

Fiction

## Burntcoat by Sarah Hall – elemental bodies

A Covid-like plague provides the backdrop for this meditation on themes of bodily pain and pleasure

Lauren Elkin SEPTEMBER 30 2021

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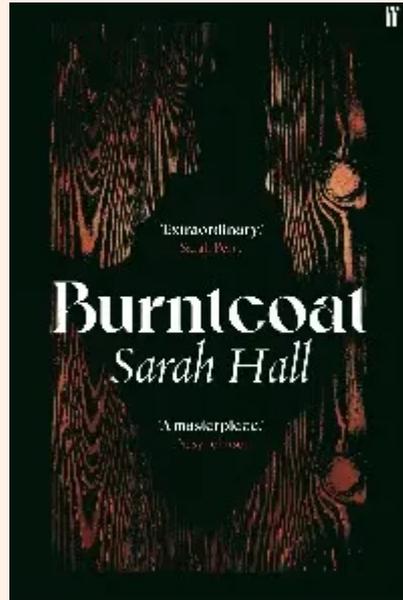
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In the great tradition of the English Gothic novel, [Sarah Hall's](#) *Burntcoat* is about a house and its owner, an artist called Edith Harkness — a name straight out of [Ann Radcliffe](#). As in the Gothic novel, there is a pervading sense of things coming to an end, hastened by a recent pandemic that shares much, if not everything, with our own. Yet allusions to the Gothic novel and the supernatural are a red herring in a book that is actually a celebration of the body and physical contact in all its forms.

Having come to national prominence with a massive and controversial sculpture — the “Scotch Corner Witch”, nicknamed “Hecky” — Edith has just finished what will be her last piece of art, a memorial to those who have died in the pandemic. “No doubt there will be controversy when it goes up [ . . . ] but I won’t have to deal with the fallout”. Edith is a survivor of the virus, called AG3, which bears some superficial resemblances to Covid-19 but is functionally more like a blend of norovirus and the Black Death.

Like Covid, it provokes a global lockdown, but far more civil unrest. Still, the resonances are there. People have shut their doors to the danger of other people and their bodies. In a free-floating after, some years later, people are marked by the pandemic past, contagious with it and prone to relapse. Edith, a “carrier”, is now fatally relapsing, and the novel is an elegiac address in the second person to her lover, lost to the plague. What else is memory but a relapse of the past?

In the first part of this temporally tricky novel we learn about Edith’s mother, a writer called Naomi who suffered a cataclysmic brain bleed and survived, in altered form. “When I was eight, my mother died and Naomi arrived,” Hall writes early on, laying the foundation for a sustained meditation on identity and doubleness that continues into Edith’s adulthood, and her love affair with Halit, a man with two names — his Turkish name and the Christian one on his legal documents.



It is a theme that is echoed later in the novel, when Halit has contracted the virus and the fever is setting in, and Edith and Halit become abstracted from their bodies as they make love. This image of alienation — rare in a novel otherwise so devoted to lyrically rendering the pleasures of the body — feeds into Edith’s final piece of work, the two Halits caught in coitus with an unknowable woman, “forms joined and hollow, containing no soul except air. I can’t imagine it’s what they want. It cannot possibly comfort, or reparate.” Any work of art that does, Edith implies, isn’t worthy of the name.

*Burntcoat* is informed by our collective experience of Covid-19, but it is not a “pandemic novel”; rather it uses it as a backdrop to explore the relationship between art and organic matter, art and breakdown, identity and cataclysm and love. In the wake of her mother’s death, Edith joined a Buddhist group in Thailand. “We collected water to wash and drink, burned coils of incense, repeated mantras. For several weeks I watched a corpse decompose [ . . . ] The body is a wound, a bell ringing in emergency — life, life, life.”

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Read from this perspective, *Burntcoat* is driven by the artistic impulse to make something — especially for a female artist — big, challenging, something that would scan as ugly or monstrous, “the artistic offence that becomes iconic”. “Hecky”, Edith recalls, “is the masterwork. A half-burnt assemblage lofting high as a church tower, containing all the unrealistic

belligerence and boldness of early ambition.”

*Burntcoat* is an elemental novel, of earth and fire and water, wood and mud and peat, graphite and charcoal, resins, pine tar and ashes. It is a novel woven from the language of the English landscape: branches, gorse, moor, sand, cold water, sodden oak. This is fertile territory for Hall, whose previous work has so brilliantly sung of the north. Where Edith plans to install her epic witch, her assistant “would dig up, label, then replant all the existing gorse on the site”.

It’s as if Hall herself were clearing space for her work, then meticulously replanting what she dug up, leaving space for continued growth — other novels, perhaps, of the world and the body.

**[Burntcoat](#)** by Sarah Hall, *Faber* £12.99, 224 pages

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