

Writing Durham 1 – Pat Barker and Benjamin Myers

Introduction *You're listening to a podcast by New Writing North.*

Laura McKenzie When we think of County Durham, we envision miners' strikes and a Norman Cathedral, St. Cuthbert's Shrine with its headless statue, a post-industrial northern landscape, and a world-leading university. It's steeped in history, but we don't tend to talk about County Durham in terms of its literary significance. I'm on a mission to prove that there's more to Durham than meets the eye; that, alongside its medieval city and worked-out pits, the county is home to a rich and varied tradition of literature. Over the past few months, I've been seeking out the writers, books and poems that tell the story of County Durham's literary past and present. And in this podcast series, I'll be speaking to authors and poets who either hail from Durham, or have made it their home. What does it mean, if anything, to be a Durham writer? What role has this place, unique in so many contradictory ways, played in shaping their work?

For our first episode, I'm joined by two of Durham's leading literary figures. Booker Prize-winner Pat Barker has lived in Durham for the past 40 years. Her first novel, *Union Street*, was published in 1982. And that book, as well as others that followed, portrayed the lives of, and gave voice to, Northern working-class women. Subsequent novels include the highly acclaimed *Regeneration* and *Life Class* trilogies, and last year's *The Silence of the Girls*, a reimagining of the untold female stories at the heart of *The Iliad*, which was shortlisted for both the Women's Prize for Fiction and the Costa Novel Award. Benjamin Meyers grew up in Belmont, a suburb of Durham City. His debut novel *Richard* was published in 2010, and was followed by among others, *Beastings*, *Turning Blue* and *The Gallows Pole*, a retelling of the desperate rise and fall of an 18th-century Yorkshire coining gang, which won the 2018 Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. His latest novel, *The Offing* came out last week, and is both a BBC Radio Four Book at Bedtime and a Radio 2 Book Club pick. Pat and Ben joined me to talk about place and memory, and what calling Durham home means to them as writers.

I'm Laura McKenzie, and this is Writing Durham.

Pat Barker I think for me, the significance of Durham and home is that Durham is the place where I don't have to be a writer. It's the place where I actually do the writing, but I don't have to fill out the persona of the writer – and when you're travelling to festivals all over the country, it's nice to come back and just be anonymous.

Laura McKenzie Yeah.

Pat Barker And it's not easy being anonymous in a place the size of Durham, but I think it can be managed, actually.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, it's interesting because I haven't lived here for 25 years, but my parents are here and my family are close by, Newcastle way, and friends are still here. So it's... I think how you define home can change, because it's where you're living, and I lived in London for 12 years. I've lived in Yorkshire for 10 years. But Durham is the constant for me. And it's the sort of security blanket, in a way. That's corny, but it's the thing that's unchanged in my life. I always come back to Belmont, where my parents live. Slightly different to Pat, though, in a way, because in the past – Pat's obviously far more successful and known than I am – but in the past few years, there's been a couple of successes which have been tied to the North East, so I've been back here a lot more on what I would call business, doing promotion or festivals or interviews or whatever. So I've come back to Durham as a writer, in a way, in the past two or three years. And, like, my old teachers are getting in touch and my parents' friends are asking for signed copies – you know, just things like that. So it's slightly strange, because in London I was completely anonymous, as most people are because it's such a big place. And where I live in Yorkshire I'm known particularly for one book that's set there. People didn't know I was a writer until this book came out, *The Gallows Pole*. But yeah, I come back to Durham and often it's to do something literary. And I'm researching a book at the moment about St. Cuthbert, and Durham Cathedral and Lindisfarne. Yeah, it's a place that's interwoven with literature, at the moment or in the past few years. It's changed slightly, my perception, I think, but there's certain things are totally unchanged. It's weird, I come back to Belmont, and I was looking out my old bedroom window last night. And there was trees, that were my height when we moved into the house, are now about 50 feet. I notice little things like that, even if I

come back a few times a year. Or some houses have been knocked down. Or there's a new retail park. So it's always changing. I see that as a sort of outsider, coming back – but it's always home.

Laura McKenzie Yeah.

Pat Barker It's interesting, the idea of coming home after a big break. I mean, one of my characters in *Liza's England* comes back home and sleeps in his old bed and realises that his shoulder blades no longer fit into the grooves in the mattress. And of course that is made to stand for an awful lot of things that no longer fit.

Benjamin Myers Yeah. I'm quite sentimental as well, I think, so when I do come back I often will go to places that had significance when I was younger, to see how I feel going there now. Yesterday I went to Finchale Abbey, which I spent a lot of time at as a kid. And the first summer I learned to drive we would drive there and sit by the river and do whatever teenagers do. So I went back yesterday – well, that bit was fenced off actually that was sort of...

Laura McKenzie Oh no!

Benjamin Myers Yeah, there's now a sort of caravan park there that's bigger, and it's private land. You couldn't get down to the little foreshore that we used to sit and drink beer on. So I do that quite a bit. I sort of almost see Durham as a slightly – I feel – partially tourist, but it's not a tourist who's here to see the obvious sites. It's more a tourist visiting my own past. I went back, and usually things are smaller when you're an adult, but I went to Finchale Abbey, and it was so much bigger than I remember. That was the weird – that never really happens. You usually go to places and like...

Pat Barker Yes, and did you go used to go to the railway viaduct when you were a teenager?

Benjamin Myers Down at the woods along from there, yeah.

Pat Barker Yes. Because there was a certain point when that was closed off. I used to take my dog walking across that. And I think boys were daring each other to walk across the parapet...

Benjamin Myers We did that, yeah.

Pat Barker ...and it was all crumbling.

Benjamin Myers I had a friend – we used to go on there when it was fenced off, which will be early 90s – yeah, and one friend hung off there, by his hands, off the rusty railing. Dangled over the edge, and would do things for a dare. I mean...

Pat Barker Well yes. I mean, you look at teenage boys, and you just wonder how anybody turns into a man. They seem single-mindedly determined not to do it.

Benjamin Myers The other thing about Durham is that, it's only when I moved away that I realised how beautiful it is, and how it's nicer than almost... It's nicer than most. Well, this is hard to say really, but it is nicer than most towns.

Laura McKenzie Well you do get acclimatised to it when you're in it all the time.

Benjamin Myers It's so green.

Laura McKenzie But yeah, so I haven't been back to Durham for a month or two months until today, and just driving past the cathedral. And you do get struck by – yeah, I know, it's the classic, the cathedral – but it is beautiful. It is.

Pat Barker But there's this sense when you've grown up in a place, you look at a tree, and it's a tree that you climbed when you were six, seven, eight years old. And an adult never looks at a tree, never knows the tree, properly, because they've never climbed it. They don't know what it feels like.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, yeah. And Durham is an interesting place to grow up because it's many different things, Durham, there's many different layers to it, I think. Like most cities, but possibly more so, because you've got this sort of historic mediaeval Norman architecture, you've got academia, the whole student world, the campuses. And that's a different...

Pat Barker And the prisons.

Benjamin Myers And the prisons. Yeah.

Pat Barker It's dominated by the prisons.

Benjamin Myers Yeah. And it's had some of the most...

Pat Barker The best place writing about Durham is Tony Harrison, in a very vitriolic poem. Something about it... it ends something like, "a dog chasing its own tail. University, Cathedral, Gaol."

Laura McKenzie And when did you come to Durham?

Pat Barker Oh, I can't remember exactly. In the 70s. I mean, it was like a lot of married women, of course, I went where my husband's job was and I ended up in Durham. It wasn't a choice. So no, it wasn't a choice. It's not a... I don't know. I do feel a link to Durham, now. I mean, I walk into the cathedral. And the cathedral feels like home. Yeah,

Laura McKenzie Yeah.

Pat Barker And I think that the cathedral feels like home to an awful lot of people who have not even the most residual religious faith. But it just is part of who we are.

Laura McKenzie Unfortunately, I was in there recently, and they think they're going to have to start charging. They're one of the few cathedrals that don't charge entrance, but they're struggling, so they're going to have to start charging. So I think that's going to change the dynamic.

Pat Barker That's a great pity, isn't it.

Benjamin Myers I wonder why now, after 1,000 years? Why now do they need to charge? I wonder why, in what way are they struggling now in a way that they wouldn't have been 200 or 500 years ago? I wonder what...

Pat Barker Well, of course, the great sort of thing, the terrible thing that happened to Durham was Thomas à Becket getting assassinated. They were rolling in money till that happened. Of course, they had Cuthbert, and Cuthbert was the major shrine. But then it shifted to Canterbury.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, that's one of the other things about Durham, or this region, is it's the, sort of, essentially, the birthplace of modern Christianity. So you've got that underneath the surface of everything, even if most people would probably call themselves atheist or mild, mildly Christian.

Pat Barker A mild Christian. [laughter]

Benjamin Myers You know, sort of amateurs.

Laura McKenzie Christian-like.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, flirting with it. People say, "I'm a Christian," because they went to C of E school or whatever. So underneath everything, you've got this weight of history, like a bedrock, of which Cuthbert is the symbol, the figurehead. Still really, amongst many others, Bede and various others.

Laura McKenzie And is that something you're looking at, at the moment?

Benjamin Myers Yeah. Yeah, I'm working on, well, four books.

Pat Barker Four books?!

Benjamin Myers Yeah. Four novellas, centred thematically around St. Cuthbert and his resting place of Durham Cathedral. And I'm writing them as four standalone novellas with the idea that hopefully they would be published separately, and then collated together and read as a four-part novel.

Pat Barker You're doing an Ali Smith, aren't you, essentially.

Benjamin Myers That has been noted.

Pat Barker I think that's a great thing to do, actually.

Benjamin Myers The first one concerns, which I've finished – I've been on Holy Island a lot this year, staying there. Cuthbert died there, and then his body was carried around the North East for 100 years by his small, I mean, you probably know this, about his small community of followers. So I wanted to tell – look at – the practicalities of a small community carrying a corpse around while Vikings are invading the coast.

Laura McKenzie The logistics.

Benjamin Myers Yeah. And the only way to tell it, I thought, was to just look at, you know, a few days or a few weeks on a personal level over a few months.

Pat Barker Are you going to – are the other novellas at different time periods?

Benjamin Myers Yeah. The last one is set now and it's about a young man who ends up doing some labouring on renovations on the cathedral in austerity England.

Pat Barker Are you going to do the marvellous thing of the raids in the Second World War and the St Cuthbert's Mist, which served to save the cathedral?

Benjamin Myers Well, it doesn't fit into the timeframe. There's so much to write about that I've had to learn a lot and then abandon it.

Pat Barker I love that story, because...

Laura McKenzie I don't know that story.

Pat Barker Oh, yes, yes – a sea fret essentially rolled in, which is characteristic of the region. And then the bombers turned back.

Benjamin Myers What, the sea fret reached to Durham?

Pat Barker Yes, yeah.

Benjamin Myers Interesting.

Pat Barker You do get mornings in winter in Durham where the fog just hangs around all day, and it's not forecast. It's just blown in.

Benjamin Myers That's interesting, because that story sort of ties in with various other myths surrounding Cuthbert when he was alive, which are attributed to him, acts of miracles. You know, the way when the monks were wandering with his body, they decided they were going to go to Ireland, leave England and be safer there, because of the Viking attacks. They set sail, but then they believe that Cuthbert said no and turned the tide and made the sea choppy. Well,

obviously, it's just weather conditions, but various things relating to weather and the topography of the landscape have been sort of claimed as miracles.

Laura McKenzie So have you been working in the archives of the cathedral?

Benjamin Myers Not yet, but I've been on Lindisfarne a lot, and I've read about 40 or 50 books about St. Cuthbert and Lindisfarne Priory, and I've been staying there by myself for spells and doing as well – It's the luxury version...

Pat Barker It's the swimming in the sea thing, isn't it?

Benjamin Myers Yeah, I've been going to stay in there and – I swim a lot outdoors anyway, but I've been swimming, because he would go and stand in the sea and pray, and then there's the story of otters coming and drying his feet and things like that. So I've been doing a lot of that. So I've been out in the sea every day.

Pat Barker No luck with the otters yet?

Benjamin Myers No otters. I saw one seal and – and I have like this robe for swimming which is like a towelling... it looks like a monk's cowl. I got it...

Pat Barker An actual robe?

Benjamin Myers Yeah, with a hood, but swimmers use them. It's instead of a towel, you just put this on and it dries you. By coincidence. So every day I was down on the beach, the far shore of Lindisfarne wearing this monk's robe and swimming in the sea. And then walking back across the island and just reading a lot and visiting the Priory. So this is all for the first novella, which is set way back in his time. But yeah, the second and third novellas are gonna be set in different eras, one probably about the exhumation of his corpse. There's a lot to learn, because I'm not a historian at all. They all say write what you know, don't they, and I'm not.

Pat Barker Yeah.

Laura McKenzie Well, *The Offing* is about a boy, Robert, who leaves Durham, he leaves the pit village. What's the significance there of the leaving? Because that kind of relates to your own experience, from what you said.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, I think so. Probably, on a sort of subconscious level, it's probably the thought – you just grow up in a place and you take it for granted. But when I went to university, suddenly, I was a Northerner, and everyone didn't – a lot of people said to me, “Where are you from in Ireland?” “Where are you from in Wales?” “Where are you from in Scotland?” I got that loads in the first couple of weeks.

Pat Barker Do you find that at home your accent was probably considered quite posh, whereas as soon as you leave the North East...

Benjamin Myers Yeah.

Pat Barker ... they pick it up, not necessarily accurate, but they pick it up. And suddenly you're not posh at all. I found that at university.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, you're different. You're a different person to different people, I think. Like, yeah, if I'm down in London for publishing events, I'm suddenly aware of my accent, because I'm not privately educated.

Pat Barker Yeah, I'm aware of my accent, too, and it's – I read something by David Storey, who I think as a novelist isn't much read now.

Benjamin Myers I love David Storey, I've read a lot of him, yeah.

Pat Barker Yeah, I love David Storey, too. And he was playing Rugby League football in the north. And he was an art student in Durham. And literally, those tunnels outside Kings Cross,

he would go into those tunnels as one person, and come out as another at the other end. And every time I go through those tunnels, I think that, and I think it's an experience that a lot of Northerners have.

Benjamin Myers Yeah. I worked as a journalist, and when asked when I started on a paper, age 21, 22, I had to slow down how I talked, I think, and soften and drop some words, which were probably slang words, which – it's just how you talk. So I think in *The Offing*, it's about a young man, but he's from a pit village, which I'm not from, and I think those pit villages in the time that I was writing about – which is post-war; the first summer after the Second World War – village life was a lot more closed off. I think they were saying, they were probably from what I can tell self-contained worlds, and they would have the Working Men's Club and some of them would have swimming pools and saunas, and, you know, almost entirely based around the pit. And Durham... I was struck by *Billy Elliot*, which is quite a sentimental film, but I liked it. There's a line where he goes down south for a ballet audition, and one of the sort of posh boys says, "Oh, Durham, wonderful. I hear it's got a wonderful Norman Cathedral," and he just said, "I don't know. I've never been." He's from what is probably Easington, so seven or eight miles away. And that struck me, and I thought, "That's true". Because I know, I've met people like that for who Durham City might as well be London if you live, particularly in the 1940s, and you had not much money.

Pat Barker Except for Gala Day, the one day in the year.

Benjamin Myers Which is the bit I meant in the book: his only knowledge of Durham is going to the Miners' Gala. Which isn't a typical day in Durham, because it's a huge event and centred round mining. So I think I maybe took a bit of my experience of leaving Durham and sort of amplified it into this character, who's got an ambition to see beyond his village, because he knows, he's been told from birth that, like your dad and your granddad, you'll be going down the pit. But he's a reader and he's into nature and he's a free thinker. So he thinks, "I'm going to go wandering down the country lanes. This is this might be my last stab at freedom." And then it transpires that he sees the whole world.

Laura McKenzie Yes, there's an outward trajectory rather than a downward trajectory. That's what struck me.

Benjamin Myers Yes, but one of the things that gets mentioned a lot about writers from the North or the regions is this idea of wanting to escape. And I disagree with that, because the idea that if you become a writer or a pop star or footballer, you can escape the North, from who – why do you want to escape the North? The idea that you can leave, you can move somewhere else, somewhere better – and for a lot of people it's home and... I think people are happier in the North East than a lot of other regions I've been in and stayed in.

Laura McKenzie Pat, you said coming here wasn't a choice, but you've chosen to stay.

Pat Barker I've chosen to stay.

Laura McKenzie You've chosen not to locate yourself in the, you know, the southern publishing club.

Pat Barker Yes and I'm glad I'm not part of it, actually, I think. I think, like Ben says, there's great advantages to having a certain distance from it. But you do sometimes feel that you're literally going into another world when you visit it.

Laura McKenzie Pat and Ben join me to talk about place and memory and what calling Durham home means to them as writers.

Pat Barker Oh, God, yes, so I mean, I remember coming to the Gala even before I lived in Durham, when it was marching miners, which is not what it is now. And what was particularly moving is that if there had been a death in one of the pits during the year, the banners were draped in black, and that contingent marched in silence. So along with this sort of necklace of men winding their way through the streets, there was sort of one black bead, this bead of silence and grief. And, you know, once seen, never forgotten. It's still got its moments, but it's changed its nature fundamentally.

Laura McKenzie Yeah, there's a lot of nostalgia around the collieries, but they were so dangerous, and so many people lost their lives. It's actually quite a dark history.

Pat Barker Yes, yes. And the grief for the loss of the mining communities, it's all very well, but a lot of lives were curtailed very, very quickly. It interests me, you see, that Barry Unsworth, a novelist I very much respect, grew up in a mining community. His father started life, at least, as a miner. And he was always pleased and relieved that his parents had got him out of that fate and chose... he never, as far as I'm aware, ever wrote about Durham. He went to live abroad, he worked for the British Council, and he wrote about, you know, wonderful places. And that was it. And he started writing history because he felt, in the end, so out of tune with modern Britain that he just couldn't write contemporary fiction anymore.

Benjamin Myers I think he was from Wheatley Hill. Is that right? Or Wingate?

Pat Barker Wingate.

Benjamin Myers Yeah. Yeah, it's one of the villages just beyond where I'm from. But it's where *The Offing* is set, in a village like that, an amalgamation of a few of those East Durham villages.

Laura McKenzie In a *Guardian* article you wrote about Durham, you describe the suburbs, or Belmont, as 'edgelands'? Or people call them edgelands, but you call them home? And there's a part in *The Offing* where Robert's talking about the place where the flagstones of the city meet the fields of the wider North East of England? And is that – how much of that sense of edgeland is important to you when you're writing about Durham?

Benjamin Myers Edgeland is kind of a buzzword at the moment, isn't it really? Particularly in nature writing. And it's really just to describe the places which are neither rural, nor urban, or suburban. It's the fringes of everything really. But growing up in Belmont I was always aware that it was entirely new, really, it was all – it was literally fields. You know, old man, "I

remember it was all fields around here", but in the 60s it was, which is, you know, I was born in the 70s but I've got photos of the house I grew up in being built in fields. You wouldn't know it now, wandering around, because it's a big estate, where I grew up. A sort of lower middle-class estate built for young professionals, close to the motorway so you could pick a commute to work. And with an infrastructure. You can walk to Durham really – it's two or three miles away. But it only occurred to me, quite recently, you could walk from Durham Cathedral to where I grew up on paths and pavements and tarmac and asphalt, and then about 50 metres past my parents' house, this country lane. And then it's fields and scrubland and, sort of, edgeland, if you want, and cornfields. And so I was always aware that there was these two worlds rubbing up against each other. And in the time that I've been away, I can now walk back to that country lane and look, and I'll see there's like a retail park, and a big B&Q sign, a McDonald's sign and Kentucky Fried Chicken poking above the trees. And I'm not against progress or anything like that, but I can just see it's spreading like spilt water. It's seeping. That's not necessarily criticism, just an observation that the fields are probably – and this is indicative of much of England – the fields are shrinking.

Pat Barker It's interesting to me that Belmont, where you grew up... I used to live in Newton Hall. And for a long time, we lived in Newton Hall. And the two areas, although they're superficially similar – semi-detached houses with gardens – they're quite different. 'Cause on Newton Hall one in three houses, I think, is prison warden. And the whole place is dominated by the prisons. I mean, the going off-shift and coming on-shift; you're very aware of it by the movement of the cars. And there's the top security prison and the young offenders' institution there. And they are the main employers. And it always fascinated me that the lives of the free people outside were, to such a large extent, determined by the institutional movement of these two big, enormous prisons.

Pat Barker I remember, growing up, hearing about the – do you remember John McVicar, the case.

Pat Barker Yes, I used to walk my dog on his escape route.

Benjamin Myers Do you know about John McVicar?

Laura McKenzie No.

Benjamin Myers He was a prisoner in the – would it be the late 60s, or early 70s?

Pat Barker Yeah, that kind of time, yes.

Benjamin Myers He was a sort of Category A prisoner in Durham Prison who undertook a daring escape over the walls. There was a film made about it, and Roger Daltrey played him, and it's good film, actually. But yeah, he had it away, as they used to say, over the wall and into the river, and floated downstream for several miles, chased by the authorities and dogs in the night, and will have drifted down close to where Pat used to live, and went on the run. But I was always... but the police were out en masse. This is before my time, but I remember my parents got a knock on the door in Belmont, you know, three, four or five miles away. Everyone was visited by the police: "Check your sheds," you know, "Check your gardens."

Laura McKenzie How exciting.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, it was exciting. But that was interesting because he didn't – you know, there's motorways and there's a train station in Durham, but his escape route was through the River Wear.

Pat Barker It was a remarkable escape. I remember when the prison, the top security prison, was being built. Frankland. And its great selling point was that it was rocket proof. And, of course, all the houses around it thought, "Well, that's very nice for the prisoners. What about us?!"

Laura McKenzie That seems like a good place to stop for a reading. When would you be happy to read something from *The Offing*?

Benjamin Myers I should point out that the bulk of *The Offing* is set in Robin Hood's Bay, so it's actually Yorkshire, but it's written with the idea of Durham in the background as somewhere he has left. Robert, the narrator, has been formed by Durham and shaped by it, but he's only to, me as the writer, he's only partly formed. And the true formation comes when he leaves, which I think is what happens with a lot of people. So there's just a little bit about him reflecting on – this relates to what I was saying, really about his experience of Durham was limited, cause he's from County Durham, rather than Durham city, and they're two different places. So it's about that.

Benjamin Myers [reading] I didn't go into the city much at all. That would require a bus journey in from the village and a bus journey required money, and I never had any. I'd only visited the Cathedral once on a school trip. The city seemed to me a place for lecturers and students in their gowns and silly hats, and young men and women who went to the good schools and carried stacks of books beneath their arms, and who didn't speak as I spoke, and who would soon join the academics and students at their seats of higher learning in other such cities. It was a place where clergyman dashed down cobbled streets, and coxes shouted orders through loudhailers at the rowing crews how trained on the river, and tourists alighted from charabancs to stand and point at the castle, and people ate scones and drank pots of tea from China in china cups and saucers, while sitting in pretty Georgian windows, and flush-faced rugby teams celebrated their latest successes on the playing fields with pub crawls. The only real reason to visit was for the Miners' Gala, which we called the Big Meeting, for one Sunday in July, when all the colliery bands would gather to march and play. And we would carry the banners all the way down to the racecourse fields where there were speeches and stalls and fairground rides, and tens of thousands of people would eat and drink and sing. Gypsy boys'd strip off their tops to fight the local lads, and evening would turn to night, and we would take the long ride home, our stomachs sick with sugar and too many chips. But that was for one day a year, and I not been since I was a child, because for five long years of the war, the Miners' Gala had been cancelled. And this time around, I would miss it anyway.

Laura McKenzie Thank you. Why did you choose that specific period, in the wake of the Second World War?

Benjamin Myers I don't know really. I honestly don't know. The book's not out yet, and I haven't done any interviews about it, other than – this is the first one, so I'm now starting to think about why.

Pat Barker Oh yes, the first interview is terrible. "What's it about?" You don't know, do you?

Benjamin Myers I know why I wrote it, and that was because I wrote it as a sort of holiday for myself from writing grim books and bleak stories set around the North East and Cumbria and Yorkshire. And it was a sunny world that I would visit. And I wrote most of it by hand in the Halifax library. And it sounds disingenuous or false modesty, but I didn't write it thinking it would get published; I wrote it to sort of cleanse my mind at a time when the world has turned into shit, and politics is awful. And I thought, *I've put out some pretty nihilistic books, really. And there's a lot of violence, as there's a lot of masculinity.* And then when I wanted to write something, I thought, *what's the point of putting something nasty into the world right now? It's not contributing anything. Why not try and do something sunny and positive?* And also with this sort of lead female character as well, because I've written a lot of men, and I needed to see whether I can write a woman.

Laura McKenzie I love Dulcie.

Benjamin Myers Thanks. But why it's post-war, I don't know, other than the fact that Britain was entirely changed, and I thought a young man going out into the aftermath would see a world that was depleted. And, like so many of Pat's books about conflict and war, it's about, Pat writes about the repercussions, and the way in which men are damaged – or not just men, men and women – but often the male workforce in this case, in *The Offing*, which is... he passes through lots of agricultural land, and a lot of the farms aren't farming because, they need to after the war because of rationing still existing, but a lot of men just simply haven't come back, or those who have are in no state to work. So I wanted to write about an England

that's in transition, I suppose, as it always is, but particularly then. And out of that came sort of an economic upturn in the 50s. But it was that period where England, or Britain, was seen to have been victorious, but what was there to show for other than the freedom of its citizens. There was no great wealth or anything, there's no abundance, from what I can tell.

Laura McKenzie Pat, one of your more recent short stories, 'Medusa', is partially set in Durham. Would you mind reading us something from that?

Pat Barker I'll just read the beginning.

Pat Barker [reading] By the time I left the cathedral it was already dark, mizzling, the kind of rain that looks like mist but drenches you in minutes. I walked quickly, head down. In the marketplace, the Friday-night bonanza was well under way, girls in tight dresses and vertiginous heels, teetering along in noisy groups, watched by boys who pretended indifference and turned back to their mates, laughing. How did girls walk in those things? I could barely manage in the heels I was wearing, and they were nowhere near as high. Mind, I don't normally wear heels. Jeans and trainers, that's me. Only, that afternoon I'd felt the need to make an effort, because I'd been supervising the hanging of my paintings in the Galilee Chapel. My first solo exhibition. As I turned into Silver Street, I was hardly aware of my surroundings; I was still walking around the exhibition in my head. All recent work, all on the theme of metamorphosis. Women turning into hares, foxes, crows, cows, fish, seals, trees. I'd been looking at these paintings for so long I couldn't see them anymore. Sometimes, when paintings first leave home, they seem a bit weak, clingy—as if all they really want to do is get back to the studio as fast as possible—but these felt different. Strong, independent, even a bit supercilious. *What have we to do with you?* they seemed to be asking, sitting there, smug inside their sleek black frames. A good sign, perhaps? Out of the corner of my eye I caught a movement, but it was only my own shadow flitting across the blank windows where Marks & Spencer used to be. Was it there that I picked up a second shadow? I don't know that I did, of course.

Laura McKenzie So, 'Medusa' goes on to narrate, or chronicle, an attack.

Pat Barker An attack on this girl, yes. And, essentially, very much she initially believes the man she finds in her kitchen, after going out to empty the rubbish is a student because all the houses surrounding her are students, as they tend to be in the centre of Durham. And yes, and she then moves on, quite rapidly, to Florence. And the artwork she sees in Florence and uses to help her to recover from what's happened to her.

Laura McKenzie It's one of... when we initially talked, we were talking about the relationship between Durham and your work, and you said, "Well, there isn't a huge relationship. But there are these two stories, 'Subsidence' and 'Medusa', which both, as it happens, have female protagonists."

Pat Barker Yes. I don't know why. I think because they are closer to my home, perhaps, a female protagonist seems more natural, perhaps. Yeah. Not that they're in any way autobiographical, but you know, I don't know why, really.

Laura McKenzie The final, close of the story where she sees herself in the mirror, and then she returns to the restaurant, and that man turns to stone...

Pat Barker Yeah, she turns into the Medusa. Yeah. I think it's a short story about the way in which even fully justified anger destroys the person who feels it, not the person who is the object of it. It's, I think, questioning the Me Too movement, which obviously I'm applauding a lot of the time, but if the only response is anger, then that is a self-destructive response, ultimately.

Laura McKenzie We touched briefly on Barry Unsworth. I suppose on the things I want to think about, as well, is whether you have a sense of there being a literary tradition in Durham, or it being a place of literary richness where different writing and writers have come out of. Is that something, when you started writing, Ben, you had a sense of that or...?

Benjamin Myers Not really, no. I was aware, growing up of Pat as the only writer I knew of, I'd heard of, from the area. Gordon Burn was an influence, and I'm a fan of his writing, but he's from Newcastle. And I was inspired by the fact that he was a journalist who wrote fiction. But I've got a very strong memory of being probably about seven or eight years old, on holiday in France, in a caravan. And I was always a voracious reader, but there was a book that my mam had on holiday. And it was on the side by the window in the sun. And I picked it up, and it had a pencil drawing on the cover. And it was *Union Street*, Pat's first book. And I said to my mam, "What's this?" And she said, "Oh, that's really interesting. That book is about..." I can't remember, I'm pulling... you know, I'm reaching back into memory, but she said something like that this is about women in the North East of England, and the author lives in Durham. And I was quite struck by, like, I remember holding this book, which I was too young to read and appreciate at age seven or eight. But I just remember thinking: *there's a writer from Durham, and she has written a book about the area*. Rather than writing about something fantastical or something in America. We grew up surrounded by American culture on TV and I was struck by the fact that someone from here wants to write about here. And I think that stayed with me and I didn't read the book till many years later. The only literary heritage I was aware of was Pat's early works. And the idea that someone would find round here interesting enough to write about, well it makes you think, of course it is. Everywhere's interesting enough.

Pat Barker And the idea that, as somebody who's actually done it, I was reading in *The Guardian* an interview with Simon Armitage. And he was saying that it was immensely important to him, as a young lad beginning to write poetry, that he lived in the next valley to Ted Hughes. And that Ted Hughes's house, that he grew up in, was like the house that Armitage grew up in; it looked the same, and that's being given permission to be who you are, and still be a writer. And it's the only thing that can do it. Because, you know, Ben, like me, comes from a background where being a writer wasn't one of the jobs that was open to you. We don't come from literary backgrounds in that sense. And it's immensely important to be able to see somebody who is in some way like you from your area, or, you know, writing the kind of things that you might want to write. Whether there is a literary tradition in Durham, I am not sure. I think if there is, it's part of the tradition of working-class writing. And in that sense, it's not purely local to Durham, anyway, it's nationwide. I was aware of Sid Chaplin, growing

up, and, you know, Alan Sillitoe, you know, people like that. But when I first started trying to write about working-class women, I felt there was not a great deal of tradition to draw on. I felt I was scratching around. Shelagh Delaney, for example. People like that were the people who mattered to me. And actually, it happens, a lot of them were Northern, though not specific Durham.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, I think more in more recent times, I've gone back to try and find, to look to see who else there is out there. Sid Chaplin is someone I discovered only five or 10 years ago. And so I collect his books, really, just because I keep coming across them. And he was, you know, worked in a colliery office.

Pat Barker I took part in a radio programme about – they came to my house to interview me about Sid Chaplin. And one of the questions, which they were asking everybody, was why has Sid Chaplin, who's a fantastic writer, not really had the recognition he deserves? And of course, I waffled around and waffled around. And then the interviewer said, "Well I asked Melvyn Bragg that, and he said, 'It's because they're all fucking snobs'." And I immediately thought, that's what I should have said, 'cause that's the truth.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, he's from a completely different planet to the London literary world...

Pat Barker The London literati, yeah he is.

Benjamin Myers ...which is where the money and publishing deals are, and it's still like that now.

Pat Barker Still like that. Yeah, it is.

Benjamin Myers Now, I did an English degree. And I grew up with books in the house: my parents are teachers. But I can still feel like, not out of my depth, but like, I'm stepping into a shark pool. You know, that sounds harsh, because most people I meet in publishing are very nice, very well-mannered and good at their jobs. But I do feel like it's, just simply from coming

from the North East... Last week I met – well, I met someone in publishing, I won't and identify them – but my new book's coming out on Bloomsbury and I was told, "Oh, you're the first northern writer that's been signed to Bloomsbury, in the time..." this guy's been working in the business 15 years. He said, "I've never come across a writer from the North." He said there's a couple of children's authors or young adult writers, but he said, "In terms of literary fiction, I don't think Bloomsbury have signed anyone from the North," which is insane. Imagine if you said, "They've never signed anyone from London and the South East for 15 to 20 years." Yeah. So it still exists.

Pat Barker And also, when you when you start out writing about Northern life, especially Northern working-class life, you've get a particular set of questions in interviews. You're always asked, "Is this character 'typical'?" Well, you know, would you ever ask whether a middle-class character was a doctor or a teacher or a journalist? "Yes. But is it typical?" Actually, to say that your characters are typical is so close to saying they're stereotypes that it's a bloody insult. Yeah. And,

Benjamin Myers Yeah, there's a lot of preconceptions.

Pat Barker They don't know how to approach your work if you write like that.

Laura McKenzie In terms of class and politics, Durham is atypical. I know, we've talked about the referendum and the results from the city being, I think it was, 57% Remain. Whereas Easington, for example, was 66% Leave. And that's quite a unique position to be in. So how much do you think that plays into your sense of Durham and Durham in relation to the rest of the North or the rest of the country?

Pat Barker It is completely atypical. I was trying to think of another county town which is more out of step with its county, and I can't think of one, could we?

Benjamin Myers No, I can't. Yeah. I don't know the statistics on other counties, really, but yeah, probably the disparity between the two is probably as great as any, or greater than,

anywhere else. And that just may be related to what we were saying before about, oh there's loads of different Durhams.

Laura McKenzie Yeah.

Benjamin Myers I could totally see why someone in Easington would vote to leave, because it's just a cry; it's a sort of middle finger. It's an anti-establishment vote for a lot of people. I don't think it's all based in prejudice and fear; a lot of people are just sick and... But Durham City's, you know, relatively affluent, and there's a lot of professionals and academics and people who actually work in things like science, where funding is coming from the EU, so on a practical level they're maybe more connected and could see a real – they'll see what happened if and when we leave, and.. it's a very varied place, County Durham, isn't it?

Pat Barker It is.

Benjamin Myers I mean, Durham's a city but I don't really think of it as city. I think of it as a town. And I don't know whether that's...

Laura McKenzie I agree with you on that.

Pat Barker Yeah, it's purely a city in the sense that it's got a cathedral.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, it's small enough to, certainly when I was a teenager, if I came into town on a Saturday, and you wander around long enough, then you'll bump into friends and people you know.

Pat Barker You'd meet people you know, and you could walk from one end to the other. I mean, even I can at my age.

Benjamin Myers Yeah, in a few minutes. My mam would, if I went out shopping with my mam, then every two or three minutes she would stop and talk to someone. And that's what makes it feel like a town rather than a city.

Pat Barker Yeah. But the emptying out of the high street, it's not peculiar to Durham. It's all over the country. But I think a place like Durham perhaps feels it even more, because people are not going into the centre in the way they used to do. And therefore this sort of bumping into people is a thing of the past, I think – becoming a thing of the past.

Laura McKenzie So Ben, we know what you're doing, looking at St. Cuthbert, next. Pat, can I ask, what's your next project you're thinking about now or – is there anything in the pipeline?

Pat Barker Oh, yes. There's something in the pipeline. I don't... it hasn't quite reached its final form. I mean, I know very well that Penguin want me to go on doing what I'm doing.

Laura McKenzie Yeah.

Pat Barker They really do.

Benjamin Myers Do you feel pressure to...?

Pat Barker Ah, no. I mean, I've got an amazing publisher, Simon Prosser. And I know he wouldn't pressurise me at all. Because of the common-sense thing that a pressurised writer doesn't write well. We've got to be given our head.

Benjamin Myers You need – to write, do you feel like – do you need a sort of empty diary?

Pat Barker I need a diary that isn't actually insane. I need a run at it. Yeah. Not the luxury of months, but two or three weeks is nice, you know, and I haven't got – I still haven't got that at the moment.

Laura McKenzie That's it for today's inaugural edition of Writing Durham. I really hope you enjoyed listening to it, and many thanks to Pat Barker and Benjamin Meyers for taking part in the conversation.

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