

Background... Q&A with Kathy Page... Reviews... Discussion Questions

The Story of My Face

Three interconnected stories are woven together in a gripping and suspenseful narrative. The central strand, set in 1969, the year men first walked on the moon, concerns Natalie, a neglected and needy teenager who seeks someone to latch on to and finds the ideal person in Barbara Hern, a kindly middle-aged woman desperate for a substitute daughter. Before long Natalie has insinuated herself into the life of the Hern family. Her presence disturbs the delicate checks and balances that have held them together over the years, and when she accompanies them on their annual religious holiday, a carefully kept secret is revealed with devastating consequences for all concerned - but especially for Natalie herself. Many years later, and now a successful academic, Natalie travels to a small village in northern Finland in an attempt to piece together the life of Tuomas Envall, the nineteenth century cleric who founded the strict protestant sect the Herns belonged to. She wants to hold him accountable for the damage done to her in the past, but soon discovers that she is not the only one who has a stake in Envall's life and that it is as impossible to lay blame as it is to escape from or rationalise her past. As the snow and ice slowly melt, Natalie re-creates the sequence of events which led to the accident which changed not just her face but her entire life; in doing so, she sets herself free.

Q. This novel has been called a psychological thriller, why?

A. The psychological part is easy enough. My main interest is in the psyches of my characters, and how the interaction between them all comes to generate what in the story is called an 'accident', though in some ways, I hope, it does seem inevitable. Barbara's need for her lost child and Natalie's need for a mother figure are a powerful combination; throw in the tensions in Barbara's marriage, Mark Hern's burgeoning sexuality and John Hern's need to cling to his faith, and it's pretty clear that something extraordinary will happen. I am very interested in how and why people make narratives of their lives, and that of course is what Natalie is engaged in: telling the story of her face. It's the story of an injury and in that sense symbolic as well as real; she could see herself as a victim but that would not be true, and she does not. Her story would be different, had she told it earlier, or later. The stories we tell ourselves about our lives can, I feel, affect what comes next... As for *thriller*, I think that is going a little too far! No one is murdered. But there is a fair amount of suspense and I do aim for a page-turning quality in what I write, so perhaps that is what they mean.

Q. Natalie is a compelling character: deeply flawed, yet understandable and attractive at the same time. Where does she come from?

A. Like many of my characters she seemed to arrive in my mind more or less fully herself and with a very strong physical presence. However, I have met a fair number of strange girls in my time and I'm sure parts of them are in Natalie somewhere. It was the combination of vulnerability and determination in her that fascinated me as I wrote the book – that, and the fact that her strengths are also her weaknesses.

An interesting post script to this is that I had just finished the first draft of the book I actually met Natalie: I was in an airport hotel with a small swimming pool and she walked out in her bathing suit; she had red hair, milky skin, freckles, exactly as she is in the book, and straightaway she joined herself onto our family group. It was rather uncanny; she even had the same habit of constantly asking questions. When we left, she was still there, and first thing in the morning she was there again. She was with her father, she said, but he never appeared.

Q. Natalie tells the story in the first person, and yet there is an almost uncanny quality to this sometimes. She seems also to know what is going on in other people's heads.

A. Yes. I stretched the point of view. As she puts together the story, she is looking back, and imagining how other people saw her.

Q. The Finnish landscape is a powerful element in the story. Why did you choose to set part of the novel in Finland?

A. I had worked there briefly and guessed it was the right kind of place for an extreme protestant sect to have evolved. When I visited again to research the book this hunch turned out to be correct. The winter landscape and the process of melting that takes place in spring were also very apt emotionally.

Q. Does the religious sect the HERNs belong to actually exist?

A. No, but many belief systems just as extraordinary do exist.

Q. Can you say a little about the themes of *The Story of My Face*?

A. The psychological development of the characters, their various needs and how they helped or hindered each other with them was my main interest. But as well as that, my family are all staunch atheists and perhaps because of that I have always been fascinated by religious belief. My feelings about it are complicated: on the one hand, I am heartened that in this materialistic, market-driven age some people still live a life of faith and principle. On the other hand, the members of most religions seem to be unable to resist the urge to compel others to think and act along the same lines and the result of this is a great deal of suffering and death. Imagery was certainly another theme: the Envallists ban all representational imagery from their lives, feeling it intrudes between them and direct experience of the world God made for them. Even though I'm an art lover and keep photographs of everything and everyone, I actually have some sympathy with them in that our culture is increasingly saturated with imagery and now, of course, we have something called virtual reality as well. We can even remake ourselves by means of cosmetic surgery, into the current image of feminine or masculine beauty... However Natalie's disfigurement means she cannot do this, and she chooses to keep her

damaged, asymmetrical face. These were interests of mine as I wrote. I don't have any pronouncements to make, but I like to explore....

Kathy Page was born in England but is currently living on the west coast of Canada with her husband and two children. She is the author of six novels, including *Alphabet* published in 2004 (a reader's guide is available), and she has also written for radio and TV. Her short fiction is widely anthologised and collected in *As In Music*, Methuen, 1992. She has held Writer's Residencies in the UK, Finland and Estonia, and currently teaches at Malaspina University College, British Columbia.

For more information about Kathy Page's life and work, visit her website www.KathyPage.info

The Story of My Face was long-listed for the Orange prize in 2002.

'One of the most compelling, unsettling novels I've read in ages, which should appeal to fans of classy thrillers and literary fiction alike.'
Sara Waters, *Independent On Sunday Books of the Year*.

'An elegantly compelling story of how a young girl's obsession forever changes the lives of those around her... a disciplined exploration of the complexity of human motivation and our need for redemption.' Lynne Van Luven, *Vancouver Sun*.

'Natalie's character is a triumph... It's rare to find a book that can not only move and thrill but also asks fundamental questions about religious belief and the nature of virtue and sin.'
Good Books Guide.

'Incredibly evocative and haunting... it keeps you reading, wanting to uncover both Natalie's past and that of Tuomas Envall. Clare Heal, *Sunday Express*

'..a most impressive achievement.'
Daily Telegraph.

'A compelling and unpredictable journey... beautifully written rolls on at a rapid pace and delivers a satisfying punch at the end.'
Rebecca Caldwell, *Globe and Mail*.

'A moving, absorbing story... Kathy Page writes beautifully.'
Helen Dunmore (author of *A Spell of Winter*)

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Suggestions for Discussion.

How do the three stories fit together?

One reviewer describes the novel as being about: 'the ultimate seduction: mothering'. Discuss.

Natalie changes her name at the end of the book, but her face remains the same. What else is different?