

**Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Catherine Webb (April 2021)**

Catherine Webb (also published under the names Claire North and Kate Griffin) was 16 years old when "Mirror Dreams," her first novel was published in 2002. Since then she has published about 20 novels. Her novel "The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August" won the John Campbell Memorial Award in 2015.

Eva Sable: What do you enjoy reading?

I love SF/Fantasy, but also enjoy crime, thrillers, spy books and historical. Recently I've been on a binge of non-fiction books. I studied History at university and have a real soft spot for books about scheming cardinals and geo-political shenanigans, but also anything which tells interesting stories about stuff I'd never normally come across in my daily life.

Chris DeSoto: Which authors, if any, have inspired you in your science fiction writing?

I adore Terry Pratchett, Roger Zelazny and Ursula Le Guin. How that translates to "inspired" is a harder thing to pin down, 'cos I never set out to write like anyone or for anything but my own pleasure. But it's impossible to love a book and not be influenced by it unconsciously, no matter what your genre or intentions. Equally I know very little about the actual lives of these writers. I adore and love the stories they create, and that's always felt like a gift enough.

Mike Saltzman: What kind of techniques (or mind-warping drugs) did you have to use to wrap your head around all the brain-bending time travel in Harry August?

I did have a spreadsheet to track how old anyone was in any given life and how they died, but that was about it. Though chronologically speaking the book is very timey-wimey, emotionally it follows a pretty straight line from A-B. If you approach it from that point of view, it's kinda linear. Which I realize makes me sound way less thrillingly literary than I could be, but hell, at least it's true.

Mike Saltzman: Also, have you ever seen the Denzel Washington movie Fallen, and did that influence your novel, Touch, at all.

I'm afraid I haven't!

Holly Wilson Miller: Where did you get the idea for the "Perfection" app that you wrote about in "The Sudden Appearance of Hope"?

I mean, let's not kid ourselves. Society regularly suuuuccckksss. Turn on the TV or internet and it's all gorgeous people with implausible lifestyles saying absurd things that sit somewhere between advice about lip gloss or invitations to partake in a Ponzi scheme. Even things that should be empowering and good – "body positivity" for example – are packaged up to us and sold as a very expensive bar of soap which will change our lives and transform us into the "real you". We shame men and women alike for their bodies, their poverty, their choices, their pasts, their dreams, their sexualities, their everythings. I think there's a trope in advertising that states the basic principle is to make people feel like their lives are "less" than what they should be, and then offer them the thing to buy that'll "fix" it. And it's profoundly damaging and cruel. The quest to be "perfect" is everywhere in our lives, and it is toxic.

Joshua Carrasco: I enjoyed your novel *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* and the way he moved through time. What are some of your favorite time travel stories?

Hum... well, I'm looking at my bookshelf and actually it's very starved of time travel stuff, though there is H.G. Wells there which I vaguely remember enjoying when I read it a few thousand years ago. I suspect that actually my answer is going to be TV/Film based rather than books, which is a bit embarrassing for a scribbler but again, at least it's true. I love *Dr Who*, and also thought the recent TV series of *12 Monkeys* was remarkably good, particularly once they got going and were a bit like "screw it, let's have fun and also collapse time and space". On a similar "let's have fun" scale, *Legends of Tomorrow* started badly and is now a joyous romp that fully gets that if you over-think time travel you end up with questions about god and free will and consequences and the value of human action that while philosophically interesting can be narratively a dead end/utter brain-melt unless you're careful – or you can *not* over-think it and just have a joyful romp. Both options are valid, but sometimes you gotta love a romp.

Tom Alaerts: Your great 84K is written in a very different style, like a stream of consciousness. Any reason for that approach?

Honestly, I'm a rubbish writer in as much as I'm never entirely sure why I do a thing until it's done, and 84K was not that different. But having had more 100,000 words of novel to think about it, the conclusion I eventually reached was that it is one of the more grounded in reality books I've ever written, and I wanted to link the style to the actual way we talk. No one talks like I'm writing now. When we talk it's full of – you know – and sentences just kinda... but we get it, yeah? We get how what I'm saying is like about, all that kinda stuff – so that's cool.

More to the point in all those places where we don't finish our sentences, and don't say quite what we mean, there's enormous room for trauma and pain. My Gran was a Holocaust survivor, and when you read about the Holocaust you find that the attitude of vast swathes of the German population was that everyone kinda knew, but no one said anything. Your Jewish neighbours disappear in the night? Well. Isn't that. Just so. Well. Or different example – someone dies. My experience of death is that people are either very mealy-mouthed or spout platitudes ("they've gone to a better place") or will move heaven and earth not to talk about it. "So. Anyway. Yes. Well, isn't the weather nice?"

The spaces where we don't say things – all the gaps we leave for trauma and pain and horror – are fascinating, and often more fluent and destructive than saying what we really mean.

Tom Alaerts: I remember that you did stage lighting as a job. Have you turned full time writer now?

I am still an LD! I mean, Covid destroyed the industry in the UK and it's gonna be a long, slow recovery, but yes, I still do lighting. I've long held the sneaking suspicion that just staying at home writing all day with the voices in your head isn't necessarily a healthy lifestyle choice, and Covid has definitely added fuel to that fire. Getting out of the house and doing something different is incredibly important to me. It doesn't just keep another part of the brain going, it's also full of people I like talking with and working with, and frankly, it's kinda a good way to help keep the ego in check. There's nothing quite like watching an artist have a meltdown on stage during rehearsals about something that really, really doesn't make a difference and is just the product of their own anxiety and dread, to really help you chill the crap out as a writer.

John Grayshaw: With “The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August” were you influenced by any other time loop stories like *Replay* or the movie *Groundhog Day*?

I haven't read *Replay*, but I've heard it's brilliant. I saw *Groundhog Day* as a kid, many moons ago, but kinda went out of my way to not watch it again when I realized what I was writing about. It probably was an influence in as much as everything in the world ever always is 'cos of the experience of being a human being living your life connected with other humans and existing within a culture – but it wasn't a conscious one!

John Grayshaw: How did you end up with two pseudonyms? I hope it doesn't cause you an identity crisis.

It was a publishing call. My first books were written as me – Catherine Webb – when I was pretty young, and were YA as a logical consequence. Then when I started paying council tax, I also found myself writing more grown-up books, and to make it clear that this was something different, my publisher suggested a pseudonym. Specifically a pseudonym that didn't have 'W' as it's defining letter, which always gets you put at the very bottom of the bookshelf next to movie tie-in books and soft vampire porn. Then when I wrote *Harry August* my publisher were again a bit like “you now appear to be writing literature” which was definitely news to me, and so another pseudonym happened to mark the change in style and tone from Kate Griffin to Claire North.

I don't think I have an identity crisis per se, in as much as it's all me. I did however spent several months thinking 'Claire' was spelt 'Clare', which was a bit embarrassing.

John Grayshaw: How did you get novels published at such a young age? And what was that like? Do you consider yourself to have been a child prodigy?

First easy answer – I don't consider myself to be a child prodigy. This is mostly because the cultural idea of “child prodigy” is often associated with either a) monumental trauma, which I didn't have 'cos my parents were very big on chilled-out hugs or b) with being supernaturally good at everything, which I absolutely am not. There's this whole cultural idea around prodigious-ness that can just be a bit othering for everyone involved. I definitely have a predilection for words, but what I also had was an incredibly safe and supportive environment where that was allowed to do its thing, and that meant everything.

I was an only child, and spent most of my childhood in the library. When there weren't any more books on the SF/Fantasy shelf to read, it made sense that I'd start writing to fill the gap. Again I got very lucky – both my parents had worked in some capacity as publishers/editors/writers in the past and were able to tell me the thing that's probably the best thing you can say to a 14-year-old with a novel, towit: “It's not bad, it's very unlikely to be published, if it is published you need to understand that this is a very unstable career and you still need to do your exams, here's the name of an agent who will at least give you the time of day but don't expect anything to come of it.” And that was kinda the beginning of that!

John Grayshaw: Since you've written fantasy and Science fiction. What is it you like about writing in each genre?

There's a reason they're bunched together – a space-age teleporter is no different from a wizard waving their hands around, so in that sense I never really felt much distinction between the two. I just write

what I like writing, and if someone tells me it's SF or Fantasy I'll take their word on it. What they have in common however is that you can ask enormous "what if" questions and then extrapolate them to their logical, glorious, hopefully fun conclusions. "What if" reincarnation, "what if" body swapping, "what if" urban magic, "what if" medical nanotech etc.. That's the great gift of either genre – they let you take a single seed and grow it to something extraordinary. What's possibly even better is that there's an expectation that you can do that, and have enormous fun and tell glorious tales of adventure while doing it.

John Grayshaw: When did you start to feel like you'd made it as a writer?

I mean, technically I feel this is the point where I cite the famous insecurity of all writers ever. Writers are *hilariously* insecure, even if that insecurity manifests as bluster and bombast. Unless you're J.K. Rowling or Stephen King you are probably still staring at your royalty cheque going "oh god, I'll never see one of these again!" This can often be a fallacy, but it's also a reflection of the reality that writers have no guarantees of anything. No guarantee another book will be published, or even written. That sales will hold. No control over their marketing, their reception. No clear ladder that you can climb, just fingers crossed and breath held. I have had a long career which began with people going "goodness a child writer!" followed many years later by one big spike of incredibly lucky success, for which I am incredibly grateful and which absolutely did change my career. But twenty years has mostly taught me not to take anything for granted. A gloriously well reviewed book may sell nothing. A bestseller may be your least favourite text that's universally panned by critics but has some really saucy scenes in it. There are no normal metrics for assessing whether you've "made it" or not – just a loose series of cobbled-together guesses on which you try to build your self-worth.

John Grayshaw: Were you surprised by the success of the First Fifteen Lives of Harry August?

I think in keeping with the answer above, I'm surprised by any and all success. It's a very implausible thing. What I mostly am though, is grateful.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research do you do for your novels?

Depends on the book. Some like *Touch* I can sorta wing as I go – get to the end of a chapter and be like "ah, they are there now, where are they going next?" and do the research from that point. The trick is not to get so muddled down in it that it stops you writing altogether. Others, like *William Abbey*, I'll do more background research on before I start just to make sure I'm happy that the time period works for the story I'm gonna tell. But I'm not an over-researcher. I have enough broad but thin knowledge to know how to find answers to questions as they arise, and am generally ok at double-checking my own assumptions if I think I'm about to put in an error. A great deal of conveying a time or a place is less about "that is the Church of St. Anne built in 1707" and more about the local texture and flavor of the ice cream and the colour of the street lamps. You don't need to learn everything about 1960s Austrian politics to write a scene in Cold War Vienna – you just need to ask some very tightly focused questions to make the moment breathe.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of your favorite current science fiction writers? And why?

Adrian Tchaikovsky – I've followed Adrian's works for years, 'cos he's been just absurdly prolific, and he's always brilliant. But *Children of Time* and *Children of Ruin* blew my tiny, tiny mind.

N.K. Jemisin – I really enjoyed *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, but thought *the Broken Earth* was especially brilliant. Although I guess you could argue those are fantasy? But hell, they're great.

Arkady Martine – I enjoyed *a Memory Called Empire*, and thought it did really nice things in a similar vein to Iain M. Banks in terms of world building, but through a very personal, tight lens.

Yoko Ogawa – I know technically she's sold as 'literature' but *Memory Police* is absolutely SF/Fantasy and thoroughly brilliant.

John Grayshaw: What science fiction writers are you friends with? Any fun stories about these relationships?

I got a few mates in the business, but to be honest, I'm not that involved in the community. And if I were, I kinda figure that since any stories would necessarily involve my friends, colleagues and peers, I'd be best off honouring them by respecting their privacy and keeping schtum.

John Grayshaw: Do you enjoy going to science fiction conventions? Have any fun stories from going to them? Or have you gotten any interesting reader feedback from your works in general?

I like going places and seeing people – being asked to go anywhere is always an adventure, and it's a particular honour to then be asked to talk to people as if what I have to say is worth listening to! Meeting readers is always the best part, not least 'cos I've been extraordinarily lucky in generally having readers who spend their time generously saying nice stuff to me, rather than the dreaded "I have feedback here's what you should change" conversation – which, however kindly meant, no writer ever actually wants. But I can also find conventions often a bit overwhelming. As a teetotal woman with a brain that translates noise into colour, the loud, often quite beer-tastic vibe, while a joy to watch, can be a bit jarring.

John Grayshaw: Which one of your works is your personal favorite and why?

The latest book is usually the favourite, 'cos it's the one that most accurately reflects who I am right now! However, since that's been my (honest) answer for more than 20 years, lemme re-phrase and say that I personally feel *the Gameshouse* could do with more love. *The Gameshouse* is a barrel of fun. Please go buy a copy for yourself, your colleagues, your loved ones and that nice stranger you met in the street.

John Grayshaw: Are there any TV or movie deals in the works for any of your novels or stories?

I believe there's currently options on *A Madness of Angels*, *The First Fifteen Lives*, *Touch*, *The Sudden Appearance of Hope*, *84K* and *the Pursuit of William Abbey*. Apologies to producers if I've missed any!

Tom Alaerts: How is the movie adaptation coming along, are you closely involved?

I have no idea how 5/6 movie adaptations are going, because it's not really my job to know. Though producers are often very generous in trying to keep you informed and say nice things about your brilliance, being a novel writer doesn't mean you know piss about being a screenwriter. These are different mediums that require different skills, and I am absolutely fine keeping my head down and letting qualified professionals do their thing. I feel very privileged in being able to say that I trust everyone involved to have much, much better ideas than I would have, and do a better job than I ever could.

There is one adaptation where I know a bit more, and it's definitely not the one you'd expect, and I am again bound to silence. Sorry!

John Grayshaw: What are some of your hobbies other than writing?

I'm a professional lighting designer, working on music gigs. (I used to work primarily in theatre, but it's a pretty abusive industry.) I also learn a martial art called escrima, and teach women's self-defense. I also do some campaigning on environmentalism, and keep on running for local council for the Green Party. I'm also trying to bring my German up to scratch, as I recently became a German citizen, but honestly I've spent more time learning Mandarin and find it a bit easier. German has a lot of grammar, and I'm unbelievably dreadful at learning linguistic rules. I also do a bit of running, though I can't see myself doing much more than a half marathon any time soon 'cos blimey the legs are feeling it.

John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick to?

Not really. During Covid I've had a bit more of a routine simply because there wasn't much else to do, but I've written books in op boxes in theatres and on trains and in lighting gantries. I generally get most scribbling done in a morning, but when I'm into it I can happily pootle along all day. I can do days of back-to-back scribbling or go weeks without glancing at a page, depending on what is going on in life.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

I'm currently half way through book two of a three-book trilogy, about which I don't think I'm yet allowed to say anything, sorry! I'm also doing a bit of TV writing about which I'm absolutely not allowed to say anything. Apologies.

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?

1. Get vaccinated. (Please get your vaccines, people!)
2. Go back to lighting gigs, grateful and relieved that I am paid for the joy and privilege of listening to music while playing with light.
3. Write lots, but not so much that I forget to feed myself properly or go for runs or see my loved ones on the regular.
4. Keep campaigning for a sustainable, equitable solution to climate change. (Please vote!)
5. When it is safe to do so and vaccines have reached enough people... go on an adventure. I'm not even sure where to. Frankly getting on a local bus to somewhere outside a five-mile radius around the flat would do at this stage. My goodness it's been a long pandemic.