

A Q&A with Joan on her novel, Silverskin

What was your inspiration to write this story? I can't remember the time when I first heard about Skara Brae - I think I've been excited about it my entire life! It's so irresistibly shiver-down-the-spine-inducing and evocative: an entire Neolithic village mysteriously buried in sand - completely lost and forgotten - and then, thousands of years later, dramatically revealed by a massive storm. And the structures are so intimate and show us so much about the way the people lived - but with still so many questions to be answered! It just begs to have stories told about it.

I've visited the site several times, but the final push to write Silver Skin came when I was doing a Live Literature visit to primary schools on Mainland. During a Q&A, one of the pupils asked me why didn't I write a book about Orkney? So I did.

Do you have a favourite character in the book? I do have a soft spot for feisty old women, so it'd have to be Voy. She's not me - when things get tough, she gets mad, whereas I get sad - and I admire her a lot!

What is your favourite scene or moment in the book? I think because it was the first scene I wrote, I have a special fondness for the first time we meet Cait, with her gathering bag leaking cold and wet down her back and the marram grass scratching her legs.

Are any of your characters based on yourself or people you know? Characters come out of bits and pieces of everyone I've ever met, heard of or read about. And bits and pieces of me. But so jumbled together I wouldn't be able to say which parts were which.

If you could swap lives with one of your characters, who would you choose and why? No, see, I put my characters through awful things. Having said that, I wouldn't mind having Voy's power over people!

If your book was a film, who would you cast for the lead character? That's a hard one. Benedict Cumberbatch wouldn't really fit anywhere, but could he just come for a chat anyway?

Why are books important in your opinion? There are loads of wonderful quotes about why books are so important, about how they teach us empathy and set us free from small-mindedness and other bad stuff. I guess they're just basically essential.

What inspired you to become a writer? I'm crazy about stories, and there a large number of people who live in my head, so a job that combined the two was always going to be perfect for me. Oh, and words. I'm crazy about words.

What's your favourite book, and why? I am rubbish at favourites. As soon as I choose one, seven others start clamouring for pride of place. No. Just can't do it.

Who are you generally writing for? Different story ideas just come with different genres, sizes, voices and audiences. They pretty much can only be what they are.

Where would you like to be right now, anywhere in the world? Venice. Or Orkney.

If you weren't a writer, what would your 'dream' occupation be? No, sorry, writing is my dream occupation.