

Gretel and the Dark

A Q&A with Eliza Granville

What was the original inspiration for *Gretel and the Dark*?

Quite out of the blue, my imagination served up an image of a displaced and naked young girl. I can't explain this – and am not sure I want to. This is the third piece of writing such a girl has sparked (the others are a novella, *Snatchling*, and a short story). This particular version had a barcode on her arm. I intended to use it for a work of science fiction. However, when I substituted the tattoo, everything else fell into place.

How did you set about researching your novel? Have you ever visited any of the places referenced in the novel and how did this affect the writing process?

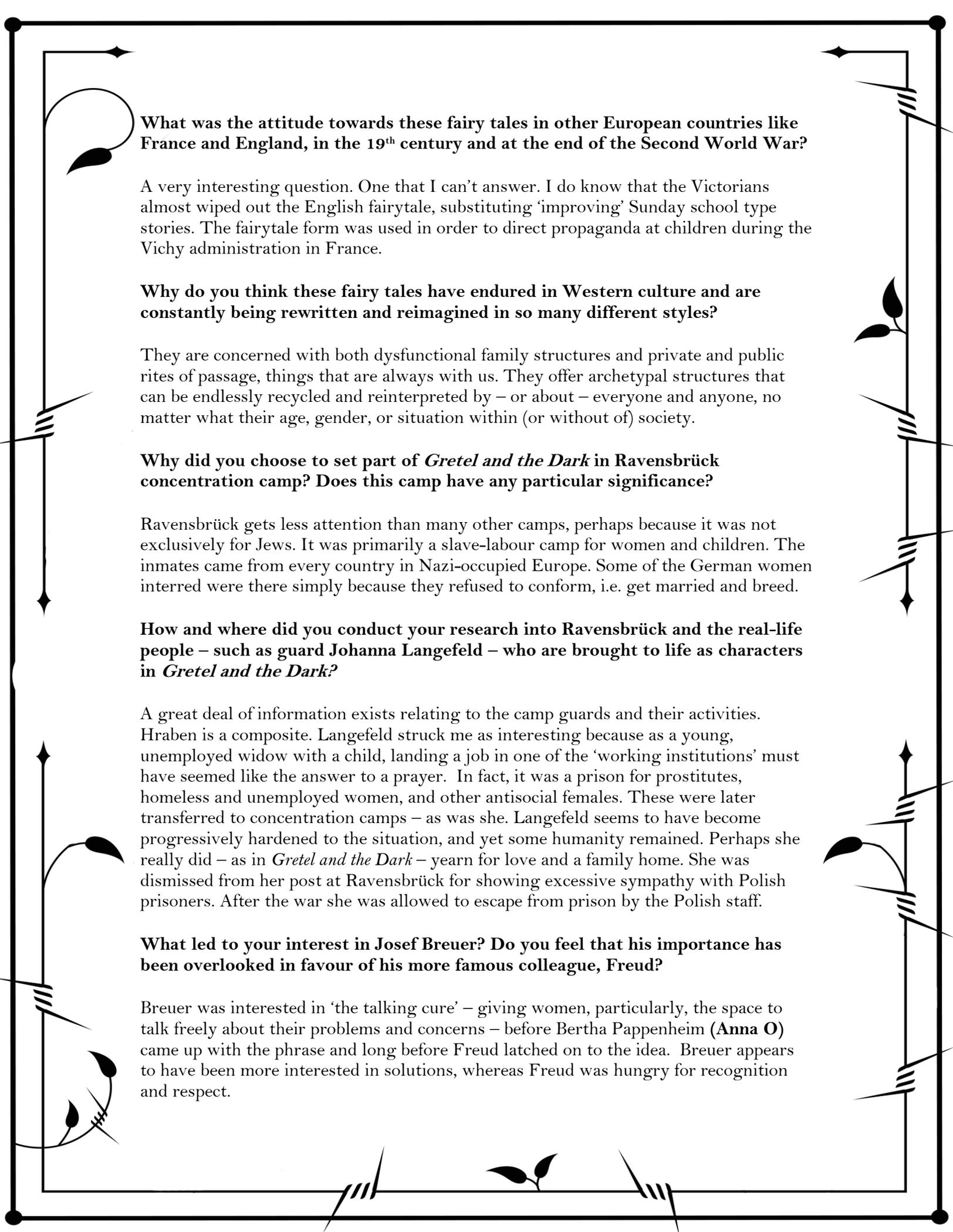
I first visited Vienna and parts of Germany in the 1960s and early 1970s. The mood then was very different to that of the 21st century and I suspect very different to 1899 and the 1940s. Much of the work on Vienna had to be done through research of old maps. Some of the research on the Nazi era was very gruelling.

How did you come to be interested in Grimms' Fairy Tales and in what context did you begin researching them?

I have always been interested in all fairy tales, and in folk lore. My interest deepened when I realised that each of my children had a favourite tale – which they insisted on hearing repeatedly – and that in many cases the story revealed something of their concerns or preoccupations. The beginnings of serious research into fairy tales (not exclusively those of the Grimm brothers) began when I was an undergraduate at Dartington College.

How did the interpretation of Grimms' fairy tales and their role in German culture change between the Grimm brothers' lifetime and the years of the Third Reich?

I believe that emphasis was increasingly laid on traits such as stringent discipline, obedience, authoritarianism, violence and cruelty, things that already existed in the stories but were, in situ, partially tempered by other factors. The German writer Günther Birkenfeld considered that anyone examining the tales would understand how the German people were able to bring themselves to perpetrate the atrocities of the camps. The Allied commanders banned the book in schools after the war, arguing that they had found the roots of Nazism in the Grimms' world.



What was the attitude towards these fairy tales in other European countries like France and England, in the 19th century and at the end of the Second World War?

A very interesting question. One that I can't answer. I do know that the Victorians almost wiped out the English fairytale, substituting 'improving' Sunday school type stories. The fairytale form was used in order to direct propaganda at children during the Vichy administration in France.

Why do you think these fairy tales have endured in Western culture and are constantly being rewritten and reimagined in so many different styles?

They are concerned with both dysfunctional family structures and private and public rites of passage, things that are always with us. They offer archetypal structures that can be endlessly recycled and reinterpreted by – or about – everyone and anyone, no matter what their age, gender, or situation within (or without of) society.

Why did you choose to set part of *Gretel and the Dark* in Ravensbrück concentration camp? Does this camp have any particular significance?

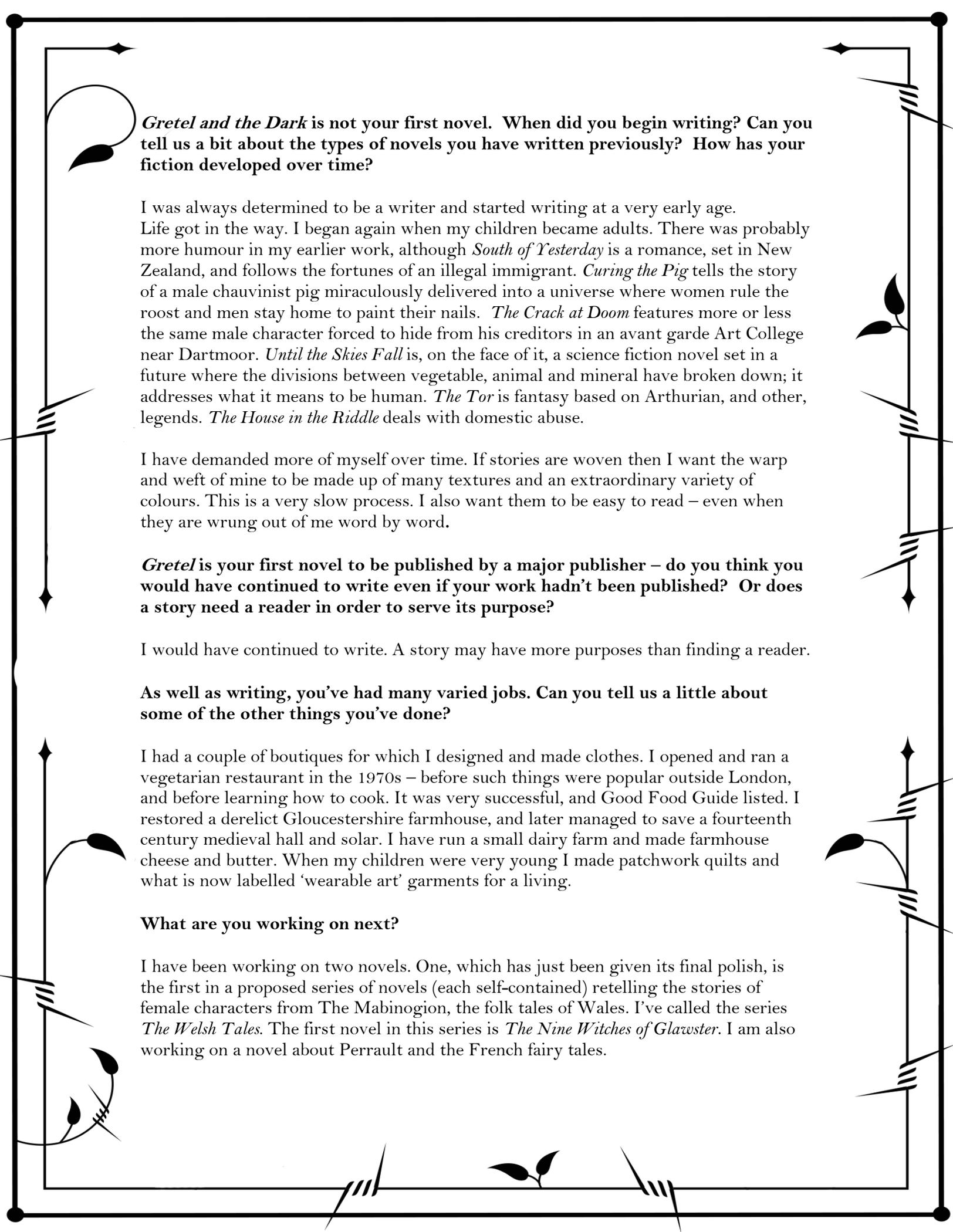
Ravensbrück gets less attention than many other camps, perhaps because it was not exclusively for Jews. It was primarily a slave-labour camp for women and children. The inmates came from every country in Nazi-occupied Europe. Some of the German women interred were there simply because they refused to conform, i.e. get married and breed.

How and where did you conduct your research into Ravensbrück and the real-life people – such as guard Johanna Langefeld – who are brought to life as characters in *Gretel and the Dark*?

A great deal of information exists relating to the camp guards and their activities. Hraben is a composite. Langefeld struck me as interesting because as a young, unemployed widow with a child, landing a job in one of the 'working institutions' must have seemed like the answer to a prayer. In fact, it was a prison for prostitutes, homeless and unemployed women, and other antisocial females. These were later transferred to concentration camps – as was she. Langefeld seems to have become progressively hardened to the situation, and yet some humanity remained. Perhaps she really did – as in *Gretel and the Dark* – yearn for love and a family home. She was dismissed from her post at Ravensbrück for showing excessive sympathy with Polish prisoners. After the war she was allowed to escape from prison by the Polish staff.

What led to your interest in Josef Breuer? Do you feel that his importance has been overlooked in favour of his more famous colleague, Freud?

Breuer was interested in 'the talking cure' – giving women, particularly, the space to talk freely about their problems and concerns – before Bertha Pappenheim (**Anna O**) came up with the phrase and long before Freud latched on to the idea. Breuer appears to have been more interested in solutions, whereas Freud was hungry for recognition and respect.



***Gretel and the Dark* is not your first novel. When did you begin writing? Can you tell us a bit about the types of novels you have written previously? How has your fiction developed over time?**

I was always determined to be a writer and started writing at a very early age. Life got in the way. I began again when my children became adults. There was probably more humour in my earlier work, although *South of Yesterday* is a romance, set in New Zealand, and follows the fortunes of an illegal immigrant. *Curing the Pig* tells the story of a male chauvinist pig miraculously delivered into a universe where women rule the roost and men stay home to paint their nails. *The Crack at Doom* features more or less the same male character forced to hide from his creditors in an avant garde Art College near Dartmoor. *Until the Skies Fall* is, on the face of it, a science fiction novel set in a future where the divisions between vegetable, animal and mineral have broken down; it addresses what it means to be human. *The Tor* is fantasy based on Arthurian, and other, legends. *The House in the Riddle* deals with domestic abuse.

I have demanded more of myself over time. If stories are woven then I want the warp and weft of mine to be made up of many textures and an extraordinary variety of colours. This is a very slow process. I also want them to be easy to read – even when they are wrung out of me word by word.

***Gretel* is your first novel to be published by a major publisher – do you think you would have continued to write even if your work hadn't been published? Or does a story need a reader in order to serve its purpose?**

I would have continued to write. A story may have more purposes than finding a reader.

As well as writing, you've had many varied jobs. Can you tell us a little about some of the other things you've done?

I had a couple of boutiques for which I designed and made clothes. I opened and ran a vegetarian restaurant in the 1970s – before such things were popular outside London, and before learning how to cook. It was very successful, and Good Food Guide listed. I restored a derelict Gloucestershire farmhouse, and later managed to save a fourteenth century medieval hall and solar. I have run a small dairy farm and made farmhouse cheese and butter. When my children were very young I made patchwork quilts and what is now labelled 'wearable art' garments for a living.

What are you working on next?

I have been working on two novels. One, which has just been given its final polish, is the first in a proposed series of novels (each self-contained) retelling the stories of female characters from The Mabinogion, the folk tales of Wales. I've called the series *The Welsh Tales*. The first novel in this series is *The Nine Witches of Glawster*. I am also working on a novel about Perrault and the French fairy tales.