48] **Kendra** There's another part of this that we haven't touched on much yet, which is GHOST WALL, the title of the book. And this class is studying ancient Britain, like we've mentioned. So what is a ghost wall? And what about it drew you to including it so heavily or very prominently in your story?

[00:22:11] **Sarah** Sure. I'm assuming that is useful here to give the backstory about the Iron Age and the Roman invasion of Britain.

[00:22:17] **Kendra** Probably. Yes.

[00:22:18] **Sarah** I probably wouldn't need too for a British audience, but I can't imagine why anyone would know. Okay. The Romans invaded Britain decades after the birth of Christ. So before that, it was Iron Age tribes living around Britain and the archipelago generally. And the Romans came AD 54, sometime around there. And naturally enough, they landed on the south coast because that's where they were coming from and then spread north, mostly conquering or subduing the various groups and tribes as they came. And they got surprisingly far north. But when they got to where Hadrian's Wall is now, they encountered difficulties, which had as much to do with landscape as people.

[00:23:03] **Sarah** I mean, there's a narrative that they pushed the ancient Britans up to the north, and finally they turned and fought. And if you want a Scottish nationalist version, it was the Scots who turned and fought, although they certainly weren't Scottish then. Anyway, in the end, they stopped there. And Emperor Hadrian said, "Let's just build a wall there, and we won't go any further." That wall is still there. You can walk along it. It's sometimes been described as the border between England and Scotland, but it never was that because neither England nor Scotland existed when it was built. It was the border between the Roman Empire and the Barbarians. Or, as we might see it now, the border at the edge of Europe, if we assume that the Roman Empire was approximately Europe.

[00:23:42] **Sarah** So it's a border wall between us and them, between insiders and outsiders, between us and the barbarians. And as the Roman soldiers came northwards, different groups tried to defend themselves in different ways. The story of the Ghost Wall has very little archeological evidence. There's a letter in Tacitus's account of the Roman conquest of Britain, where he said, you know, his brother's uncle's friend's son-in-law told him there's this one legion was approaching a British settlement. Having used all their firepower and all their weapons, they built palings and got the heads of the ancestors and put them along the top in a last ditch attempt to stop the Roman army overwhelming their settlement. And of course, it didn't work. You can't hold off an invading army with magic, but that's the origin of the ghost wall.

[00:24:38] **Sarah** So I was thinking about walls and borders and the way really all the walls are ghost walls. I mean, a wall is not usually a very sound form of technology for keeping people out. They will tend to come over or under or around. But it's a symbolic marker. And I was thinking, of course, about Trump's wall as I was writing that and about the fences and borders going up around Europe as the refugees tried desperately to leave Syria and also about the border between England and Scotland, which was becoming more controversial in the wake of the Brexit vote because Scotland voted to stay in Europe and England voted to leave.

[00:25:13] **Kendra** And you mentioned that it's a great symbol. And I feel like it is definitely this multi-layered wall because that's what the class is studying in ancient Britain. And I don't want to give any spoilers, but there is a ritual kind of thing associated with that wall.

[00:25:35] **Sarah** Yes. It's not really associated with the wall. There were bog bodies found across northern Europe, mostly Denmark, Germany, England, and Ireland. And it seems that in the Iron Age, so just before the Romans came, some groups made a practice of sacrificing members of their communities to the bog. So these people were killed, usually in at least three ways. They'd be gutted and bashed on the head and also stabbed. And the bodies were then pushed into bogs. And bogs conserve bodies. They tan them. The tanning in the water means that the surfaces don't decay, the bones dissolved, but the skin and the organs survive for, it turns out, two thousand years.

[00:26:24] **Sarah** These bodies have been being found in bogs for hundreds and hundreds of years. Probably since they were put in thousands of years ago. They're very, very strange. You can see them in museums across northern Europe because they look so individual. They still have eyelashes and fingerprints. And, sort of, they still have expressions, and they still have hair styles. But they're so old and so strange and died in such extraordinary pain. They're very, very disturbing things to see because they seem both completely individual still and inexpressibly foreign to us. So the book begins with an imagined scene of a bog sacrifice. And I just wanted that to hold the reader. I want you not to know quite, to suspect that it's going to come back, but not to know how.

[00:27:14] **Kendra** When I was rereading the story for this interview, I opened it up, and that's the first few pages. And I was just riveted all over again. And it really makes you think about this idea of sacrificing others for the sake of the whole and how that plays out in Silvie's life.

[00:27:36] **Sarah** Yes. My working title for the book was pharmacos, which means "scapegoat." I was thinking a lot about the the victim and the scapegoat and the bearer of sin all the time I was writing.

[00:27:49] **Kendra** Oh, that's fascinating. And when you combine all of these elements together, you have Silvie's father who wants to harken back to this ancient time. But then you always have these reminders throughout the story of what that ancient time actually was like.

[00:28:07] **Sarah** Yes! The friend Silvie makes, Molly, one of the students, is very clear that it really wouldn't have been much fun and that it's much nicer to have ice cream and hot showers and shampoo and comfortable boots and that life was nasty, brutish, and short in the Iron Age.

[00:28:26] **Kendra** It's like people asking you, like, "Where do you want to travel back in time?" Uh, nowhere?

[00:28:33] **Sarah** I'll stick with equal rights, antibiotics, and dishwashers. Thank you.

[00:28:38] **Kendra** I can't imagine. And that's one of the things that was fascinating to me about reading this, was the idea of these students trying to live like they were in the Iron Age. Was there actually a class that you studied for this kind of project for the story?

[00:28:55] **Sarah** There's an archaeological practice called experimental archaeology, which is never about . . . It's not reenactment, and it's never about some kind of fancy time travel. It's an idea that fascinates me that you can learn about prehistoric ways of living by making the kinds of things that those people would have made, using the kinds of technologies they would have used. So it's a very practical form of scholarship. And I really like that. I like the idea that by making . . . moving your hands in the way that people would have moved them and having the feelings on your skin that people would have had, you can understand more about their lives than you will just by studying what's left.

[00:29:37] **Kendra** I think that would be so fascinating to actually do one of those classes. But at the same time I feel like since I come from a family where my grandfather took me out in the woods and taught me about plants and roots and animals and tracking—on a very base, kid level, but still that was very much part of my education in being aware—that it might be a little bit different for me compared to someone who might have come from a major city.

[00:30:06] **Sarah** Yes, absolutely. And I grew up sort of with both. I mean, I lived in urban Manchester. So it was pretty poor then, a post-industrial northern city. But my grandparents lived in rural Yorkshire. And my grandfather, who, he's definitely not the basis of Bill. He was a lovely, gentle, kind man. But he'd left school at twelve and had such severe malnutrition as a child that he was short, and his bones were fragile. He'd grown up barefoot and poor in Leeds in the 1920s, and he really knew and loved the landscapes that he'd grown up with. And my parents are very into hiking and mountain walking. So I grew up doing that. And I've gone on doing it with my own kids. So I kind of had both growing up and maybe they've both found some form in this novel.

[00:31:03] **Kendra** Something beautiful about connecting with the land in that way, and that goes back to how you start with place and how just even that practice of going out and just being aware of the land really makes you appreciate it more for what it is as opposed to just people will say that is empty land. But it's not. It's full of life.

[00:31:24] **Sarah** Yes. And it teaches you to recognize your own physicality and mortality as well. When you understand yourself as a creature off and on land in the same way as other creatures off and on land, you have a very different idea of bodies and minds and being in the world.

[00:31:42] **Kendra** That gives me hope for the future Silves of the world, that may be in the future, will be able to see more women who are both educated but also close to the land, and that it's not this idea that you have to be one or the other, that there is room for people who are both.

[00:32:01] **Sarah** Yes, that would be nice.

[00:32:04] **Kendra** So this book also touches a bit on violence against women. And I do believe that this is something that we seem more aware of. It's always been there. But as anything we've been more aware of in recent times. Did that, what's happening now, influence the writing of your novel? Or is that something that just came naturally to the story?

[00:32:25] **Sarah** I think it was always going to be part of the story. And #MeToo happened certainly after I'd written several drafts and possibly after it had gone for copy editing and proofs. I can't quite remember. So it wasn't a direct response to the #MeToo movement. I'd

always avoided writing violence against women before. In one of my earlier books, there is some, but it happens very definitely off stage. This time I needed to address it more directly, but it was very important to me to do that in a way that didn't allow any space for voyeurism or titillation. You don't get to stand back. You don't get to see. You don't get to hear. You never see it from the aggressor's point of view. You are absolutely in the victim's head and not in her body. There's no . . . there's no real account of how it feels. You're just in her thoughts and in her mind. And it was very important to me to do it that way because I think so many accounts of violence against women in fiction end up being voyeuristic and sensational. I'm very uncomfortable, for example, with a lot of crime writing because of that. So I wanted to find a way of doing it that doesn't afford the reader the luxury of listening or watching.

[00:33:46] **Kendra** I think being in her head, it makes it more real because it's like you're kind of seeing or reading what her thoughts might be going through something like that.

[00:34:00] **Sarah** Yes. Good. That was how I wanted it to be.

[00:34:04] **Kendra** One of the things that I also found fascinating was how the other women responded to the violence happening to another woman. And they respond in different ways. Some of them want to get one of the women to stand up for herself. And the other one more kind of perpetuates, writes it off as, "Oh, that's just who he is." And there's so many different portrayals of that.

[00:34:26] **Sarah** Yes. Partly because Allison, the one who thinks that it's the victim's fault, is also a victim. And in some ways, it's probably more comfortable to believe that it's your fault or her fault than to believe that the woman in that situation has no power because it's a bit like blaming victims of crime or people who are poor. If you believe that is because of some moral failing or act of complicity on their part, then it won't happen to you because you're stronger than that or better than that or cleverer than that or whatever it is. Once you accept that it's not the victim's fault, that the victim did nothing to invite it, then you have to accept that it can happen to anybody. And that's quite a scary position to occupy. And in some ways, Molly's ability to call it out comes from her own class privilege. And she's right. It probably won't happen to her, but it won't happen to her because it hasn't happened to her. And I mean, of course, domestic violence happens across all classes. But it's unimaginable to Molly that she would ever be a victim, and therefore she can almost afford to see what's wrong.

[00:35:44] **Kendra** There's so much to think about with this book, and I hope all of our listeners will go and read it. But before I let you go, I always like to ask the authors that we have on the show about recommendations of other women authors. And since we're talking about a book set in northern England, and that is also where you're from, are there any northern English writers that you would like to draw attention to in particular?

[00:36:10] **Sarah** Well, I mean, she's already done very well and probably doesn't need my recommendation, but Fiona Mozley's *ELMET*, which was shortlisted for the Booker a couple of years ago, her first novel. It's really excellent, and that's set in Yorkshire quite near where mine is set, and in some ways, exploring some similar themes. Jeanette Winterson is originally from the north, of course, though a long resident in London. It seems we tend to leave. Well, if we go back a bit further, there's Winifred Holtby, who's late 20th century, very good and very definitely in that tradition of female northern writers. And then, of course, we can go all the way back to the Brontës because that's where they come from.

[00:36:51] **Kendra** It always brings me joy that there are these three women up in northern England, just little geniuses. And everyone's like, "Where'd you come from?".

[00:36:58] **Sarah** Yes.

[00:36:59] **Kendra** And you like, "Uh, not . . . not London." I imagine it must be even more joyful, actually being from there and not admiring them from across the pond like I do.

[00:37:14] **Sarah** Yeah, it's good. I mean, I grew up near enough to Haworth that I used to go fairly often and walk over the moors to Top Withens, which was the origin of Wuthering Heights.

[00:37:23] **Kendra** That is the dream.

[00:37:27] **Sarah** But you know, they were pretty difficult, those women.

[00:37:30] **Kendra** I can imagine.

[00:37:31] **Sarah** There's a lovely account of Charlotte Brontë at a party that her publisher gave for her in London, and she came in and sat down on a chair at the side of the room and stayed down. It was a party that was meant to celebrate her achievement and to be to introduce her to all sorts of London literary people. And she just sat there with her hands folded in a black dress. And after a while, somebody got up confidence and said, "You were very quiet, Miss Brontë." And she said, "So it is my habit when I have nothing to say." And you can just imagine the poor bloke kind of creeping off with his hands behind his back.

[00:38:02] **Kendra** They're such an interesting family.

[00:38:05] **Sarah** You should go to Haworth sometime. They've got Charlotte Brontë's dresses and her pens.

[00:38:11] **Kendra** That that is the dream. If I ever get over to England, I have family in Ireland. I need to go visit them. Hop across the channel. And go visit all of the historic things. Virginia Woolf was my favorite writer, and I want to go to where she used to vacation.

[00:38:28] **Sarah** Sussex. Yeah.

[00:38:30] **Kendra** Because, you know, *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* was an epic book for me. And so I need to go and do a literary historical tour.

[00:38:37] **Sarah** You should do that.

[00:38:40] **Kendra** So before I let you go, what are you working on now? And do you have plans to have any more of your books come over to the United States?

[00:38:49] **Sarah** Well, I'd be delighted. The next book is called *SUMMER WATER*, and it's coming out in September in the UK, and I think a few weeks later in the US.

[00:38:59] **Kendra** That sounds wonderful. I have been buying your books from the UK through Book Depository for a few years now. And I'm so excited that finally more of them are coming across to us. So congratulations on that, and congratulations on the paperback of GHOST WALL.

[00:39:20] **Sarah** Thank you very much.

[00:39:20] **Kendra** And thanks for chatting with me. It's been wonderful.

[00:39:22] **Sarah** Great pleasure.

[00:39:26] **Kendra** I'd like to thank Sarah Moss for talking to me about her novel, GHOST WALL, which is out now in paperback from Picador. You can find more about Sarah on her website, sarahmoss.org. And of course, all of her information will be linked in the show notes. I'd also like to say a special thank you to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. If you're interested in becoming one of our patrons, getting exclusive patreon podcast and newsletter. . . . We have a book club. There are so many things. If you'd like to join our patrons, you can find a link, per usual, in our show notes. You can also find us, Reading Women, at readingwomenpodcast.com and on social media (@thereadingwomen). And thank you so much for listening.