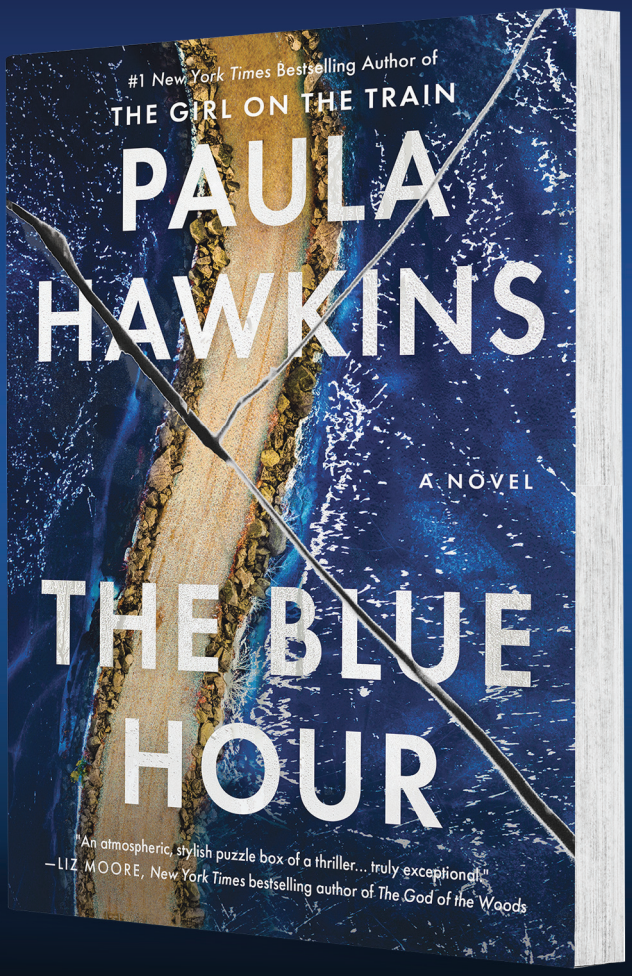


BOOK CLUB KIT

MARINER BOOKS

THE BLUE HOUR

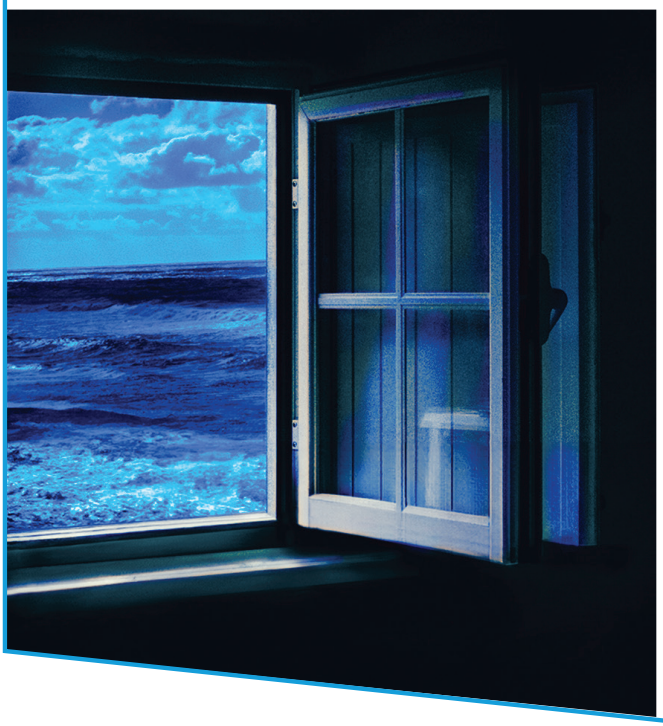
THE CREATIVE PROCESS
Writing the Blue Hour: A Brief Essay by Paula Hawkins

Years ago, long before I began writing this book, I went on holiday to France, to the *Cote de Granit Rose*, the Pink Granite Coast, a place where, in midsummer, there is still light on the horizon at midnight.

I walked for miles along that coast, marvelling at its extraordinary rock formations, smooth and sensuous and piled like warm bodies in the sun, reminiscent of sculpture, of Barbara Hepworth, of Henry Moore.

That part of Brittany's coast is dotted with islands, many of them tidal – *presqu'iles*, the French call them. Almost-islands. At low tide I meandered along damp sand strewn with weed in shades of deep green and umber, past the rotting hulls of old boats, out towards a tiny island which was home to a single, lonely house. I looked up at it and felt a familiar thrill, a prickle on the back of my neck, my heart rate ticking up. The start of something – or the very first stirrings of the start of something, at least.

The day after that walk, I went on another, further up the coast, and managed to twist my ankle very badly.



I was forced to spend most of the rest of the holiday on a deck chair in the garden, looking out at the sea, a book at my elbow and a notebook on my lap.

What thrilled me about the house on island was not just that it was picturesque and lonely, but that it demanded of its occupant a certain kind of surrender to the elements. If you lived there, you would be at the mercy of the tide.

Not long after I got back to London, I started writing. By the following summer, I was stuck: mired in a story that felt hopelessly bleak, narrated by protagonist for whom there seemed to be no redemption. One morning, unable to face sitting at my desk to wrestle with the novel any longer, I went instead to the Barbican, to an exhibition of the groundbreaking abstract expressionist, Lee Krasner.

Krasner is well-known in the United States, but at the time there was only a single work of hers on permanent display in the UK, and I had never heard of her. I loved the show, loved her monumental, moving, vibrant, sometimes terrifying pieces. I was particularly struck by one part of her narrative when, disheartened by a series of pictures she'd been working on, she ripped them from her studio walls and tore them to shreds.

Weeks later, she returned to her studio. "A lot of things there... began to interest me," Krasner told an *Arts Magazine* journalist in 1973. "I began picking up torn pieces of my own drawings and re-gluing them. Then I start cutting up some of my oil paintings. I've got something going here and I start pulling out a lot of raw canvases and slashing [them] as well."

From these fragments, Krasner would go onto make her collage paintings, "jungles of exotic shape and colour" according to one rave review of work when shown.

I walked home and wrote an email to my agent. I was abandoning the work in progress, I told her, I just couldn't make it work. In my head, I tore it up, ripped it to shreds. I started work on something quite different.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS
Writing the Blue Hour: A Brief Essay by Paula Hawkins

A few years later, when I began to write *The Blue Hour*, I returned to the debris of the old novel. I salvaged the tidal island, and though the protagonist had changed completely, the manner of that earlier novel's abandonment echoed: one of my main characters would be an artist, one who would sometimes make art from found objects, and from broken things.

Something else from that Krasner exhibition played in my head when I began thinking about my artist, and that was the (now infamous) quote from one of Krasner's teachers, Hans Hofmann, who remarked on seeing one of her pieces that it was "so good you would not know it was painted by a woman".

The standing of women artists no doubt improved between the 1930s and the 1990s, but not as much as one might have hoped: EH Gombich's (supposedly) definitive text, *The Story of Art*, featured no women at all when it was published in 1950; by the time its sixteenth edition was published in 1995, a single woman was mentioned. This is the art world which would have shaped Vanessa Chapman, a world in which the works of female painters were worth less, exhibited more rarely and where admiration, when expressed, was frequently tinged with hostility and misogyny. It was a world in which, in order to find a place to work freely, she might have to bolt, to create a life somewhere remote, somewhere she could be untethered.

LOCATION

Eris, the tidal island to which Chapman escapes, is not real, but it could be. The Scottish coast boasts no fewer than 168 islands of one hundred acres or more, as well as hundreds of smaller islands, some of them are tidal, some inhabited, some completely wild. Some have been settled for thousands of years, some are peaceful idylls, while others have the bloodiest of histories.

Over the past few years, since I started spending more and more time in Scotland, I have travelled quite a bit in its enormously varied landscape, gathering images along the way, both literally (on my phone) and in my mind. Thinking about this novel I began to form a singular vision, of a place where the air is filled with water and beaches glitter in low winter light, where there are wrens in the rosehips and buzzards move in slow, lazy, threatening circles overhead. Where in summer the hills are velveted with green and the gorse flowers smell of coconut, and where, once you step into the woods, you can hear nothing but the creak of trees and the distant roar of surf.

This is where I imagined Vanessa walking, scavenging, looking for inspiration, and for objects to include in her art work. This is how setting starts to shape plot: I saw her walking on the beach, picking up pebbles or smooth glass, or in the woods, finding an interestingly-shaped piece of wood, or a pure white bone.

A bone, picked clean. The phrase snagged in my mind, it caught my attention like glass catching the light, I had to stop and look at it a while, turn it around in my head, consider it from different angles. It led me to the Dylan Thomas poem which I've used as an epigraph for *The Blue Hour*, to "death without dominion"; and from there to the idea of legacy, to the importance of what we leave behind. I started to wonder what Vanessa would leave behind, I thought about how often legacies are disputed, particularly when they are valuable, I thought about how often the meaning of an artist's work is disputed after their death. The meaning of Vanessa's work would be left to others to explain, I realised, but who might those others be? A friend? An outsider?

And so the novel starts to take shape: it has a setting and character, and conflict... all that remains is to somehow stitch them together in a way that makes a whole of parts. The sculptor Barbara Hepworth talked about her fascination with "the new problem which arose out of each sculpture . . . by the kind of form that grew out of achieving personal harmony with the materials." I think writing a novel can feel much the same, like trying to find a form within a stone, trying to determine the shape of something formless, establishing whether you are working with the right materials at all, and searching for the right language to bring those materials to life on the page. If you're very lucky, you might be left with something beautiful, or intriguing, something you want to return to, to consider from different angles, to see what you might find.

THE BLUE HOUR

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

FOR OUR READERS WHO DON'T KNOW, TO WHAT DOES THE BOOK'S TITLE REFER? WHAT, EXACTLY IS THE BLUE HOUR, AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO YOUR NOVEL?

The 'blue hour' refers to that time after the sun has set (or before it has risen), when the light in the sky takes on a blue hue; it's a transitional moment, no longer day but not quite night, that passes in minutes if you're somewhere close to the equator, but stretches out much longer the further north or south you go.

It's a time when the sea and the mountains turn a glorious dusky purple, a time when shapes and shadows morph into each other. A time when energy shifts, when animals start to move around, when predators go out to hunt.

This novel, which centres on the life of an artist, is all about perception: what we see or fail to see, how we interpret or misinterpret what is there in front of us. The blue hour refers to that dangerous time when we might mistake one thing for another – a wolf for a dog, perhaps, or an enemy for a friend.

DID YOU HAVE A REAL ISLAND IN MIND FOR THE BOOK'S ERIS ISLAND?

Eris is not based on any one island, but it could be. There are hundreds of islands off the Scottish coast, many of them are tidal, some are inhabited, some are completely wild. Some have been settled for thousands of years, some are peaceful idylls, while others have the bloodiest of histories. I was inspired by the places I have visited along Scotland's west coast, by the beauty of its landscape, the scarcity of people and the richness of its history. It is, in my opinion, precisely the sort of place a woman like my artist, Vanessa Chapman, would want to run to, the perfect spot for an artist to seek inspiration.

TELL US ABOUT THE BOOK'S CENTRAL CHARACTERS: VANESSA, GRACE, BECKER, AND JULIAN.

Vanessa Chapman is a painter, sculptor and ceramicist, an ambitious woman who is devoted to her art and who desires, perhaps above all things, the freedom to create, to live life on her own terms. She has intense friendships and passionate affairs; she is much loved, but like many ambitious women who fail to be pleasing, to do as they are told, she is subjected to vitriol and violence, too.

Grace Haswell is a doctor who lives on the mainland near Vanessa's island and who, after treating her for an injury, becomes her friend. They are a bit of an odd couple: Grace is nothing like Vanessa, she is awkward in company, she struggles to make friends. But she is also fiercely loyal, resourceful and brave, the pair of them form a (not entirely uncomplicated) bond which lasts for more than two decades.

James Becker, known always as Becker, is a curator and a Vanessa Chapman scholar. Through his mother, Becker discovered Vanessa's work when he was very young, and has felt deeply connected to her work ever since. Like Grace, Becker is something of an outsider: a working-class boy who excelled in his studies, he now finds himself living among aristocrats, with whom he has an ambivalent relationship.

Julian is Vanessa's estranged husband, who vanishes without a trace after visiting her on her island. His disappearance remains a mystery, and we see Julian only through the eyes of others, so our view of him is not clear. What emerges, however, is that he was attractive and charming, a good friend but a terrible husband –feckless, unfaithful and volatile. Despite his charms, he had a cruel streak, too, which both Vanessa and Grace experienced first-hand.

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT SOME OF THE BLUE HOUR'S KEY THEMES: FEMALE POWER, AGENCY, CREATIVITY?

I'm fascinated by how power can shift in relationships, sometimes in ways that are barely perceptible to the protagonists. These shifts go unnoticed, I think, because power derives from so many different sources, not all of them obvious. It might come from physical strength or money, but it might also come from class or professional standing, intellect or beauty. And then there is a kind of negative power, the power of resistance: to the will of others, to their agendas, to their interpretations of one's work or one's story.

Work is central to the lives of the women in the book. Both Vanessa and Grace define themselves in terms of what they do: to Grace, work gives her life meaning, it shapes her sense of self, it gives her status within her community. As a doctor she is valued in a way she does not feel in other spheres of her life. To Vanessa, creative work is essential; it is how she expresses herself and makes sense of her life.

AS A WRITER, HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR WORK HAS GROWN AND CHANGED SINCE YOUR RUNAWAY SUCCESS THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN?

This is very difficult to answer! My preoccupations remain the same, and I don't apologise for that – I am still fascinated by the fallibility of memory, the unreliability of the stories we tell about ourselves, and of course by the lives of women who resist the pressure to conform to societal norms. But I have tried, with each novel, to do something a little different to the last, to be ambitious, to sharpen my language, to write better sentences. That being said, when I find myself in difficulty, I find myself returning to those aspects of *The Girl on the Train* that I know readers loved: the intriguing, difficult character at its heart, the setting, at once familiar and oddly sinister, and the idea that all it takes is a minor disruption to throw a life into chaos.

PAULA HAWKINS

THE BLUE HOUR

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Becker serves as an intermediary between two conflicting interests — Grace's and those of Fairburn House. How would you describe his own interests and motivations?

2. The tide is a prominent symbol throughout the novel. What do you think it represents? What other symbols did you notice in the text?

3. Lady Emmeline insinuates that, because Helena left Sebastian for Becker, she must be untrustworthy and is likely a serial cheater. Julian had multiple affairs, always returning to infidelity even after reconciling with Vanessa. Do you believe in the mantra "Once a cheater, always a cheater?" How do you think perpetrators can redeem themselves after a betrayal, if it's possible?

4. How does class impact the relationships in *The Blue Hour*?

5. How does Vanessa's art practice reveal her emotional state at different times in her life?

6. *The Blue Hour* depicts many relationships with disparities in power — the most obvious being the abusive relationship between Marguerite and her late husband. Where are there other gradations of power between characters? How does power struggle manifest between characters in large and small ways?

7. How did Vanessa's diary entries impact your reading experience? Did you feel more or less connected to her than the other characters? Did you view her as a reliable narrator of her own life, or did you ever doubt her reporting of the facts?

8. How does the disappearance of Vanessa's husband change Vanessa and Grace's relationship?

9. How does Paula Hawkins build and maintain suspense in this novel? How does it compare to other murder mysteries you have read?

10. Were you surprised at the ending?

THE BLUE HOUR

CONNECT WITH PAULA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Hawkins worked as a journalist for fifteen years before she wrote her first novel. Born and brought up in Zimbabwe, Paula moved to London in 1989. She now splits her time between London and Edinburgh.

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