

EXCLUSIVE
By David Barnett

ANNA Maybourne, the protagonist of Sarah Pinborough's newest twisty thriller, *They Say A Girl Died Here*, is angry. She's dropped out of university in New York and abandoned a promising career path to instead move to the backwater town of Harper's Creek and live with her mum Claire, grandma Evelyn and much younger sister Caroline.

Instead of a glittering post-college career, Anna is working shifts at a diner in the dry, dusty farming town beaten down by long, increasingly hot summers and failing crops.

In fact, the only shadow in Harper's Creek is that of the murders of two young women, at the hands of a serial killer known as the Farmhand, three years apart. And with the three-year anniversary approaching, the gossip among Harper's Creek's young people is that the Farmhand is going to strike again...

Anna has a shadow of her own hanging over her life: referred to by her only as the thing, it's drip-fed into Pinborough's tense thriller, an appalling sexual assault that Anna was the victim of in college, with multiple assailants and the episode filmed and circulated online.

It's no wonder Anna is angry with her lot, and Pinborough, 54, is angry too.

"For all the 'not all men' stuff we get told, just about every woman I know has at some point, and on some level, had an experience of sexual assault or something that has made them afraid it was going to happen," says Pinborough from her home near Milton Keynes. "I don't necessarily mean everyone has been raped, which some people think sexual assault can only mean, but that they've all had some kind of experience at the hands of men.

"Even in this day and age, when people are supposed to be more aware of this sort of thing and consent is more understood, I've been in the company of men who have done things they should know better about.

"And I'm like, 'Would you behave like this if I was another man? Is this how you'd be?'

"The awful thing is that most women have several stories like this but we second-guess ourselves, and because we don't want to be seen as a victim we sometimes doubt our own memories of what actually happened."

In *They Say A Girl Died Here*, people, even Anna's own mum – perhaps unintentionally – seem of the mind that Anna almost brought on herself the assault because of how she dressed, how much she had drunk. Even as she is trying to process the attack, she is being shamed for it on some level.

"It's weird how we still feel this inexplicable shame for things that happen, as though it's actually our fault and not the fault of the men who do it," says Pinborough. "This is why I gave Anna all the anger of her age group. Women should not be defined by something a man does to them."

LEST this make the novel sound like a feminist polemic, Pinborough is skilled at weaving in the themes of female rage in and around the main narrative, which is concerned with the creeping dread at the approach of the anniversary and Anna's growing assertion that the murder of the two girls is not as solved as the police would like to think it is.

As the newcomer in the town where her grandma grew up, Anna is both viewed with suspicion as an outsider but also someone who can get a fresh perspective on the tragedy.

She can see with clearer eyes than the residents that someone else might be in the

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Eve Hewson and Tom Bateman star in the Netflix adaptation of *Behind Her Eyes*

sights of the murderous Farmhand.

The story is also about the rest of the Maybourne women, especially mum Claire, who is representative of what's become known as the "Sandwich Generation" – still working, still caring for children who have not yet reached adulthood, and facing up to ageing parents who are developing

health issues and need their own care.

Pinborough says: "We have four women in the same house, and although Anna and Caroline are sisters, there's a big age gap so they're essentially different generations. And I kind of wanted to make each woman almost representative of their generation, and what their generation's problems are.

"Claire's a single mother and she's got one daughter who's coming up to being a teen-

ager and an older daughter who's had all this trauma. She's had to take time off work to deal with it so they can't afford to live where they used to, meaning they have to relocate to her own mum's old town and house.

"Then she's got this mother with the start of Alzheimer's, and when you've got all that going on you're thinking, how is this going to eat my life? Which sounds like a very selfish thing, but women that age are thinking, my

International bestselling author Sarah Pinborough on the female rage that inspired her latest novel... and how she had to reinvent herself to save her career



Vicky McClure as Emma Averill in TV adaptation of Sarah's hit novel *Insomnia*



Sarah Pinborough made the switch to thriller writing, fearing she was 'slipping down the rungs of the ladder'

'I was aware that I was going to have a shelf-life that might come to an end quite soon'

Pinborough's late father worked for the Foreign Office, which saw her travelling the world as a youngster – India, which she was too young to remember, then Damascus, Khartoum, Moscow and South Africa.

She spent a lot of time in boarding schools, and was at school in Scotland with Harriet Tyce, who would also grow up to be a thriller writer (her latest, *Witch Trial*, was out earlier this year) and a contestant on *Traitors*.

After a wedding in Vegas ("It was a very brief marriage") Pinborough worked a number of jobs, and had "lots of dodgy boy-friends" before somewhat settling down to spend six years working as an English teacher at secondary schools in Luton and then Milton Keynes.

BUT she always harboured an ambition to be a published novelist, and decided to take six months off to make a go of it. That produced *A Matter of Blood*, published in 2010 as the first in her *Dog-Faced Gods* urban fantasy trilogy, and she finally started to make enough money to become a full-time writer.

"It was *Behind Her Eyes* that changed my life, though," she says. "It bought my house for me, and I was excited by writing in that genre in a way I wasn't always excited by writing books."

Pinborough's books typically have women protagonists, and she likes to explore female rage, its causes and its results. But the last thing she wants is to be seen as a spokeswoman for either her gender or her generation.

"I don't think I should be allowed to be a spokesperson for anything!" she laughs.

"I'm very wary of anybody in the entertainment industry having strong opinions on anything, and I don't expect anyone to be interested in what I think about things. Nobody cares about my political opinion. I just write books."

With *They Say A Girl Died Here* freshly published and Pinborough working on the TV script, what's coming next? The smart money would be on another female-led thriller, surely? But true to form there could be a twist we never saw coming.

● *They Say A Girl Died Here* by Sarah Pinborough (Orion Books, £22) is out now



that book came out, but she concedes she considered herself "slipping down the rungs of the ladder a bit. I was aware I wasn't progressing, that I was going to have a shelf-life that might come to an end quite soon".

Pinborough was reading a lot of thrillers at the time, with *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* the big sellers, and wanted to try something like that.

Behind Her Eyes shocked readers with its final twist, and was followed by the equally twisty *Cross Her Heart*, *Dead To Her*, *Insomnia* and last year's spooky *We Live Here Now*. *Insomnia* was also adapted for TV, starring Vicky McClure, and *They Say A Girl Died Here* has already been optioned for adaptation, with Pinborough currently working on the script herself.

It's an overnight success story that has been at least two decades in the making.