

# GALE FORCE

PATRICK GALE'S NEW NOVEL, *A PLACE CALLED WINTER*, HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS A CROSS BETWEEN MAURICE AND BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN. IT IS A NOVEL OF SECRETS, SEXUALITY AND, ULTIMATELY, OF GREAT LOVE. PRIDE LIFE'S **ULI LENART** MET UP WITH PATRICK TO FIND OUT MORE.

The genesis of the novel's plot originates in a mystery from the author's own family history – a great-grandfather apparently banished from a life of elegant ease to a harsh new one as a Canadian homesteader in 1907.

**PRIDE LIFE:** It's a complete pleasure to be talking with you and it's an appropriately freezing London day to be discussing a book called *A Place Called Winter*. I believe this is your sixteenth novel?

**PATRICK GALE:** (Laughing) Um, I think so... I'm never sure quite how many I've written, because I'm not quite sure how many of them count, because of *Caesar's Wife* which is officially listed but it is kind of a novella really, but it's very precious to say is it a novel or a novella, or what is it? It's sixteen-ish.

**PL:** *A Place Called Winter*: I genuinely loved it and I think your readers are going to adore it. It's a really special, wonderful story.

**PG:** I'm hoping it will reconnect me with my gay readership.

**PL:** I suspect it will certainly do that, and appeal beyond the bounds of your gay readership, too.  
**PG:** Well, women are loving it which pleased me because on one level, in a way, it is a novel about fleeing from women; getting to a place where there were hardly any women at all. But the way I ended up writing it, it's sort of about a man discovering himself at the hands of women. A succession of women through the book who, in their different ways, are all more or less kind and encourage him to be himself. And of course one of them isn't entirely a woman, but we can talk more about that later.

**PL:** And that central character is man called Harry Cane, a sensitive, good-hearted man who is really the focus of the book... and this is a real historical person.

**PG:** The bare bones of him and his story are true. Yes, my great-grandfather, my mother's grandfather. Basically everything that happens in the book until he goes to Canada is true, apart from the gay stuff, which I've made up. Because what I wanted to do was honour the truth, honour all the facts as I know them but then

come up with a story that would make them emotionally coherent. Because I didn't quite buy the story I was given as I was growing up, and I kept thinking, well, to leave your wife and child back then was a big deal. It must have been, either she did something tremendous to drive him away... and if that were the case why didn't he just divorce her? Or that he had done something that meant he had to leave the country. And I decided it was probably that. And so what I've done is to come up with this gay story, this big gay love story, and yet, if you look very closely around the edges of it I've laid the paper trail and I've laid the clues to make it still feasible that way-away in England his little girl will grow up with no idea and will never know.



**PL:** And there is a photograph of the real Harry Cane on your website.

**PG:** All I had to really go by, visually, were these two photographs, one of him as this really terribly handsome young man looking a bit like the young Aidan Quinn, and then this picture from 1953 where he is this prematurely shattered old guy. I leave the novel with an open ending. I don't want to give away too much for your readers, but the possibility of happiness is there, of a secret happiness is there.

**PL:** And focusing on the novel, the book is structured beautifully, with sections refracting back on each other. But essentially it opens in terms of the start of the narrative at the tail-end of the Victorian period.

**PG:** Well, It opens in E.M. Forster-land.

**PL:** Exactly, we are talking after the Cleveland Street scandal period, we are talking post-trial of Oscar Wilde...

**PG:** Which is still within living memory, yes...

**PL:** Still in living memory and implicit in the atmosphere around. And I suppose the sort of issues you are dealing with in this period are issues around intimacy and masculinity, really.

**PG:** Yes, masculinity and also Harry in real life, and in the book, was raised a gentleman... he never works. He wasn't raised to work. He was raised to be leisured. It's a completely alien idea

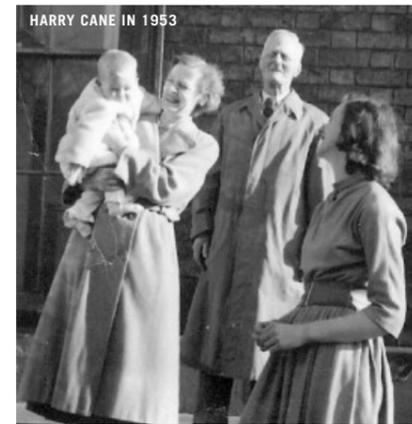
to us now. And one of the things that struck me when I got to think about it was just how gendered Edwardian society still was. So it was quite possible for a young bachelor with money to really never encounter women, at all, not in any meaningful social sense. So I thought, by the same token, it would be quite possible for a fairly innocent young man in that position to be a very late developer in terms of who he was, if he gay, but of course there was no word for that then. He could quite believably stumble into marriage. Because he would just be manipulated by more worldly, more needy people around him.

**PL:** And there is also this sense of fear and the fear of obscenity and the social and emotional alienation that would be experienced by people discovered to be having illegal same-sex sexual relationships. It's palpable in the book, that fear and anxiety.

**PG:** The fear is terrific and on one level the book is a bit of a thriller because of quite the scariest villain I've ever written in it. But the thing, the real challenge to me was to try to inhabit the mind of a man who we would call gay but for whom there are no signposts; there is no gay culture, there is no gay literature, there is nothing he can look at or read that will give him a mirror to himself. So he doesn't have this incredible emotional vocabulary that we all get now so readily off the television and from newspapers. I'm not saying that growing up gay is that much easier now, but it is a lot easier now than in was in the 1900s. I think partly because we now have this incredible bombardment of different kinds of sexual imagery from a very early age. So when I was growing up in the 60s I knew I was different, it took me quite a while to work out that I was gay, but I knew enough to know that I wasn't going to get married, I knew that I kind of wanted to marry the prince... but I think in the 1900s you didn't even have that. It just wasn't in the ether. Very strange. And added to which there was this tremendously homosocial culture so, rather like an extension of the boarding school ethos, I think a lot of young men were having sex with each other without identifying as being in any way alternative. There were just waiting, a bit like in Northern African societies today. Talk about the past being a foreign country, I think pre-World War I England was really alien to our way of thinking now.

**PL:** In the novel we have repression, Edwardian England, old models of masculinity and femininity and then we also have this flip with the possibilities of the New World and maybe a preview of where libertarianism and ownership of personal identity can go.

**PG:** And for woman as much as for gay men. I was very keen to have a version of the Shavian new woman in there. So the last of the heroines in the book is modelled on a lot of the diaries and letters I read. I wanted to reflect something of the parallel development that was going on for women's rights in this period, without being too blatant about it, so I didn't want to have a suffragette tied to a railings. And taking this story sort of handed it to me on a plate because of course the Canadian prairies food-offer did give these opportunities to women who were brave enough to basically turn their backs on the



world of drawing rooms and go out there and be a pioneer. Not many women did it, and most of the ones who did were married, but I did find accounts of "impatient" women, clever gentlewomen who were stifled back in their life in Toronto or New York who did jump at the opportunities to get out there and run a little wild, and it was dangerous. And parallel to that I wanted to bring in the promise, I suppose, of psychiatric development and medical development happening at this period too, largely kick-started by Freud on the one hand and Edward Carpenter's writing on the other. So, in the way, the book, instead of being depressingly framed in the 1950s, is framed somewhat ambiguously in the totally made-up proto-psychiatric community of — and they are not named as such — but as "inverts" I suppose they be called — to have a safe haven. And yet, is it safe? Because in a way they are all guinea pigs, they are being watched and experimented on.

**PL:** And we touched on a character we encounter in this community earlier, when we were talking about women in the book. Tell us about Ursula.

**PG:** Among the many horrors the English visited upon the Cree and the other tribes whose lands we appropriated was the enforced Christianisation of their children in boarding schools, some of which, shockingly, were still running as late as the 1970s. As in many North American tribes, the Cree recognised a third sex — variously referred to in English as two-spirits, two-flames or two-souls — a thing that was anathema to the colonising Christians, especially once their wives joined them out there. My twin natured heroine/ hero Ursula, or Little Bear, was a member of this select group, recognised in boyhood and raised as a girl with special status as a shaman-in-training. I wanted to show the way we had brutally stripped such people of their social standing and their recognised sexuality and to explore the ways in which such a person might help a similarly brutalised homosexual from England reach a state of self-recognition, even acceptance. I made Ursula's story desperately sad in recognition of the fact that so many people like her ended up either committing suicide or being locked away in psychiatric wards.

**PL:** And her story speaks of other forces too.

**PG:** Yes, the period I'm writing about coincides with the most monstrous acts of colonial violence. Not just in that we took away the land

from the Cree and the other tribes there, but on this very specific two-spirits level we took these boys, they were usually boys — sometimes they were women — who had tremendous status and we robbed them of all their faith, we forced them to live as one gender, we took away all their power and their visions and we treated them like outcasts. It was difficult because all my Canadian friends who read the first draft of the book said, "It's not racist enough, these characters are too polite, nobody is racist enough... Canada is, and was, profoundly racist", so going through it again I wanted to find a way of tackling the race thing head on, without being too obvious about it and this seemed to be a very neat way of doing it because Ursula is a Cree, she's already an outcast among these white people but then she's a two-souls, so she's doubly — people would say doubly-blessed — but from the Christian, Western view-point she's doubly an outcast.

**PL:** Another element in the book is sibling relationships, like Harry's relationship growing up with his brother. Family always seems to be a strong theme with you, so although *A Place Called Winter* in one sense is a departure for you as a historical novel partly based in a foreign geography, there is this familiar Patrick Gale territory running through the book.

**PG:** Yes, I think my loyal fans won't find that a great a departure, because on one level it is so much about family relationships. I love the idea, which is all true, of these two boys who are all in all to each other, in that they have no other family, marrying into this monster family, this huge family who were all my great-great-aunts and uncles, and how the dynamic of that would affect them. That on one level they would be supported by marrying into this big family and on another level would be destroyed by it. And one of the things I did make up, I couldn't resist, was in some ways the worst betrayal in Harry's life, is the point where his brother, who he has completely adored and supported, his brother rejects him in favour of his wife because he has heard a rumour, and the wife believes the rumour to be true about Harry's sex life. Something like that has never happened to me and I found it quite hard to write, I just kept thinking, God how would you cope?

**PL:** There is a lot of beautifully calibrated dramatic tension in the book.

**PG:** It's a three hanky novel. Just this last week I was recording the audio book of it and I had to keep stopping to blow my nose.

**PL:** It's incredibly affecting. And in this novel there is yet another of your characters that I've fallen utterly in love with — I tend to fall in love with your brooding male characters — and that's Paul.

**PG:** Well, he's quite hot, isn't he?

**PL:** He's very hot.

**PG:** The old trick is you make them hot and not that happy to speak much.

**PL:** (laughing) Well, there we go. Yes there is this sort of E.M. Forster meets Brokeback Mountain allusion that you've made, with affection, but there a lot more to the book than that.

*"It's a three hanky novel. Just this last week I was recording the audio book of it and I had to keep stopping to blow my nose"*

**PG:** Yes, there's not actually a lumberjack in the book. There's plenty of flannel shirts and long-johns.

**PL:** Well, thank goodness for that. The book is coming out towards the end of March.

**PG:** 26 March.

**PL:** And you are doing some events to support it.

**PG:** Yes in London I'll be doing an event at King's Place, being interviewed by the lovely Zeb Soanes, who people will know is the man who reads the news on Radio 4. And I'm also doing an event curated by the wonderful gay novelist Rupert Smith who is now doing Books in the Attic, these talks at the Hackney Picture House. I'm also going to be at Foyles and I'm going to be at the Dulwich bookshop.

**PL:** Patrick, I think we are going to round it off there. Thank you.

**PG:** Thank you.

*A Place called Winter is published in hardback by Tinder Press on 26 March. Patrick Gale is reading at King's Place in London on Monday 30 March, tickets available through [kingsplace.co.uk](http://kingsplace.co.uk). For more information go to: [galewarning.org](http://galewarning.org)*

