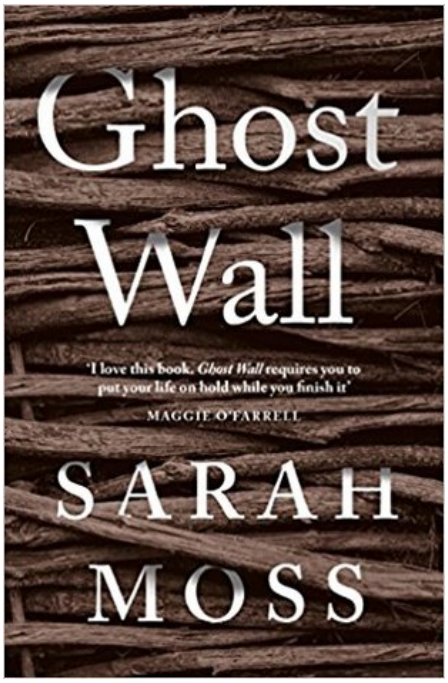

Ghost Wall

Sarah Moss

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Ghost Wall Sarah Moss
Teenage Silvie is living in a remote Northumberland camp as an exercise in experimental archaeology. Her father is an abusive man, obsessed with recreating the discomfort, brutality and harshness of Iron Age life. Behind and ahead of Silvie's narrative is the story of a bog girl, a sacrifice, a woman killed by those closest to her, and as the hot summer builds to a terrifying climax, Silvie and the Bog girl are in ever more terrifying proximity.

Ghost Wall Details

Date	:	Published September 20th 2018 by Granta Books
ISBN	:	9781783784455
Author	:	Sarah Moss
Format	:	Hardcover 152 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Literary Fiction, Contemporary

From Reader Review Ghost Wall for online ebook

Susan says

I have enjoyed the writing of Sarah Moss since reading, “Cold Earth,” in 2009 and was delighted to receive her latest work for review. This is a short novel, almost a novella, but still retains a huge amount of depth and interest.

A group of people are gathered for a trip in ‘experimental archaeology,’ recreating an Iron Age camp in Northumberland. There is the professor, Jim Slade, his students; Molly, Dan and Peter, and Silvie and her family. Silvie is seventeen and lives with her downtrodden mother, Alison, and her father, Bill Hampton. Usually a bus driver, Bill is obsessed with Ancient Britain and is often used to give practical help, or trade information, with academics.

Resentful of those he perceives as ‘better than him,’ Bill is aggressive, over-bearing and abusive. Alison has learnt to keep her head down. Silvie knows that, however she tries, she will annoy him and then she will have to pay the consequence.

This is an excellent portrayal of the dynamics of a group, thrown together and trying to recreate the past, while being very much in the present. There are those who are simply there out of interest and those, like Bill, who take it very seriously indeed. With a glimpse into real life sacrifices, which took place long ago, the men decide to build the ‘ghost wall,’ of the title – a wooden fence, topped with animal skulls to keep out invaders. Suddenly, without warning, things begin to get just a little serious...

As always, Moss writes beautifully. This did end a little abruptly and I would have been happier if she had fleshed this out, as it was an interesting idea and I thought the characters well drawn. Even Bill had a warmer side, as Sylvie thinks back and remembers times when he has been kind to her – trying to include her in his interests, but, ultimately, controlling and short-tempered. Still, this is well worth reading and I enjoyed it very much. I received a copy of this from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

Paul Fulcher says

We’re seeing if we can make a ghost wall, said the Prof, sitting back on his haunches. I was just telling your dad, it’s what one of the local tribes tried as a last-ditch defence against the Romans, they made a palisade and brought out their ancestral skulls and arrayed them along the top, dead faces gazing down, it was their strongest magic.

Sarah Moss's Ghost Wall sparked connections for me with two excellent novels - Melissa Harrison's recent All Among the Barley (my review: https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...) and Paul Kingsnorth's highly innovative, and Goldsmiths shortlisted, 20145 novel, The Wake (my review: https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...).

Harrison's novel, set in rural Suffolk in the 1930s, features a fictional Order of English Yeomanry, based on real-life groups that were common at the time, with a back-to-nature English nationalism that strayed easily into support for fascism. As Harrison explains in an afterword:

"These complex, fragmented groups differed from one another, sometimes slightly, sometimes profoundly; but all drew from a murky broth of nationalism, anti-Semitism, nativism, protectionism, anti-immigration sentiment, economic autarky, secessionism, militarism, anti-Europeanism, rural revivalism, nature worship, organicism, landscape mysticism and distrust of big business – particularly international finance."

Kingsnorth's novel is set in 11th century England, and the 'hero' of his novel, the narrator buccmaster is part of the Anglo-Saxon "resistance" in the wake of 1066 and the Norman conquest. But the buccmaster's views, and his quest to preserve authentic Englishness, rather stray again into xenophobic nativism. Interestingly in this novel, while Kingsnorth presents buccmaster warts-and-all, for example he is clearly a coward as well as delusional as to his own importance, one strongly suspects the author's sympathy lies with his views. Kingsnorth has caused significant controversy recently for his eco-nativist views that have strayed into supporting Brexit and, while not supporting certainly at least understanding other disruptive politicians of the left and right (Putin, Trump etc).

This article of his own in the Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...) contained the troubling passage:

It must be 20 years since I read the autobiography of the late travel writer Norman Lewis, The World, The World, but the last sentence stays with me. Wandering the hills of India, Lewis is ask by a puzzled local why he spends his life travelling instead of staying at home. What is he looking for? "I am looking for the people who have always been there," replies Lewis, "and belong to the places where they live. The others I do not wish to see."

This rather ridiculous concept of 'a people who have always been there' was part of Sarah Moss's motivation for writing Ghost Wall. She explains in detail here (http://www.sarahmoss.org/on-prehistor...) but she nails the story of 'foundation myths' as she calls them in this paragraph, including exposing buccmaster's folly:

Foundation myths live in prehistory, back just before the inconvenient truths of the historical record, and foundation myths feel very relevant at the moment. I live in a country where xenophobia and nativism have become normal in the last couple of years, where the rights of people perceived not to be British, or not British enough, are routinely denied.

In this story, the country was better before the immigrants came, when all the inhabitants were native British. When, I wonder, was that? Before the Windrush? Before the Empire brought people from India and Ireland and parts of Africa to live and work in Britain in the nineteenth century? Before the transatlantic slave trade? Before William and Mary came from Holland to rule us? Maybe before the Norman Conquest, before all those French people brought wine and made us stop speaking Anglo-Saxon? No, because the Angles and the Saxons came from the Nordic countries via France (Saxony, in fact). Before the Anglo-Saxons we had the Romans, bringing underfloor heating and literacy but definitely not British and not even, actually, very Roman; there were Syrian and German troops in Yorkshire and Northumberland two thousand years ago, coming over here and making the roads run straight. And writing things down: there were runes and bits of script before the Roman conquest of Britain but our historical record begins with the arrival of those foreign troops. The 'Britons' who experienced that invasion had come, a few generations earlier, from Ireland and Brittany (Britain is named after part of France), their material culture distinctively Celtic. There were people in these islands before the Celts came, and they left some stones and bone fragments, just enough for us to know that they, too, came from elsewhere. Go back far enough and we all came out of Africa, or Eden if you prefer a foundation myth to archaeology. Either way, according to the logic of national blood, none of us belong on these islands.

As for the novel itself, Ghost Wall actually tells a relatively simple story, indeed at 160 pages it feels more like a novella than a novel, and indeed one suspects could have been slimmed down further to a 50-60 page story was the form more commercially viable in the UK.

It is narrated by Silvie, a 17 year old girl. She is in Northumberland with her father, a bus driver by profession but amateur historian, and her mother. The three have joined a University professor, and three students from his 'Experiental Archaeology course. And yes that does read Experiental, not Experimental: the group are camping in the Northumberland national park, with its extensive peat bogs, reconstructing, as best they can, iron-age life.

That was the whole point of the re-enactment, that we ourselves became the ghosts, learning to walk the land as they walked it two thousand years ago, to tend our fire as they tended theirs and hope that some of their thoughts, their way of understanding the world, would follow the dance of muscle and bone. To do it properly, I thought, we would almost have to absent ourselves from ourselves, leaving our actions, our reenactions, to those no longer there. Who are the ghosts again, us or our dead? Maybe they imagined us first, maybe we were conjured out of the deep past by other minds.

The teenage Silvie, in her narration, rather pokes fun at the inauthenticity of some of the reconstruction, although any comments are made sotto voce for fear of upsetting her father, who takes the whole thing very seriously:

When I woke up there was light seeping around the sheepskin hanging over the door. They probably didn't actually have sheep, the Professor had said, but since we weren't allowed to kill animals using Iron Age technologies we would have to take what we could get and sheepskins are a lot easier to pick up on the open market than deerskins. While I was glad we weren't going to be hacking the guts out of deer in the woods with flint blades, I thought the Professor's dodging of bloodshed pretty thoroughly messed up the idea that our experiences that summer were going to rediscover the lifeways of pre-modern hunter gatherers. The clue, I muttered, is in the name, you know, hunter gatherers?

What was that, Silvie, said Dad, would you like to repeat what you just said to Professor Slade?

Oh, please, call me Jim, said Professor Slade, and don't worry, I have teenagers myself, I know what it's like.

Yeah, I'd thought, but your teenagers aren't here, are they, gone off somewhere nice with their mum I don't doubt, France or Italy probably.

Although Sil defends her father when the rather cynical students joke about his views, for example her name, a 'proper British name' according to her father.

Silvie, what, short for Sylvia?

Sulevia, I said. I was about to say, as I had been doing since I first started school, she was an Ancient British goddess, my dad chose it, but they were already exchanging glances.

Sulevia's a local deity, said Dan, Jim was talking about her the other day. Northumbrian goddess of springs and pools, co-opted by the Romans, said Molly.

...
A proper British name. What's he mean by that, then?

Nothing, I said, he likes British prehistory, he thought it was a shame the old names had gone.

Right, said Pete, you mean he likes the idea that there's some original Britishness somewhere, that if he goes back far enough he'll find someone who wasn't a foreigner. You know it's not really British, right? I mean, Sulevia, it's obviously just a version of Sylvia which means – of the woods in Latin.

I said, yes, I do know, a Roman corruption of a lost British word.

But more troubling aspects start to emerge. A description of seeing her mother when she returns to the camp from a foraging trip contains within it, the casual but disturbing *There was a new bruise on her arm.*. And as she walks along Hadrian's Wall, her own thoughts of the many diffuse voices that would have been present among the Roman forces (echoing the author's blog above) cross into thoughts of her father's nativism:

I half closed my eyes, imagined hearing on the wind the Arabic conversations of the Syrian soldiers who'd dug the ditches and hoisted the stones two thousand years ago. I tried to hold the view in my mind and strip the landscape of pylons and church towers, to see through the eyes of the patrolling legion fresh from the Black Forest. They weren't even really Roman, Dad had said, they were from all over the show, North Africa and Eastern Europe and Germany, probably a lot of them didn't even speak proper Latin. There were even Negroes, imagine what the Britons made of that, they'd never have seen the like. We were only two days out from Newcastle, a city that had upset Dad, and I knew better than to challenge him; even the word 'Negro'was already some concession to my ideas because he preferred to use a more offensive term and wait, chin raised, for a reaction.

As her father and the professor and the two male students get increasingly enthusiastic, they decide to reconstruct the ghost wall of the title, and my opening quote, albeit using rabbit skulls rather than their own dead. The female student Molly points out the 'boys with toys' aspect:

I don't know whether to laugh or cry, said Molly, it kind of reminds me of Swallows and Amazons but they're grown men. Those little drums and a willow fence with rabbits'heads on top, for what, to keep out the Romans?

While Professor Slade and her father argue about whether the ghost wall would have had any effect on Roman troops, her father arguing that the ancient Britains 'saw off' the Romans, and the Professor that Hadrian's wall was more of a 'Rome woz here' monument than anything defensive:

It would just have been intertribal squabbles up here, the Prof was saying, until the Romans came, no training at all for taking on the imperial army, they'd never have seen the like. At least part of their defence was magic, did you know that? War trumpets, scary noises coming at you over the marsh. Aye, said Dad, maybe so, you're thinking of the carnyxes, but they had their horses and swords as well, didn't they, put up quite a fight and after all sent them packing in the end, there weren't dark faces in these parts for nigh on two millennia after that, were there?
...
Well, said the Prof, they weren't exactly British, as I said before, they wouldn't have seen themselves that way, as far as we can tell their identities were tribal. Celts, we tend to call them these days though they wouldn't have recognized the idea, they seem to have come from Brittany and Ireland, from the West. Dad didn't like this line. Celts, I suppose, sounded Irish, and even though Jesus had only recently died at the time

in question Dad didn’t like the Irish, tended to see Catholicism in much the same light as the earlier form of Roman imperialism . Foreigners coming over here, telling us what to think. He wanted his own ancestry , wanted a lineage, a claim on something. Not people from Ireland or Rome or Germania or Syria but some tribe sprung from English soil like mushrooms in the night.

Except from Swallows and Amazons, it instead all gets a bit Lord of the Flies at the end as the men decide to re-enact another of the ancient Briton's rites, one inspired by the bog bodies found in the local peat, including Lindow Man, which she and her father saw at the Manchester Museum.

Overall: the theme of the novel is very important, and as mentioned links with one in two of my favourite British novels of the last 5 years.

As mentioned, the story itself is perhaps a little insubstantial for a novel, albeit Moss packs a lot in there including themes my review doesn't even touch on (misogyny, some snobbery from the Southern English students and professor to Silvie's Northern family, her own emerging and confused sexuality).

But as a negative, where Kingnorth was not afraid to show us the flaws in his protagonist despite sharing his views, Moss doesn't do Sil's father the courtesy of giving him any real redeeming features: in particular his temper-triggered domestic abuse seemed an unnecessary addition to his faults.

But still a stimulating and quick - perhaps too quick - read. 3.5 stars.

Thanks to the publisher via Netgalley for the ARC.

Paula Bardell-Hedley says

> *“I didn't quite know how to ask anything of my own. How do you leave home, how do you get away, how do you not go back?”*

When I started reading *Ghost Wall,* the forthcoming novel from Sarah Moss about a group of people setting up camp close to Hadrian’s Wall as an exercise in experiential archaeology, I surmised from the demeanour of Silvie, its protagonist (and narrator), she was far younger than her actual age. I took her to be a precocious eleven, possibly twelve-year-old, only to discover after reading for some time she was in fact seventeen. The reason for my misjudgement was partly her father, Bill’s behaviour towards her, since he treated her like a little girl, but also because she complied with his every wish in a most un-teenage-like way.

Bill Hampton is a bus driver from Burnley with an all consuming interest in the lives of Ancient Britons and an enormous grudge against those he perceives as belonging to a higher or more educated class than his own. His depth of knowledge about living off the land has gained him a reputation among academics as being a handy amateur to have on call, and has led to him being invited, along his wife and daughter, to spend a short period living in a remote, authentically recreated Iron-Age village in Northumberland.

The family share the experience with Professor (“call me Jim”) Slade and the students responsible for building the village and making the scratchy tunics and crude moccasins they now must wear. Silvie is immediately attracted to the only female student in the group, a confident, prepossessing individual called Molly, who seeks to educate (some might say ‘lead astray’) her slightly younger friend.

At Bill’s insistence, Silvie (short for Sulevia) and her mum, Alison, move with him into a great open-plan roundhouse, sleeping on lumpy handmade bunks, while the others – much to his chagrin – opt to pitch their waterproof tents around the place. Bill is a stickler for authenticity and detests anything that reminds him of the modern world. His list of dislikes also include women’s “undies”, footling about “like an old woman” and female sanitary products (which, he says, women managed “well enough without back in the day”). It is probably an understatement to suggest that women in general make Bill feel queasy.

It becomes apparent fairly early in the novel that Bill is both bigot and bully, though he skilfully conceals the results of the rough treatment he deals out to his wife and daughter from others in the camp. Alison tells Silvie her father can’t help his behaviour, that he’s always had a bad temper, and advises her to simply do as he says. She certainly tries to keep him happy, but she’s a bright young woman and forgets herself by “answering him back” (i.e., makes perfectly sensible comments and suggestions).

As Bill’s conduct becomes ever more obsessional and domineering, Molly begins to see that all is not well with the Hampton’s. Then events come to a head when a re-enactment of a sacrificial ritual is taken too far.

In her Acknowledgements, Sarah Moss reveals that the genesis of this story came firstly from participating in a Northumbrian residency to celebrate the Hexham Literary Festival, and then from the ‘Scotland’s People’ exhibition in the National Museum of Scotland, where she spent time with “the possessions and bodies of Iron and Bronze Age residents of the borderlands.”

Moss’s slender novel, which I devoured in one sitting, is menacing and brutal, but also filled with yearning, sensuality and hope. It has much to say about female affinity and friendship.

> *“Because they are men, I thought, because they're in charge, because there will be consequences if you don't. I didn't see how she could not know that.”*

Many thanks to Granta Publications for providing an advance review copy of this title.

Roman Clodia says

> Because they are men, I thought, because they're in charge, because there will be consequences if you don't. I didn't see how she could not know that.

A short, almost impressionist piece of writing in which Moss swirls together strands about gender, class, prejudicial nationalism and a kind of atavistic mentality that foreground both the use and abuse of power.

The writing is subtle and loaded, the tension rising with the heat and the increasing violence as rabbits are skinned for food, their heads boiled for the construction of the menacing ghost wall.

The lord-of-the-flies-alike ending is both flagged from the start but also not quite believable - and leaves us a little stranded as the piece ends abruptly.

Nevertheless, the control in the writing is striking, and Moss has created a nicely complicated relationship in that between Sylvie and her father: her memories of their closeness when she was a child, the security of

holding his hand, offering both a stark contrast and key to their present tension.

Best read in a single sitting, this is a spare and powerful piece of writing alive to small movements, moments of complicity and rebellion, and the consequences that ensue.

Thanks to Granta for an ARC via NetGalley.

Sarah says

3.5 rounded down

In Sarah Moss's novella *Ghost Wall*, set in rural Northumberland, we follow a teenage girl called Silvie. Silvie's father is obsessed with the Iron Age, and takes his wife and his daughter to a camp where they spend the summer living this ancient lifestyle - foraging for food, following the rituals - isolated from modern society.

Silvie becomes acquainted with another young camper, Molly, a female archaeology student from university who is also at the camp with her professor. Where Silvie is reticent and follows her father's inane rules, Molly is wilful and plots trips to Spar to buy snacks. Where Silvie lives in fear of her father's reign of terror (he is abusive to both her and her mother), Molly fights against the sinister undercurrent that develops within the camp.

While the story is memorable and there are a number of strengths to the book - the observations on class stood out - somehow it didn't quite come together as a whole. The story gained momentum towards the end, but I finished feeling it could have been so much more.

Thank you Netgalley and Granta Publications for the advance copy, which was provided in exchange for an honest review.

Amalia Gavea says

''Darkness was a long time coming.''

This book is my first contact with Sarah Moss’s writing and it proved to be so fascinating...The word Ghost in the title, the bogs and Northumberland drew my attention to a novel that I read in a single sitting. It was mystifying, hypnotic, complex, powerful.

It is an unusually hot summer in Northumberland. Silvie and her parents are following a professor and his students in a camp that tries to imitate the daily life during the Iron Age. However, things start going wrong and the camp becomes a field for repressed feeling and the need for justice. Silvie is at the heart of this peculiar, dark storm.

''The shadows were long in the grass, the whole moorland low and still in slanting yellow light. In the east the trees stood dark against the sky and all the colours were fading. A late flight of birds winged the air, homeward bound.''

The writing is extremely beautiful, difficult, demanding as the story is told in long sentences, a technique that makes the atmosphere even more threatening, almost ruthless. At certain times, reading felt painful. Moss uses the richness of the history in the area to create a mystical scenery. Hadrian's Wall, the wild nature, the ravens coaxing a shadowy future and, above all, the bogs and the sacrificed souls that found an untimely, tragic death in an era of darkness.

Darkness and ignorance are two central themes in the story because Moss focuses in the way Silvie's father, Bill, uses History to justify and express his cruelty and violence over his family, his desire to control everything and everyone. Ignorance in the form of all the prejudices against the people from the North, their accent and mentality. On a more positive note, Moss includes a brief reference to Berlin (...wait for me, you beautiful city, I'll see you next August!) and the fall of the Berlin Wall, another vile creation of the human race that so loves to divide and sacrifice, and much less to unite and create.

Silvie is a ray of light in the bleakness and pain of the story. Her name is supposedly a diminutive of Sulevia, a goddess of springs and woods. A name chosen by Bill who fails to notice (obviously…) that the origin of the name is extremely Roman. So, Bill is actually the epitome of the culturally illiterate man who wants to appropriate History so that it fits his claims. Now, where have we seen that before? Oh, wait....It is sad to say that this is the least of his faults. He is a horrible, extremist brute. Violent, hideous, trapped in his incompetence and illusions like all extremists. There is no love for his wife and his daughter. Only a twisted obsession to imitate a life that will allow him to freely express his instincts. He is one of the most despicable characters you'll ever come across. Silvie's mother is equally at fault here, She cannot be acquitted because of her condition. She is weak, pathetically giving way under his psychological and physical violence, unable to protect her child who should have been her only priority. I had no tolerance reserved for her. Not when we have Silvie and Molly, the young women, the fighters and protectors.

With a thoroughly satisfying conclusion, this is a haunting story about the bonds of the present and the past, about the cruelty towards the ones who are not allowed to defend themselves, the resistance of youth against violence and tyranny, the need to end patriarchy once and for all. A story that demonstrates the evils brought about by prejudice, extremism, and racism. What could be more relevant to our troubled times?

Many thanks to Granta Books and NetGalley for the ARC in exchange for an honest review.

My reviews can also be found on https://theopinionatedreaderblog.word...

Gumble's Yard says

> *That was the whole point of the re-enactment, that we ourselves became the ghosts, learning to walk the land as they walked it two thousand years ago, to tend our fire as they tended theirs and hope that some of their thoughts, their way of understanding the world, would follow the dance of muscle and bone. To do it properly, I thought, we would almost have to absent ourselves from ourselves, leaving our actions, our reenactions, to those no longer there. Who are the ghosts again, us or our dead? Maybe they imagined us first, maybe we were conjured out of the deep past by other minds.*

My first book by this author, a Professor of Creative Writing – and a book I would not be surprised to see

featuring on next year's Women's Prize longlist.

The book is a slim novella – less than 150 pages of well-spaced writing – and best read in a single sitting (or perhaps even better in a single squatting on uncomfortable ground) as a way to experience the real-time way in which the first person, 17 year old, narrator Silvie tells her story.

And my reference to experiential reading is deliberate – as the set up of this novel is that Silvie (actually Sulevia – named by her father after a Northumbrian Goddess), is with her amateur-archaeologist/historian bus-driver father and mother, joining some field work a University professor – Professor Slade – is conducting with three of the students (two male, one female – Molly) on his Experiential Archaeology course: the purpose of the field work to camp in the peat bogs of a Northumberland national part and, for a few days, attempt a historical reconstruction of Ancient Briton iron-age lifestyles (wearing authentic clothes, hunting and gathering food and so on).

A number of things become quickly clear to the reader in turn:

Silvie's father's enthusiasm for the fidelity of the historical recreation is stronger than the Professor's (who for example sears socks inside his animal skin moccasins) and even more so than that of his students (whose enthusiam for gutting animals is much lower than for absconding to shops for illicit snacks);

Silvie's father's enthusiasm for the recreation reflects his belief in a more genuine ancient way of life: one that features the original real natives of the land, that does away with the softness and distractions of modern life and which also has an unquestioned patriarchal structure

That Silvie's father imposes, as far as he can, such a lifestyle on his family's day to day living – in particular using physical and mental abuse to control his wife and to attempt to control his daughter's emerging independence (increasingly expressed by cheeky asides – which often result in beatings) and sexuality (something which comes more to the fore as she sees how Molly interacts with the boys but also finds herself drawn to Molly).

At first the camp divides along family/university lines. The professor and Silvie's father clash over Hadrian Wall – Sylvie's father convinced it shows the immigrant dominated Roman army was unable to overcome the resistance of the Ancient Britons – the Professor arguing firstly that the Wall served little defensive function and was more of a statement, and that the "Britons" would have no concept of themselves other than as a series of disparate tribes. Silvie resents what she sees as the class/regional condescension of the students towards her father.

Things, however, change when the men (and Silvie) reconstruct the eponymous Ghost Wall – a wall assembled by the ancient Britons and topped with the preserved, and magically imbued remains of the dead (substituted by animals skulls) and the men discover a shared sense of power and meaning from the reconstruction. Silvie is drawn increasingly to Molly who tries to get her to admit and confront her father's abuse and the story culminates in Sylvie allowing herself to be drawn into the reenactment of a bog-based female sacrifice – which causes Molly to involve the police.

For a short book – it is packed with themes, the clearest of which is the idea of a flawed nationalistic view which both harps back to an immigrant free/pure native world which never existed and which is intrinsically bound up with a longing for a time when misogyny was not only acceptable but intrinsic to societal structure.

Overall a quietly impressive novel.

Ova - Excuse My Reading says

Full review here
If there was a contest of writing, that will require telling a story using the least amount of words, this book would win it this year.
A borderline novella, Ghost Wall is a powerful story that could easily be read in one sitting.
I loved the idea behind this novel. The sacrificed bog girls, whose remains found, as characters they are quiet and unknown, as if they never existed but the proof of them being very much alive is there, in contrast with today's abused women in hands of bad-seed men.
Silvie, short for Sulevia, a Celtic goddess, is living a hard life with her "almost not there" mother and abusive father. This father of Silvie's is a terror. He crushes both the mum and daughter both physically and psychologically.
The family is involved in an expedition-like setting, in Northumberland , vast moors, where there is a professor and some students investigating the lives of ancient Britons by replicating the same style of living. Silvie's father, Bill, is helping the professor who is seemingly closing an eye on the ways Bill manipulates and uses his family. Bill is obsessed with 'ancient times' and mimicking the same style of living.
It is not a long story, and I don't want to go on talking about the plot. The story is very powerful and dense. There were bits turned my stomach, and other bits where I felt ashamed/stressed reading on Silvie's behalf. It is a dark and depressing novel, but very well put together.
Two things I didn't like about this novel,
1- The narration style. I am not sure if someone went out and about this year to young writers, and recommended them to write in a dreamy, first-person voice with long sentences that's shy to include punctuation to get long listed to awards? Why the sudden explosion of this style of writing? I am not a fan.
2- The ending. It felt a bit hasty. The start was intriguing, but find the ending the weakest point of the book.

Don't get me wrong, this was a really good book. When a book is good, you can't help thinking it could have been better. 4 stars and will definitely be reading Moss again.

Bill Kupersmith says

You know that Ghost Wall is a work of literary rather than genre fiction because the characters' direct discourse is not set off by inverted commas. It is also absurdly overpriced - in a minuscule format scarcely larger than a pocket diary with lots of white space between the lines to pad it to 152 pages at £12.99. And yet it is scarier than all get out, an excellent horror story that Shirley Jackson would have envied having written. Silvie (which stands for Sulevia, supposedly the name of some Celtic goddess) is a 17 year-old girl in Northern England sometime later in the last century. (Why that time period? I suspect because it's before mobile phones.) Her father Bill (shudder!) is a keen amateur archaeologist fascinated with the Iron Age in pre-Roman Britain, particularly bodies of strangled sacrificial victims preserved in bogs. The book begins with a 3rd person account of such a ceremony, setting us in the proper mood of horror. Subsequently the tale is narrated by Silvie. In real life Bill is a bus driver and bully and autodidact and abusive boor. I expect an American equivalent would be a Civil War re-enactor or the like. He forces his wife (a doormat) and daughter to wear scratchy woollen tunics without underwear and live on a diet of burdocks and rabbits in a tent made of skins. (The bunnies are quite inauthentic because according to Bill they were introduced by the Romans tho' I've been told they didn't arrive till 1066 with the Normans.) Besides Bill and his wife and

daughter, we have Professor Slade and three students who are participating in a unit of Experimental Archaeology and living in nylon tents. Molly, a posh girl from the south of England, befriends Silvie and encourages her to sneak into town for treats. Molly wears expensive underwear and goes to pubs. As it turned out, she was my favourite character.

It seems a fascinating coincidence that I should have read recently three books featuring daughters with obsessive abusive fathers living in the woods: Claire Fuller's Our Endless Numbered Days, Gabriel Tallent's My Absolute Darling, and this story by Sarah Moss. Tallent's is repulsive rubbish full of excessive violence and obsession with firearms (so naturally nominated for literary fiction prizes), Fuller's is excellent and affecting with the daughter Peggy too young and isolated from her German mother to know how she is being abused by a parent who is mad. Silvie I find harder to characterise; she seems a common type of British working-class character who is intelligent enough to realise that something is really wrong with her situation, but regards resisting her father - as well as going to university and speaking proper English as a betrayal of her roots and heritage (which is one reason I was so pleased with Molly's role in the plot). I thought Professor Slade was the worst character in the story. On one level he's a humourist who regards the entire experiment of primitive living as a huge joke and yet encourages Bill's sadistic and perverse appetites.

As we approach the ending I was really scared and was glad this book is not longer even tho' absurdly overpriced. Personally I found the denouement most appropriate. But not every reader will agree, I suspect. I hope somewhere in the ghostly realm the shade of Shirley Jackson is enjoying it; I'd love her opinion.

Emma says

The beauty of this novel is in the clash between the bountiful, exuberant language which builds into this incredibly crisp picture, detailed and vibrant, and the terse, one sentence revelations that hold implications, secret knowledge, shared experience of such emotion that it feels like all the words in the world couldn't reveal the depths of it, but somehow say it all. Once you are lost in the flow of Silvie's story, it is mesmerising, the inevitability of violence like a gathering storm with her at its epicentre.

The dynamics of the group are tense from the start, each interaction representative of a jostling for or demonstration of power on the part of some, and the deliberate, desperate attempts of others to mediate, to avoid, to escape. Most of all it is the story of a family in which abuse and love play against each other, illustrated by a pattern of bruises and other hurts. The scenario might be particular, but the experiences are intensely recognisable- I know these people. Even if this work has been highlighted as a critique of much larger things, it is in these intimate, personal interactions that Moss does her best work, the inner workings of a family forced to bear the critical gaze of outsiders.

Yet it ends too soon, with a suggestion of resolution but no real catharsis for the reader. I checked back to see if I had missed something, if pages were missing. Perhaps that's meant to say something of the fragility of Silvie's fate, but it still felt like I'd been cheated of something.

Nevertheless, my first introduction to Sarah Moss's work was exciting and memorable, i'll be looking for more.

ARC via Netgalley

Claire Fuller says

I really enjoyed the premise and story in this short novel. Silvie, seventeen, is participating in an experiential archaeology re-enactment of an iron-age Northumbrian camp with her mother, and abusive and controlling father. Staying in the camp - but in their tents rather than the roundhouse - are three students and their professor. The women are left to 'gather' and cook, while the men hunt, until they also start to reenact odd ancient ceremonies, including building a ghost wall. Silvie is too scared of her father to challenge him and so the tension between father and daughter builds, until Molly, the female student finally ends what is happening.
My minor quibbles were with characterisation of the two male students who seemed to blend into one, and with the grammar of the dialogue. (It's without speech marks which I don't mind, but the dialogue is run together so that I had to reread things like, 'I said, Dad said, xxx', unsure of who was speaking. I'm sure this is done by Moss on purpose - she's too good a writer for it to unintentional - perhaps to show again how Silvie has no mind of her own, but it sometimes made reading a struggle).

Sheila says

4 stars--I really liked it. Trigger warnings for domestic violence.

A quick read, *Ghost Wall* contains a lot of things I love: British history and folklore, a clear narrative voice, and an exploration of female strength and relationships. Also, bog bodies! A group of students and their professor, along with Sylvie and her family, spend a couple weeks in the wilderness of northern England, living (with various degrees of historical accuracy) as their prehistoric ancestors might have.

Sylvie spends much of her time dodging her father's wrath, contemplating her suffocating future, and marveling at the freedom the college students have. I'm going to be vague to avoid spoilers, but at first I thought the book's title was referring to Hadrian's Wall, which is missing and incomplete in places, but no--it refers to something older and darker. Definitely a creepy central image for the book.

I received this review copy from the publisher on NetGalley. Thanks for the opportunity to read and review; I appreciate it!

Antonomasia says

This is the kind of 3-star rating that means 5 stars for some things, and 2 stars for others. *Ghost Wall* is brilliant in some ways - but its political implications are not fully coherent, and there are details that don't ring true if you're familiar with the setting and subject.

Historical re-enactment and retro living doesn’t get a great press in fiction. (See for example, Todd Wodicka’s All Shall Be Well", Valentine in Nicola Barker’s The Yips, or more tenuously, *Confederacy of Dunces*) Perhaps the authors who like the idea are writing historical fiction or history, instead of contemporary novels about efforts to live in historical ways, meaning those which are published hijack the subject as comment on politics and personalities.

With this being Iron Age re-enactment, and set in the 1990s, it’s possible Moss was inspired by the 2001

BBC reality /re-enactment show Surviving the Iron Age. A team of volunteers, some of them the adult children of participants from a similar 1978 series Living in the Past, tried to re-enact Iron Age life, argued and created a lot of drama, albeit not as lurid as this book. (With hindsight, it shows that this sort of thing may be best left to professionals such as Ruth Goodman and Peter Ginn. Incidentally, I would love to hear what Goodman's daughter - who grew up in a re-enactor family, clamoured to learn historical skills from her parents, and now works as a costume designer and textile historian - thought of *Ghost Wall*.)

What's great about the book:

- The descriptions of landscape, interaction with it, and of bodily sensation are vivid and visceral and I found every one worth lingering over. (This was the full-strength, fresh-pressed stuff, whereas Daisy Johnson's Booker shortlisted Everything Under, which I read straight afterwards, was like dilute from concentrate.) Sarah Moss captures and communicates exactly what it feels like for her narrator standing in a stream, or wearing a coarse fabric, or hundreds of other similar physical feelings.

- This narrative understands brilliantly what it's like being a strong-minded teenager living with a problematic and equally strong-minded parent. (Or perhaps more precisely, what it was like before, but not very long before, the internet arrived in homes and reduced isolation.) There's a great evocation of the way a lot of stuff seems so normal experientially, whilst you also know it's not for everyone; Silvie usually narrates her father's rages with an underlying half-stoic tone of "oh, this shit again" rather than with the pumped-up horror some writers bring to similar material. I love the way Silvie keeps thinking about when she'll leave home: I've always described it as years of holding your breath, but as Silvie shows, you're also doing a lot of thinking and learning and storing things up during that time, and it's really a lot more than waiting. I never had to put up with physical punishment after primary school age, or being hit with implements, but the way that Silvie details events that lead up to the beating (which doesn't even happen until 40% into the book), then almost skims over the moment itself without going as far as dissociation, rang very true from what I remember as a younger child.

- Moss understands the sorts of details that historians and re-enactors care about. I've always wanted to do re-enactment, but have never done it for health reasons. First I ruled myself out on accuracy grounds (I see now that nice people who have less hardcore-accurate attitudes than my own would have been fine with my participation, with a couple of adjustments and allowances, if I'd ever actually asked) and then later, with poorer health, I just couldn't have anyway. I've thought before that if I'd been healthier and had a child I would have taken them along to do re-enactment and survival stuff. In the first third or so of the book, every detail and dashed expectation that winds up Bill, Silvie's dad, for historical or environmental reasons, is something that would inwardly annoy me in this scenario - except that I'd have started out knowing I had to accept these sorts of preferences from a kid, even if I was secretly disappointed they didn't want to stick to the level of detail I did.
(It's difficult to separate positive from negative neatly by topic here, and there were a handful of details about the re-enactment that seemed off the mark: for instance it didn't make sense to me that they hadn't tried the recipes out at home, even if that would have been with a modern cooker. There is absolutely no mention of Silvie's grandparents or any other antecedents and family origins. In portraying the claustrophobia of an abusive family in another context, this would have only added to the atmosphere of isolation, but for a man so steeped in, or obsessed by, history, it was just peculiar that Bill never referred to his immediate ancestry. This was one of a number of points which seemed so odd to omit that I wondered if swathes had been cut out of the book after a much longer early draft.)

- It made me reconsider teenage favourite *The Secret History* (which was incidentally, first published in 1992, a couple of years after *Ghost Wall* is set). **Warning: spoilers for The Secret History follow.** People,

even nice people, getting carried away in atavistic, ectastic states. I think a lot of us *Secret History* fans back then (at least not the ones I made friends with in my twenties) didn't mind very much that it was Bunny they killed; we didn't really like him either. If it had to be one of them, it should have been him. (Although it would have been better to just, y'know, stop speaking to him as soon as they could after college.) It was like we were bystanders, part of their crew. But here, it's the sympathetic narrator who's on the receiving end, not a distant and sometimes obnoxious rich loudmouth – she's likeable and strong in certain ways, but also victimised and vulnerable.

- Silvie's tentative attraction to another girl was wonderfully written: at that time, and being from a strict home, even at 17, *just looking* felt far more daring and deliberate than might be imagined in many parts of the UK in 2018. Moss shows how it was both very subtle and not.

<u>On the other hand:</u>

- Yes there was a brief heatwave in summer 1990, but overall this is *not* convincing weather for the Hadrian's Wall area and the Northumberland coast back then. Where's the relentless breeze whipping hair in your face and meaning outside, even in summer, rarely feels warmer than sitting in a draught under a meagre electric bar heater? I suspect Moss is basing weather on recent visits, and the weather is warmer now all over Britain than it was 25-30 years ago.

- I felt that details of the time in Britain c.1990 were about 50% beautifully observed, and 50% questionable, leading me to make dozens of notes about these things which it would be excessive to list in full here. (Moss is a few years older than I am, probably a contemporary of Silvie, so I would have expected her to get these things right.) A few examples: lovely to remember calling hairbands bobbles (scrunchies would have been too obtrusively modern to wear in the re-enactment setting) Good call mentioning cities in Eastern Europe which were newly, excitingly open for inter-railing, and how the fall of the Berlin Wall created a buzz everywhere. Very much on point to have the university students so squeamish about butchering rabbits and clueless about foraging: ten years or so later and they'd have likely been wanting to prove themselves, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall style. However, some of the phrases and ideas used about feminism and domestic abuse are very, very social media in the 2010s. And I think it's unlikely there would have been such loaded insinuation by twenty-year-olds about the idea of a 'proper British name' at that time: that's mid-to-late 2010s concern about the rise of the far right talking. I think in the 90s it would have just been a more neutral response like "so as far back as you can go then?" Silvie is somewhat sheltered from average teenage life by her overbearing father, but she goes to a mainstream state school in Lancashire: it's pretty much impossible she wouldn't know what 'the North' means in England and that Lancs is part of it, even if to Geordies Lancs is, jocularly, the Midlands.

- All this led me to wonder if Moss had researched which ideas were current in Iron Age archaeology in 1990. (The only contradiction I could see was that back then, nearly all the bog bodies on the news and in documentaries seemed to be male, whereas Silvie, via her father, perceives them as mostly female. Perhaps academic books gave a different impression, but given the attention that the media tends to pay to female murder victims, I remained sceptical.) I was frustrated to think that I might be reading anachronistic ideas about archaeology when I didn't know this era well enough to spot them. So another review of *Ghost Wall* which I'd love to read is by someone who studied Iron Age archaeology at least 30 years ago, and has kept up with the field to some extent since..

- On the subject of one particular character, I found it impossible to believe that a student with poor results like Molly, who wasn't enthusiastic about re-enactment, and went off to get processed food from the shop

every chance she got, would have got a place on a specialised very small group trip like this. An opportunity like this would be very much in demand and would go to students who would obviously make the most of it. She was one of several elements which felt shoehorned in for political and plot purposes. A female student who was enthusiastic about re-enactment, and also saw that Bill was abusive, would have been fairer to re-enactment and experimental archaeology as pursuits and communities, and to real women who are leaders or free participants, and not pushovers or victims roped in by men – and a more realistic character - but she wouldn't have carried the convenient symbolism of "modernity (and implicitly consumerism and capitalism) is better for women".

Ghost Wall is really a political novel about Brexit, and about a somewhat intertwined literary-world conflict about the recent British nature-writing revival and predominantly theoretical links with right-wing politics. These subjects should have been handled with considerably more nuance and care - however that would probably have been difficult to do within the confines of a short novel with a neat beginning, middle and end. If this is the result, even in the hands of an author who can produce great prose, I think these issues are better left to discursive non-fiction.

Bill is moulded into an all-round bogeyman for the contemporary British left: nationalist, racist, male chauvinist, domestic abuser, misuser of history for his own political ends. It couldn't be more obvious that he'd have voted for Brexit, though one imagines him too wiry to be called a Gammon. (His anti-Catholic bit was odd: Bill is otherwise consistent about 'the longer ago the better' in history, and besides Lancashire was historically a centre of post-Reformation Catholic recusancy. A Lancastrian with a strong sense of history would be particularly likely to see Catholicism as having a deeper link to the past than Protestantism. I felt that Moss was trying to evoke the meme of Henry VIII's Reformation as the 'first Brexit', but to the well-informed reader this runs aground, and shows another example of this project's trading of deep character plausibility for superficial political shorthand.) Bill is the only working-class male character in the novel (there's not even a mention of his father, or a friend of his), and in a symbolic book with such a small cast, he inevitably looks like he is meant to represent his entire type. Silvie (whose knowledge and skills are as good as her dad's, and better than the students a few years older than her) does stand up against small instances of largely unwitting snobbery displayed by the students and their professor, but the overall effect of the alignments in the book is to say that working class white men, even when they are well-informed, are not well-informed enough, they are prejudiced, and that as laypeople with a specialist interest in an academic field, they're still doing it wrong, not properly like actual academics do. Middle-class professionals, academics and women know better than Bill: it's exactly the kind of smug-liberal juxtaposition that contributes to the problem of political division in this country. He confirms the lazy prejudices of metropolitan middle-class people who live in socio-political bubbles; this sort of thing is not part of the solution artistically.

Ghost Wall may also subtly initiate these readers into a currently small cultural and political debate about nature-writing and politics, which may not have touched them before, especially if they haven't read Melissa Harrison's recent novel All Among the Barley - which, by being set in the 1930s, explicitly indicates the roots of this anxiety, which is currently theoretical as far as the public is concerned: in 2018 there are no significant blocs of voters, or spokespeople in national media actually espousing Nazistic *blut und boden* combinations of racist far-right politics with conservation. There are evidently small numbers of people incontrovertibly like this, and who also have an interest in nature writing and folklore, as evidenced by the Twitter hashtag campaign FolkloreAgainstFascism. (A bit about that halfway through this blog post.) However, so many cultural features of the last 20-25 years can be pulled into the idea of Britain having been on a slippery slope to that, via Britpop, Bake Off, Boden, and psychogeography - as in this extract from Joe

Kennedy's new book Authentocrats that it will make some people want to say despairingly, "so we aren't allowed anything nice at all?" (I guess the time has passed for the 90s Cool Britannia idea that most other countries don't equate their national flag or pride in their country's cultural output with racism so maybe Britain shouldn't either. That also lacks a bit of nuance, but there has to be something decent inbetween rabid white nationalists, and reviving the British cultural cringe for the sake of political asceticism.) Now people who have never been racist nationalists feel like they have to apologise for tastes and opinions that were not in the least questionable a while back, because a few people at the other end of the political spectrum might share a few of those tastes. (e.g. here, third paragraph after the second picture.)

As Green politics and other forms of hippy-ism are still so strongly aligned with the left in the public imagination (in Britain at least - the UK doesn't have the big right-wing homesteader tradition of the US, or the Russian or Nordic trend of far-right involvement in neopaganism) these concerns are currently mostly an argument between a few social media posters and writers and artists. (I thought I was fairly aware of debates in this area, but other than the extract from *Authentocrats* I hadn't seen the articles linked in the last paragraph until a couple of days before writing this review, and afterwards I thought it seemed best to move Paul Kingsnorth further down my very long Goodreads list of favourite authors.) Today I remembered - and made a note in - a four-year-old review of mine which has aged badly because of its scepticism about a dystopian scenario, so I shouldn't be too confident in what I say here. But I feel that increasing literary energy focused on attacking a minor tendency may be a cul-de-sac that distracts from pressing and concrete issues, like how the left can appeal politically to pro-Brexit voters, common interests and tastes that may unite people in an aggressively divided country, and the increasing urgency of addressing climate change, the depletion of nature and the disgusting extent to which humans waste resources. And compared with the literary authors and Twitter posters involved in this conversation, fantasy authors who create multicultural versions of British myths, like Ben Aaronovitch and Paul Cornell have a far bigger readership. (I haven't read Cornell myself, but thanks to Alex for mentioning the bit about the Asian vampire whom supernatural forces recognise as British due to his love of tea.) They connect better than any of these discussions and insinuations with my first experience, in my teens, of getting to know someone else who was as much into all this sort of history and folklore and tweedy, crickety Englishness stuff as I was, a friend who's mixed-race; we were both only half British by heritage and more into these things than the British people our age whom we knew, and so on a gut level I never felt these subjects to be automatically exclusionary, although that is the conclusion some draw from them.

Nonetheless, I doubt too many people will let *Ghost Wall* put them off re-enactment if they feel like having a go - Goodman et al are too friendly as public faces and get a far larger audience - and I hope they won't be overly worried about re-enactors they may meet socially. (The ones I've met are all lovely and some of the least judgemental and most accepting people I've had the pleasure to be friends with.)

I decided to request a free ARC of *Ghost Wall* on Netgalley because I thought I'd have a lot to say about it in a review. But I didn't count on taking 5 days, rather than 5 hours, to read such a short book (I paid such close attention, and thought and noted so much that I probably could have written the entire novella out by hand in the time taken) nor on taking a month to finish the last few paragraphs of the review.

Hannah says

Sarah Moss is one of those authors I have wanted to get to for what feels like ages because I had this feeling that I would adore her work. But sometimes that feeling of a potential favourite author makes me to anxious to actually pick up a book (this is irrational, I know), so I finally jumped at the chance to read and review her

newest novel, because it sounds brilliant and it is quite short (I love short books). And I still think that Sarah Moss might be a potential favourite author, even if this book did not quite blow me away.

This book is set over a period of a couple of days, days Silvie and her family are spending in a experimental archeological setting, together with a professor and a few of his students. While the students can sleep in tents, Silvie's controlling and obsessive father forces his family to sleep in what he deems "authentic" huts. Silvie latches onto the sole female student, while trying not to make her father angry (and obviously failing, because he always finds something to be angry about). Moss uses this setting to showcast a variety of awful things: abuse and dysfunctional family dynamics, misogyny and sexism, classism and racism. She does so adeptly and impressively, but it does make for a rather grim reading experience.

The setting and the atmosphere are the biggest strength of this book. Told in long, run-on sentences (a style I particularly enjoy), Sarah Moss plays with the limited variation of their everyday life. The atmosphere becomes ever more oppressive and instilled with a sense of foreboding that made me very scared for Silvie. Moss is in perfect command of her language in a way that made me savour the words and excited for more of her books.

In the end, this book is more a collection of clever observations and vivid scenes than a cohesive whole – it is extremely well-done but did not always work for me. It felt longer than its less than 200 pages because spending time in Silvie's life is suffocating and repetitive, and while I know that this was on purpose and done exceedingly well, I did not always enjoy my reading experience.

I received an arc of this book courtesy of NetGalley and Granta in exchange for an honest review.

You can find this review and other thoughts on books on my blog.

Eric Anderson says

Like many people, I was hugely impressed by Sarah Moss' previous novel "The Tidal Zone" for the way its story meaningfully drew the past into the pressing concerns of its characters in the present. She uses a similar technique in her new novel "Ghost Wall" but in a much more compressed form that combines a tense story with a strong statement about issues in modern Britain. Teenage Silvie is taken on a unique archaeological trip in Northern England by her parents along with a few students and a professor. Rather than searching for artefacts they seek to recreate the feeling of living in Iron Age Britain as closely as possible. This means wearing nothing but burlap sacks, foraging for what food they can in the forest and living in primitive shelters. It also includes antiquated rituals like building a wall out of skulls and other unsavoury acts which grow increasingly alarming and bizarre. The values that Silvie's father holds are skewed towards an outdated ideal of masculinity and gender dynamics which Silvie gradually comes to question. For such a short novel, this book builds up to a thrilling and memorable conclusion.

Read my full review of Ghost Wall by Sarah Moss on LonesomeReader

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