

Psychopath in the community

 Sarah Hall

Sarah Hall's grim dystopia is unrelieved by hope or humour

12:01AM BST 08 Sep 2007

Michael Arditti reviews *The Carhullan Army* by Sarah Hall

With rivers bursting their banks, the Stock Market taking a tumble, an ever-present terrorist threat at home and British forces engaged in two intractable conflicts overseas, the publication of Sarah Hall's third novel could not be more timely.

The *Carhullan Army* is set at an indeterminate date in the near future, when ecological disaster, economic collapse, lethal epidemics and disastrous military operations in China and South America have resulted in the total breakdown of British society.

An authoritarian government has destroyed all democratic institutions and imposed a 10-year national recovery plan. Communities are isolated, and food and electricity rationed.

Families are required to live in sub-standard accommodation reminiscent of Soviet Russia. Women are forcibly fitted with metal coils to prevent reproduction and routinely humiliated by the government officials who monitor them. Only the drugs that keep the population docile remain plentiful.

Dystopian fiction is in vogue. In recent years, writers as diverse as Doris Lessing, Jim Crace, Michael Cunningham and Will Self have offered their bleak visions of the future. What distinguishes Hall's contribution is its local detail.

Like her first novel, *Haweswater* (2002), *The Carhullan Army* is set in Cumbria, and Hall's sharp and vivid evocation of landscape ("The light was fading fast, and the rust-coloured bracken in the banks looked like a tide of scrap metal") has the value of rooting her dark fantasy in a recognisable rural world.

Hall's unnamed narrator is a factory worker who lives with her husband Andrew in a communal flat in "Rith".

In despair at government diktats and popular apathy, she determines to escape to a nearby farm at Carhullan, the highest in England, and home to a 60-strong group of outlawed, self-sufficient women, under the leadership of a former soldier, Jackie Nixon.

Her dream of being welcomed into a loving sisterhood is rudely dashed when no sooner has she arrived than she is brutally assaulted and locked in the Dog Box, a constricting tank resembling a medieval instrument of torture.

On her release, she quickly learns that the community is no latter-day Greenham Common peace-camp.

Although there are some gentler souls among its members, such as Lorry, the 63-year-old midwife, doctor and vet, the majority are "violent, outspoken, socially inept, promiscuous, drug-addicted and aware that they need some kind of system to bring them down".

The narrator, none the less, throws herself into life at Carhullan, first helping out on the farm and then signing up for the private army with which Jackie plans to incite a national insurgency. Jackie is a female counterpart to Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Although at first she appears to be benign, it rapidly becomes clear that she is a dangerous psychopath, who has imposed her pernicious values on the community.

The narrator, who falls under Jackie's spell, comes to share her belief that gender differences are the exclusive product of social conditioning.

She praises Jackie for giving "us the power to remake ourselves into those inviolable creatures the God of Equality had intended us to be".

She joins the elite commando unit in its ever more violent and masochistic struggle to enter the "fresh red field" in whose "rich soil were growing all the flowers of war that history had never let us gather".

This is a grim, uncompromising novel, unrelieved by either hope or humour.

Just as she gives her central character no name, so Hall allows the reader no chance to identify with her emotionally. Her account is detached and dispassionate, written in prose as crystalline and craggy as the landscape, its unexpected usages - "jeoparding", "prideful" - lending it weight.

Although its narrative voice and political vision may be too bleak for many readers, the seriousness of Hall's intent and the scale of her achievement are to be highly commended.



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