



**SPREAD
THE WORD**



2017 Shortlisted:

An extract from *Singing to
Seals*
by
Gillian Haigh

About the author page 25

Copyright © 2017 Gillian Haigh

All rights reserved

Copying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests from the publisher & author, write to:

hello@spreadtheword.org.uk

www.spreadtheword.org.uk

Daddy is at his office but Walther is here. I like Walther. He used to be a prisoner of war in the olden days. I like his voice. He helps daddy with the chickens. Sometimes they make cement and do work on the roof. I'm not allowed on the roof but Walther lets me play with the cement.

Mummy's hands pull at each other while she cries and eats her cigarettes.

I am digging in the flower bed.

My finger hurts. There's blood coming out of it. I show it to Walther and he calls for Daddy.

We are going to the hospital in the car. The doctor puts the end of my finger back on and I have to wear a black thing over it.

Mummy is happy today because Paulie has come back from school. He wants to play his records on the gramophone. 'When are we getting electricity in this dump?' He says.

'God knows,' says Mummy.

After Paulie's finished winding up the gramophone he puts a scrunched up page from the newspaper inside the round thing so it won't be too loud.

Paulie and I are dancing to the music. I want it to be louder so I pull the newspaper out of the round thing.

I am a clumsy oaf. Bill Haley is scratched and Paulie is shouting.

Mummy says a nasty lady lived in our house before us. She pushed her little girl down the stairs. Then she died of suicide in the pantry.

It is night time and I am in bed. The suicide lady has come. She is shaking her finger at me. She is wearing an orange blanket round her shoulders and her fingers are thin.

I want a biscuit so I scream and bite the carpet. After a while Daddy comes in my bedroom then goes away and comes back with a biscuit.

We are all having breakfast. Mummy is talking to Paulie. She rubs her tummy. 'I wonder if this one will be born inside a caul.'

'What's a caul?' I ask.

'Sometimes babies are born in a bag. It's a sign of witch-craft. You can sell the bags to sailors so they will never drown,' says Mummy.

'Was I born in one?' I say.

'Yes,' says Mummy.

'Did you sell it to a sailor?'

Mummy doesn't answer.

I hear the train coming and run up to my bedroom, to wave at it. Paulie says our train works with steam. Some trains work with electricity but this one works with steam. Lights work with paraffin and the gramophone works with the windy thing.

I lean on the window but it isn't there. I am flying. There's the sky. And the trees. And the floor. When I land on the floor the birds go quiet.

Daddy has come home from his office to take me to hospital again. The doctor makes me lie down and a lady puts a heavy blanket on me. I don't like it.

'You have to keep it on,' says the lady. 'You are having an X-ray.'

'It's so you'll be able to have babies,' Mummy says. Her hands are pulling at each other.

I don't want any babies but I let the lady put the blanket back on me.

'Nothing broken,' says the doctor. 'Amazing after falling from an upstairs window onto concrete. You must have bounced. I think you are accident prone, young lady,' he says looking at my finger which is better now, then looking at Mummy and Daddy.

There's a box in the corner with voices in it.

'Are there people inside there?' I ask.

Mummy puffs on her cigarette. 'Oh do stop asking stupid questions,' she says. 'It's a wireless.'

It isn't; I can see a wire coming out of it.

Mummy and Daddy are shouting at each other and eating their cigarettes. Mummy's hands are wriggling about. It is night time but she has gone in the garden. She is crying.

An extract from *Singing to Seals* Gillian Haigh

'I can't bear it any more,' says Mummy. 'Living here is like being in solitary confinement. There's nobody to talk to. Nobody at all. I'm going to throw myself under the train,' she says. She starts to walk away, across the field.

'You can't,' I shout. 'It doesn't come until morning.'

Daddy picks me up and shows me all the stars. Each one has a name.

The sky lights up and there's a bang. 'What's that?'

'A storm,' says Daddy.

'Why?'

'It's electricity,' says Daddy.

'Can we get some for Paulie's gramophone?'

Daddy is laughing.

Now he's crying.

Mummy's typewriter is clacking. Daddy is at work. Mummy's tummy is fat because there is a baby inside. I don't know how it got in there.

'Did you eat the baby?' I ask.

'No.'

'How did it get in there?'

'It's complicated.'

'Why?'

'It happens when you get married.'

'Why?'

Mummy goes quiet for a while. Then she says: 'When you get married the vicar puts a seed in your widler and then a baby grows.'

'Can I have a seed in my widler?'

'Not until you grow up.'

'Why?'

'You have to get married first.'

'Why?'

Mummy's crying and doesn't answer.

The baby has come out. His name is David and he drinks bosom milk. Mummy won't let me have any. She gives me a biscuit and tells me to leave her in peace.

I stand in the hall, looking through the window. Then I go outside to play with the funny rabbits. It is raining and my biscuit is getting wet.

A lady has come from France to help Mummy with the baby. Her name is Au Pair. She's crying.

Au Pair's gone away.

It is getting dark so Mummy puts David in the basket and lights the paraffin.

She's going outside to get some water out of the well.

An extract from *Singing to Seals* Gillian Haigh

'Don't touch that mouse-trap,' she shouts.

I can hear Daddy's car so I run into the garden and he picks me up. He smells nice.
Like smoke.

'Why won't the vicar put seeds in children's widlers?' I say.

'What?' He says.

'I want a seed in my widler.'

Daddy doesn't reply.

They are shouting again.

Daddy is cross because I've got ideas in my head.

Mummy is cross about electricity and water, coal and paraffin, chickens and foxes,
mice and money and me.

Now she is shouting about somebody who is attacking her. It is because of Daddy's
expenses. I don't know what expenses are. I don't know what attacking is either.

'What's attacking?' I ask.

'Persecuting,' says Mummy very shoutily.

'What's expenses?'

'Bloody money,' says Mummy.

Mummy's got another baby in her tummy. The vicar must have come and put it
there when I was outside in the field, playing with the funny rabbits.

Daddy wakes me up in the night. At first I'm scared because I think it's the suicide lady. But it's not her.

Daddy says: 'Come and see your new little brother, Gillian.'

He carries me into his and Mummy's bedroom and there is a new baby there, in the basket.

He has a nice scratchy little voice. Now there are five people in our family, not counting Walther.

Paulie isn't here because he's back at school being beaten. Once he ran away and got sacked. I think that means they put him in a sack. After that he had to go to a different school to get beaten. I don't know why Mummy and Daddy keep making him go. Perhaps it's the law.

We have moved to a new house.

'Thank God,' says Mummy as she touches a clicky thing on the wall and the paraffin comes on by itself. The light smells different in this house.

There is a boy called Gareth living next door and he's got a tricycle. I want one too but we can't afford it.

Daddy has come back from work. We have had our supper and now we are all in the car, going to the beach.

It is dark. We are standing on the rocks by the sea so Mummy can sing to the seals. She has a loud voice. I can't see any seals though. When Mummy sings, smoke comes out of her mouth. She says the seals will come to her if she keeps singing.

Daddy is holding hands with David and Jeremy to make sure they don't fall in the sea. I'm wearing my wellingtons and mashintock but I am still cold. It is raining.

A lady comes and says: 'Nasty weather.' Then: 'Oh what sweet children. How old are they?'

'Five, three and one,' says Daddy. He has to shout because the wind is loud and the waves are big.

'Five, three and one,' says the woman. 'Well, there's lovely.' She looks at Mummy for a minute. Mummy is still singing so doesn't answer. Her hair is blowing about and the wind is making a whiny noise. She is singing the speed-bonny-boat song.

'Shall we go home now Joan?' Says Daddy. The wind blows his cigarette out of his mouth.

'No, they'll come in a minute,' says Mummy. She tucks her scarf into the front of her coat. 'They are drawn to music. They can't resist. They'll start singing back to me soon. Then they'll come and sit on the rocks.'

I listen but I can't hear any singing seals. Only the wind and the waves.

The lady puts up her umbrella. It turns inside out and the lady says, 'Oh bother,' then goes away.

The seals don't come and Mummy looks sad. My chest hurts. I put my arms round her knees. I wish the seals would come and make her happy.

There are mice under the beds. David has been trying to catch one in his guitar. He has put cheese in the hole to make one go in there but it hasn't worked. We can't

use mouse traps any more because Jeremy got his hand stuck in one. Mummy told him it would snap his fingers off if he did it again, but he did it again. His fingers didn't snap off but they got a bit bent and he cried.

The wireless is talking about a lady called Rosa who got into trouble on a bus. I'm not sure what she did wrong. Buses are like big cars. You have to sit in the right seats though or you get into trouble.

David is putting a knitting needle in the plug socket.

Mummy says: 'Don't do that, you'll get an electric shock.'

David is still putting the knitting needle in the plug. 'Octric shock,' he says.

'Go and play outside,' says Mummy.

We walk outside and Jeremy crawls along behind us.

Next door some men are building a new house. There is a big machine full of cement going round and round. Jeremy is holding his Wunks. He puts it down and helps us dig in the sand. We're making a sand castle. I think it would be a good idea to have some cement for the walls so David and I go to get some out of the machine. David puts his hand in the machine and the man shouts.

He's mean. We were only going to take a little bit. The man says: 'Where do you kids live?' David points to our house. The man picks up Jeremy and holds David's hand then he walks to our house with my brothers and I follow behind.

Mummy opens the front door. She's smoking a fag. 'Are these your children?' Says the man.

'Yes,' says Mummy.

'Well can you please control them? Building sites are not playgrounds.' I don't like the man. Walther didn't shout when we played with his cement.

There's a tar lorry outside today. Mummy's going to take Jeremy outside to breathe in the tar because he's got whooping cough and the tar will make it better.

It's not fair; I want whooping cough.

'Can I breathe the tar too?' I say.

'Yes we'll all breathe the tar,' says Mummy.

When we get to the lorry the nasty builder is not there. The lorry is full of shiny black stuff that is all warm and steamy. It smells of hot black soil and paint and treacle.

First Mummy holds Jeremy over the black stuff and he breathes in the steam for a while. But he is still coughing all over his Wunks.

'Is he better now?' I ask.

'I expect he soon will be,' says Mummy.

The builder is coming so I have a quick sniff of the tar and we all go back inside the house.

I saw Gareth at the swings today. He goes to school. They sing songs at his school and he has taught me one:

'What's a cock?' I say when I get back from the swings.

'A boy chicken,' says Mummy.

Then I sing her Gareth's song which is about a boy chicken. 'Can I go to school with Gareth?' I ask.

'Definitely not,' she says.

I can count to ten and sing the alphabet and write my name. Daddy taught me.

Mummy is still angry about the mice under the beds. She says they have been in the pantry, eating things and pooing in the sugar.

Today the car won't start. The windy thing slips and Daddy says: 'Bloody bastard,' then comes back inside and Mummy puts a plaster on the bendy bit of his finger called the knuckle.

Daddy's gone to work. David and Jeremy are playing on the floor, putting dried peas up their noses. Jeremy's holding his Wunks and his rabbit, whose name is Eee Rabbity Whisker.

The man on the wireless is talking about Suez Canal. A canal is a sort of road made out of water; I'm not sure if it's the same as a river because when I asked Mummy she said: 'Oh do stop asking stupid questions. You're driving me mad.'

We have to go to the doctor's house because David and Jeremy have both got peas stuck up their noses. It's not fair. I want a pea up my nose but Mummy has put them away on the top shelf and she won't let me have one.

Eee Rabbity Whisker and Wunks come with us to see the doctor.

Daddy is back from his office but it is still light because spring has come. We are going for a nice picnic at Devil's Bridge. We have stopped to buy a punnet of strawberries from a man in a hut.

Mummy looks beautiful and smells of roses. She's laughing and smiling because she loves strawberries. She offers one to all of us then takes one herself and bites it.

She's looking into the punnet again. 'Oh how disappointing,' she says. 'They've filled it up with gravel. The strawberries are only on the top.'

I wish I hadn't eaten my strawberry now. I want to give it back to Mummy. My chest hurts when Mummy is disappointed.

Dad is teaching me how to ride a bike. He's holding the back of my seat to make sure I don't wobble. I ride all the way to the end of Caradoc Road with him holding the seat. Then I look round but Dad isn't there so I fall off. He runs over and says: 'You rode all the way down the street on your own, Gillian. If you did it once you can do it again.'

I think about it for a while then get back on and ride uphill to our house. I run into the kitchen to tell Mum: 'I can ride a bike on my own.'

'Hmm?' She says.

'Gillian rode her bike all the way down the street, on her own,' says Dad.

'Jolly good,' says Mum.

When we are all sitting down at the table I say: 'When can I go to Gareth's school?'

Mum and Dad look at each other and don't answer. It's not fair. I want to go to school.

I've just found out I am going to school soon. Dad says there are ladies there called nuns. He says they look like penguins.

'Do they put children in sacks and beat them?' I ask.

'No of course not,' says Daddy.

I'm looking forward to seeing the penguin-ladies and playing with Gareth at play-time.

Caroline Jones lives up the road at number 82. She has got a television which is a sort of wireless with pictures. Today we saw Dixon of Dock Green. Dixon is a policeman who arrests suspicious characters and makes them go to prison. We also watched The Mickey Mouse Club. I like Annette Funicello; I bet she is really good at football.

I'm starting school today so I have to wear a skirt. I also have to wear a tie like Daddy's.

The nuns are very suspicious characters. They are grown-ups but they don't smoke or drink gin or say Bloody Hell. Also they always wear black and white dresses and carry rulers. The rulers are for hitting children on the knuckles with.

At nine o'clock Mother Superior finds some widdle in the cloakroom, which is a room where you are supposed to hang your mashintock.

'Who is responsible for this?' She asks.

Nobody puts their hand up so Sister Angelica takes all the girls to the girls' HMS and we stand in line. Then Sister Angelica feels our knickers. Sister Mary has taken all the boys to the boys' HMS so she can feel their knickers. At last Sister Mary solves the mystery. The widdle in the cloakroom came from a boy in Sister Angelica's class. His name is Stuart Jenkins and he wears glasses and a funny jumper with squiggly knitting round the edges of the sleeves and neck.

Now he's in trouble because you're not allowed to widdle on the cloakroom floor.

I need to go to the HMS but when I ask Sister Angelica she just says: 'I beg your pardon?'

'I want to go to the HMS,' I say.

'Do you want the toilet?' she asks.

'No, the HMS,' I say.

After a long time Sister Angelica takes me to the HMS.

I walk home and find Mum in the kitchen reading and smoking a cigarette.

When she stands up I see that she's wearing a beautiful dress and has got lipstick on. She smells of flowers and looks like a lady in a film.

'Well, how was your first day at school?' She says.

'I couldn't find Gareth,' I say.

'No. He doesn't go to the convent,' says Mum.

'Why?'

'He goes to the primary school.'

'Can I go to the primary school too?'

'No.'

'Why?'

Mum is reading and doesn't answer.

I look over her shoulder and ask her where she's got to on the page. She breathes out some smoke then points. I put my hand over the place but she pushes it away and carries on reading.

'Sister Angelica doesn't know what an HMS is,' I say.

Mum looks up at me. 'Ah yes,' she does a little laugh. 'I probably should have mentioned that before you went. HMS is a family joke. Gran started it during the war when she saw a sailor on Aberystwyth prom with HMS Lavatera written on his hat.'

'Oh. So should I say toilet now?'

'Don't you dare! No; you must say lavatory.'

'Why can't I say toilet?'

Mum doesn't answer.

'I've changed my mind,' I say. 'I don't want to go to school anymore. I think I'll just stay at home with you and David and Jeremy from now on.'

'Hmmm?' says Mum.

At school today a boy did a runny poo in his pants. Not Stuart, a different boy. But there was no need for us to all line up in the HMS this time because the poo was still stuck to his trousers and running down his legs, so Mother Superior told him he was a dirty boy and he cried in the playground.

I don't like school; there are too many children and nuns and too much noise. Also everybody has to wear navy blue clothes and white shirts and ties. It's called uniform. My favourite dress is orange and has animals on it but I'm not allowed to wear that to school. Or the red one with lady-birds. Unless Mum has forgotten to do the washing which happened once but Mother Superior made me go home and change into uniform again, even though it was all scrunched up inside the laundry basket.

Mother Superior is the boss of the convent. She sits in a big room with a statue of a woman holding a baby. If you happen to be in there for doing a sin and you touch the woman or the baby, you get told off because you aren't allowed to. There is also a man in there. He wears a spiky hat and a nappy but you can't reach to touch him because he's too high up on the wall with his arms spread out and red stuff all over his hands. His name is Lord Jesus.

Today we are doing writing. I can already write my name so I show Sister Angelica. But I don't do it right. You're supposed to touch the top of the lines with your big letters and the exact middle with your little letters. Also they all have to slope the same way. Sister Angelica hits me on the knuckles with her ruler because my letters don't slope the right way. It hurts but I don't cry.

It's Saturday and Caroline and I are watching television. There's a film on called *The Night of the Hunter*. The man in it is a murderer but I still like him. He's got a cigarette in his mouth and smoke going into his eyes which are scary and his face is covered in sharp little hairs because he hasn't shaved. He's wearing a black hat to show that he's a baddie. Actually I want to marry him when I grow up. I'm not exactly sure why; PC Dixon would probably put him in jail.

Today we are doing Art with plasticene. We have to make something, so I am making a bed with a little girl lying in it holding a teddy bear. I think it is good. At the end of the class Sister Veronica tells us to break our plasticine into colours and put it back in the box. I look at my little girl in her bed. I don't want to pull her to bits so I hide her in my pocket. I am going to take her home to my house, to show my Mum and Dad.

At play-time, I am running round being a train in the playground. The other children won't play with me. I don't know why. They all stand together and talk to each other and water their snail-farms and skip with ropes and do hula-hooping but when I talk to them they don't answer so I just carry on being a train.

Then the little girl in the bed falls out of my pocket and one of the sisters sees it.

'What is this?' She shouts, which is silly because it's obvious it's a little girl in a bed.

The sister takes me to the statue room and tells Mother Superior I am a thief.

'Did you steal this plasticene?' Asks Mother Superior.

'No,' I say.

'Did you steal this plasticene?' She says, even louder.

'No,' I say.

This goes on for a while. She keeps asking and I keep saying no. Then she says that thieves and liars are wicked and that I'll have to go to Purgatory which surprises me.

'I thought wicked people went to prison,' I say.

Mother Superior's mouth goes down and she says: 'Do not give me any of your cheek.'

'I wasn't going to,' I say.

I've been wondering where Purgatory is. As soon as I get the chance, I'm going to ask Sister Angelica. I don't think I want to go there. I'd rather stay in Aberystwyth with Mum and Dad and my little brothers and my big brother Paul when he's home on holiday from school.

A lady has come to see me at school. She says hello to me then says: 'My name is Mrs Vincent.'

I look at her then try to carry on walking into the class-room. But she holds my hand and starts walking back towards the playground even though the bell's gone and everyone else is in class. I don't like being out in the playground when everyone else is in class.

Mrs Vincent is asking me questions about my Mummy and Daddy. I don't know why she's so interested in my family.

'How did you get that bruise on your face, Gillian?' She asks me.

'What bruise?' I say.

'This one, right here,' she says and she touches my cheek. Her fingers are very soft and they smell of perfume.

'I don't know,' I say. 'I suppose I must have fallen over.'

Mrs Vincent looks at me for a long time and all of a sudden I understand that I'm in trouble. I'm always getting into trouble for things without even realising I've been doing something wrong.

'Are you sure you fell over, Gillian?'

I don't know what to say. If I say, no I'm not sure, I'll go to Purgatory for being a liar. And if I say yes I am sure, I'll still go to Purgatory for being a liar because either way I'll be a liar. I don't remember if I fell over.

All of a sudden I remember about my Aunty Mags, who is Mum's sister and has a big red mark on her face which she was born with. 'Actually, I think it's a birth mark,' I say. This seems like the best thing to say; nobody ever tells Aunty Mags off for having a birth mark.

Mrs Vincent is looking at me. I can't tell if she's angry or not but at least she's stopped asking questions. After a while she holds my hand again and we walk back to the classroom.

Jeremy has a big white thing on his arm. 'What's that?' I say.

Mum is sad. 'He's broken his arm,' she says. 'Paulie's bike fell on him.'

I look at Jeremy's arm. The stuff round it is hard.

'It's a plaster cast,' says Mum, 'you can write your name on it if you want to.'

'Can I have a plaster cast too?' I say.

'No.'

'Why?'

'Because you haven't got a broken arm.'

It's not fair.

I've found out that Purgatory is a waiting-room in the sky with rows of benches and a big clock on the wall and there's nothing to do except sit there forever because time never stops, it just goes on and on and no trains ever come past and there are no days or nights, or weeks or years, or birthdays or Christmas, just time, going on and on and on and on forever, which seems impossible but Sister Angelica says it is actually true. All the naughty children have to go there and sit, being bored until God decides to let them into Heaven, which is also quite boring, or send them to Hell, which sounds a bit more interesting. I think it would definitely be better to have my eternity in Hell; not Purgatory. Gareth's probably going to Hell because he's common and says 'Bollocks' and 'Fucking Hell'. I like Gareth.

Sometimes I think I might not be real. Not a human being at all but a girl in a book. Like Cinderella or Gretel. How would you tell?

Or maybe I'm real but nothing else is; maybe I'm just hanging in space like a puppet.

I need to think about this but I'm pretty sure this is the worst idea I've ever thought of.

At least in Purgatory there would be other naughty children to play with. And at least if I am just a girl in a book, the story will end eventually. But if I'm hanging in space all alone and everybody's gone away and forgotten about me, I might be stuck here for Eternity.

I never know what Mum will be doing when I get home from school. Sometimes she's cooking supper. Sometimes she's still in her nightie, making her novel. Sometimes she says: 'Bloody Hell, is that the time already?'

Today when I get home, Mum has red stuff all over her nightie.

'What's that?' I ask.

'Blood.'

'Have you cut yourself?'

'No, I've got the curse,' says Mum.

'What curse?' I ask.

'You'll find out one day,' she says.

Last night Mum and Dad were shouting again and today we have all gone on holiday. Me and Mum are staying with Gran and Gramp Chichester, in Chichester. David, Jeremy and Dad are staying with Gran and Gramp Yorkshire, in Yorkshire. I wish I could have gone with Dad. I like Gran and Gramp Yorkshire better than Gran and Gramp Chichester. Gran Yorkshire makes steamed puddings and Gramp Yorkshire smokes a pipe which smells like burning grass and black treacle.

The last time we went to visit them, Gramp Yorkshire promised to take me out to paint the town red. I was very excited. But we just walked around for ages.

'When are we going to start painting the town red?' I asked.

Gramp Yorkshire laughed. Then he went into somebody's house and came out with some lemonade for me and a brown drink for him.

Another time he said we were going to see a man about a dog, but we just went to the same house. Gramp had the brown drink again and I had orange squash. Gramp let me smell his brown drink but wouldn't let me have any. It smelled like primroses.

Even though he's forgetful sometimes, I still like Gramp Yorkshire better than the other one who is mean and always grumpy.

About the Author

Gill Haigh lives in Hackney, East London. For several years she has hosted an informal weekly writers' group – laughingly called the 'salon' - in the living-rooms of various tiny flats around central London (she moves a lot). In 2016 she was short-listed for the Literary Consultancy's Pen Factor prize for *Singing to Seals*, which she is now editing in the hope of finding an agent and getting it published. In 2013 she won the Commonword Prize for Diversity in Children's Literature for her YA novel, *Out of Water*, which she'd written as an assignment for her MA in Creative Writing at the University of Portsmouth. After years of bar-work, beach-photography, waiting tables, cleaning, nannying, shop-work, being a (very inefficient) secretary, scavenging for and selling stuff, cooking, teaching, van-driving, farm-labouring, working in factories etc. etc., Gill retired from wage-slavery and these days she enjoys reading, writing and sleeping.