

Gothic faith in the Essex mud

Sarah Perry tells **Sarah Meyrick** about seeing her novel *The Essex Serpent* brought to life on screen

WHEN Sarah Perry's second novel, *The Essex Serpent*, was published in 2016, it was a worldwide hit, selling more than 100,000 copies in hard-back alone. It has been widely lauded as a modern Gothic masterpiece (Reading Groups, 7 July 2017).

The book tells the story of the newly widowed Cora Seaborne as she sets off on a quest to find out more about a mysterious sea creature that is rumoured to be terrorising the Essex coast in the 19th century. It is a rich novel of ideas, exploring questions of faith and reason, scientific and medical advances, privilege and poverty, friendship and love. All this set against a foggy backdrop of the muddy Essex marshlands.

Now, *The Essex Serpent* has been turned into a six-part mini-series by Apple TV+, starring Tom Hiddleston and Claire Danes. Speaking to the *Church Times* in 2018 (Features, 30 November 2018), Perry said that she was mystified by its success. "Nobody — least of all me — had any idea that this would happen. This is a novel that has an entire chapter in which there's a discussion about the nature of sin, and that is unashamedly a novel of ideas."

So, how does it feel — seven years after completing the manuscript, and six years after it was optioned — to see her work realised on the small screen with such a stellar cast?

"I have all sorts of feelings, arriving one after the other — and sometimes quite contradictory," she says. "I feel gratitude more than anything else. They showed me the scripts in advance, and I spoke to the wonderful director, Clio Barnard."

The process was "extraordinarily" respectful. "The idea that I could have produced something that could be treated with so much care and so much expertise is just extraordinary, really extraordinary. And then, at the same time, the book almost feels like it doesn't have anything to do with me any more, because I wrote it such a long time ago, and the world has changed."

There's a melancholy about that,



Tom Hiddleston as the Revd Will Ransome in *The Essex Serpent*, filmed on the Essex coast

"because it's been like meeting myself on the stairs", she says. "I'm just so grateful that it was in the hands of people who treated it with so much intelligence."

Does she think that the producers understood the complexity of the book, with its big ideas and multiple plotlines?

"I feel very lucky that I had confidence in the writer Anna Symon, and also in the production company," she says. "I felt strongly that they understood that this is a book about friendship and about faith, science, and loyalty to each other. They understood that it was a Gothic novel, that it was a novel of ideas, and a novel about friendship, and that they wanted to be able to explore that side of it rather than just create a standard vision of what the Victorian age looked like."

It is important to her that we see the women behaving "in a way that is recognisably modern". They are independent, funny, and intelligent women, she says. "I'm so grateful that they did that, because it was an

unusual novel in that sense, in that I insisted on treating the 19th century as the modern age . . . not preserved in aspic."

The result is "a really strange and unusual piece of television that is, maybe, quite confronting for people expecting a silly Gothic melodrama about a monster", she says. When we speak, less than a week after release, the series is tracking at 89 per cent on the review website Rotten Tomatoes; so it's not doing badly.

She feels less vulnerable waiting for people to pronounce judgement than she does for a novel. "Obviously, when you've written a book, and you're waiting for the critical response, it's absolutely terrifying, because it's all your responsibility. When I publish a book, I don't sleep for weeks for panicking about the critical response."

"This time around, of course, some of it is about my own work, but mostly I love Clio, and I love Anna and I love Tom and Claire, and I want them to do really well. So, when I see that they get a good review, I'm pleased for them."

I wonder if she had any input into the casting. "No, not at all," she says, "and I didn't really care, because I'd handed that over to the experts. I'm not a casting director. I'm not a screenwriter. I'm a novelist, and I have books to write."

As a result, the casting took her completely by surprise. She knew of Tom Hiddleston because she is a fan of the Marvel films (in which he plays Loki), and she'd seen him in *Henry V* and in *The Night Manager*.

Keira Knightley was originally lined up to play Cora, but was unable to fit in the filming. Claire Danes is best known for her role in the TV series *Homeland*, for which she won repeated Emmy awards. "It really couldn't be better," Perry says. "I admire both of them enormously."

Other parts were also well played, she says, mentioning Frank Dillane as Dr Luke Garrett, a pioneering doctor and would-be suitor for Cora. The two young actors who play Naomi and Jo were also remarkable.

The production is heavy on atmosphere and menace. It was filmed — to her delight — in her beloved Essex. "The Essex landscape is so particular," she says.

"I'm a woman of East Anglia, absolutely to the bone. And those marshlands, the shingle, the mud, the mist is so particularly specific. They filmed at Mersea, Maldon, and Colchester . . . all the places where the novel's set. It was really important that they really 'got' Essex, and they did an amazing job."

Perry visited the set while filming was under way, and, as a result, the producer asked her if she'd like to take part as an extra. She and a friend appear "in full Victorian gear" in a scene at the Natural History Museum. You can just spot her in the official trailer for the series.

That gave her a renewed respect for the actors, for whom filming can be agonisingly slow. "I went down to Maldon and saw a very brief scene being filmed — so brief that, on screen, it would be 30 seconds, if that. And it was hours of filming, over and over and over again, and they never got tired. They never got cross. They never lost their good humour. They would do absolutely whatever it took for the director to be happy, and I just thought, these are really extraordinary people. I mean, there's me sulking because I have to sit at my desk and rewrite a sentence."

Of course, there are changes in the TV series. Characters are added or removed, the plot gets tweaked. I ask her about the final scene, which, in the book, is written in the form of a letter. Without wanting to give any-

thing away, the TV ending is different.

Perry is upbeat. "In a novel, you can end on a letter or a thought, because the novelist has the ability to convey to the reader what someone's thinking as they stare out of a window. You can't do that in a TV series, I'm sorry. So they had to find a way of bringing some form of wholeness."

She recounts her experience of attending a private screening of the series in March: "I was so moved I put my coat over my head and just cried," she says.

"When I think about what I try to achieve as a novelist, I want to move people. To wonder, to fear, to anger, possibly to confusion, to console them, to feel the sublime."

"And I think that was what the TV series is. So, even if they've had to change character slightly or change the plot . . . that's what they've done. And done it so well that they've moved me to tears."

THE TV series is the apogee of a new chapter in Perry's life, after several years of ill health. She has an incurable auto-immune condition, Graves' disease, that took some time to diagnose. "That made me unwell for a long time," she says. "I went through a time of appalling pain and disability that's taken years to recover from."

Her suffering was profound, but she is in good health now, after surgery and physical therapy. "I'm as strong as a horse," she says. "I'm one of those annoying people that emerged out of lockdown ten years younger than when they went in."

Perry loves writing. "I feel very privileged that that's how I get to spend my life," she says. Half an hour before we spoke, she sent the manuscript of her fourth novel to her agent, and she is about to begin work on her fifth, which will be set in Essex again — "contemporary Essex, my version of Essex, which is particular to me".

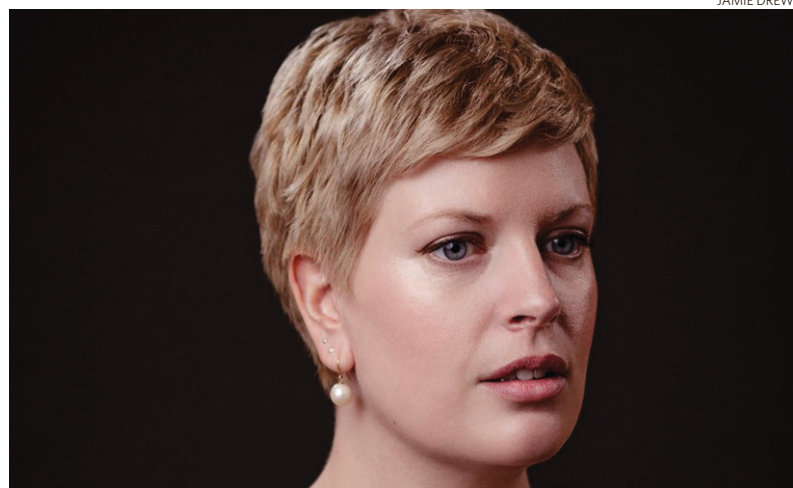
All she'll say about the new novel is that she had to "learn a lot about physics and astronomy" to write it.

"As you write, as you build a body of work: you learn what you're interested in, and you learn that you will return to your material, and that that is a noble inquiry," she says. "And I'm interested in love, God, reason, science, and ethics. That's what my next book will be, you know, and those are my subjects and I'm really happy with that."

For all her success, she still experiences terror, submitting a manuscript to her agent. "I think being a writer requires a very fine balance of humility and arrogance. You know, you have to have the self-belief to spend five years doing something, to believe it's worth it."

"But you have to have the humility to understand that you know nothing, once again. You know nothing because [the book] doesn't exist yet. So, you have to wipe the slate clean, and you go right back to the beginning, totally humbly and say, right, OK, now we have to work out how to write this book. And then you have to do it all over again."

The Essex Serpent by Sarah Perry is published by Profile at £8.99 (CT Bookshop £8.09); 978-1-788169622. The adaption is on Apple TV+.



Sarah Perry, who cried when she first saw the series at a private screening