Research secrets

Emma Claire Sweeney explains to Anita Loughrey how the research for her novel *Owl Song at Dawn* led to a PhD in autism and learning disabilities

My novel *Owl Song at Dawn* was inspired by my love and admiration for my autistic sister Lou, whose zest for life defies most people's assumptions about disability.

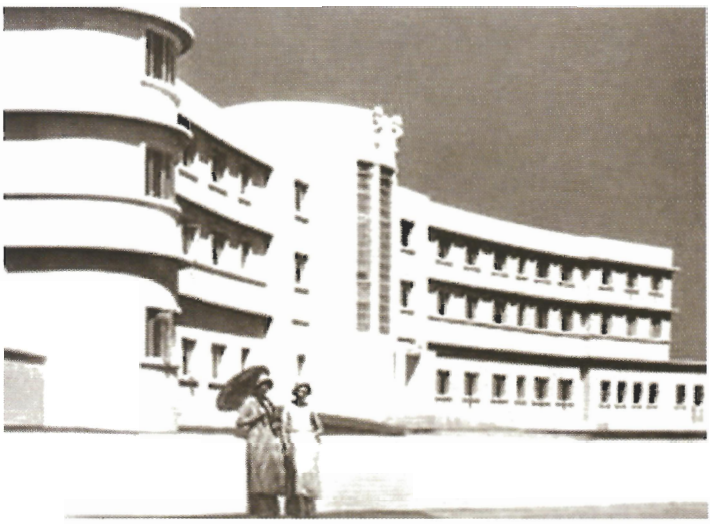
Some of my most prominent memories of my school days in Birkenhead relate to Lou, even though she attended the special school on the other side of town. After a swimming lesson in the early '90s, for example, an older boy referred to Lou as a 'spaz'. I still remember the sudden strength I acquired when I pinned him up against a wall!

Not long after, I complained to my English teacher about the use of the term 'idiot' in Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War*. Mrs Nuttall generously responded by devoting one class to a debate on the subject. I am indebted to her. She focused my fierce (and, in hindsight, somewhat misplaced) sense of injustice at the inadequacy of literary representations of learning disability.

Years after, I still couldn't find a portrait of a family that resembled mine in the novels I devoured. I suspected that most people had misconceptions about learning disability, and that fiction could help to subvert them.

I began to ask myself what a fun-loving family like mine might have looked like if my sister and I had been born earlier. Would we have been wrenched apart?

I watched a TV show with the unfortunate title *The Strangest Hotel in Britain*, and this gave me the idea for my setting: a family seaside guesthouse that employs staff with learning disabilities and caters mostly to the disabled community.



The place featured in the Channel 4 programme was Foxes Hotel in Somerset. I called them to ask whether I could interview the owners and some of the staff. They were now wary of journalists but when I explained that I was writing a novel and that my sister has autism and cerebral palsy, they agreed.

I journeyed down there alone. One night at dinner, I got chatting to the married couple at the next table, both of whom had Down's syndrome.

'Could you not find anyone to come with you, love?' asked the wife sympathetically.

This encounter got me thinking about what love really looks like and who gets to see it. Maeve in *Owl Song at Dawn* is feted as the cleverest girl in town but it takes her until she's nigh on 80 to appreciate the love that Edie, her 'severely subnormal' twin, might have spotted all along.

I knew I had the beginnings of a novel when I could hear the voices of these twin sisters. Maeve and Edie both spoke with a Morecambe dialect, and I formed a clear picture of the pair of them in the 1950s at the lido , fairground and pier. My sister, Lou, had gone to a college run by Scope in Lancaster and she used to go on nights out to Morecambe. Subconsciously I must have associated the town with her.

> *It was a symbol for the neglect my twins endured*

But I had never so much as visited Morecambe. I tried to enforce a Scouse accent on to my characters and move them to New Brighton instead, but their dialects refused to budge. I accepted that I would just have to put in the time and effort to get to know the place.

I ended up visiting the resort many times, interviewing long-time residents, meeting local historians and creating detailed maps of the places my characters frequent.

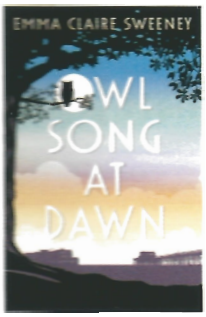
I learnt a lot through a fabulous coffee-table book, *Morecambe's White Hope*, about the history of the Midland Hotel – a magnificent Art Deco building right at the edge of the bay. It was built in 1933 and was host to big band dances and bathing beauty competitions. From the 1960s onwards its fortunes turned, however, and it ended up standing derelict, until it was finally restored to its former glory in 2008.

The neglect of the hotel and the wider town over the years seemed a good symbol for the neglect that my twins would have endured too.

I ended up plotting the trajectory of one of the twins' lives to resemble the history of the hotel: her heyday from the 1930s to 1950s and her slow decline, until, in her late seventies, she's offered a glimmer of hope by an unexpected guest.

Setting some of the novel's scenes in the Midland, both in the 1950s and in the present day, gave me the perfect excuse to sip a cocktail in the hotel's Rotunda Bar as the sun set over the crashing waves.

The period detail came fairly easily as I have always been interested in this era and have absorbed stories over the years from my parents and grandparents. Whenever I checked up on facts about gimlets or milk bars or polka-dot dresses, my imagination always seemed to have been based on authentic facts about the fashion and food of the



time. Not that this prevented me from whiling away a very pleasant afternoon with friends at the Imperial War Museum's brilliant rationing exhibition.

Academic pursuit

But I needed to conduct far more extensive research on the history of learning disability. How did doctors go about informing families of their diagnosis in the 1930s? Could parents be forced to institutionalise their disabled children? What role did convents play in 'care'?

For answers to these questions I went to books and papers written by experts who had conducted interviews with older people with learning disabilities, and I arranged to meet with some of the authors and contributors. Academics have often shown me great generosity with their time.

I discovered that the authorities would put pressure on parents to institutionalise children with learning disabilities, but they were unlikely to force a separation against the will of a loving, financially solvent family.

What if, I began to think, a family who had always been steadfast in their resolution to remain together were put under circumstances that led them to make the choice to part? What would have to happen to make them change their minds? And what might be the consequences?

I ran an oral history project at Sunnyside Trust – a social enterprise that trains people with learning disabilities in horticulture – which resulted in a book of poems, *The Memoir Garden*. The relationships I formed and the stories I learnt all informed my novel too.

I began to avoid speaking on behalf of people with learning disabilities and instead attempted to narrate with them – the most important lesson I've learnt along the way.

I became interested in fiction that featured first-person narrators with autism and learning disabilities and ended up completing a PhD in this area at the Open University. This proved a great way to receive feedback on my work, build contacts, and, just as importantly, get paid to conduct research I would have needed to undertake anyway.

There actually wasn't a rich history of main characters with learning disabilities in literary fiction. This surprised me since such a point of view offers lots of opportunity for an author to play with aspects of voice.

Any novelist in this area must inevitably set themselves up in conversation with William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. It's a novel I've long admired for the literary inventiveness of Benjy's narration. However, Benjy is presented from the start as an inevitable source of rupture in his damaged family. This is a trope that is repeated in every literary novel I've come across about learning disability.

In *Owl Song at Dawn*, I didn't want the narrative conflict to be fuelled by familial breakdown caused by disability, but rather by a family's loving attempts to resist the segregationist pressures of the authorities.

• *Find out more about Emma at www.emmaclairesweeney.com*