



A Conversation with Mary Swan, author of *The Boys in the Trees*

1. Where did you get the idea for this story? What about the time period and subject matter appealed to you? Did you set out to write a novel?

The first spark came from something I happened upon several years ago—an account in a publication of a local historical society, of a man who had been tried and executed in the late nineteenth century for killing his family. I can't really explain why that story caught me, but I did know immediately that I would do something with it. Some time later, I started to write a short story about a young boy who had witnessed this execution, and for some reason he watched it from a tree overlooking the jail yard. But of course this boy had a home, and a family and friends, and I began to see that there were many other people connected to the story, and many different ways to tell it.

2. Naomi suffers the loss of her first three children to diphtheria, and thereafter moves from England to Canada, where her husband's troubles drive their small family from town to town. Mrs. Robinson, the doctor's wife, likewise finds herself living a life she would not choose for herself. What did you hope to convey about the condition of women, either in general or in this particular situation?

When writing about the past, it's important for me to really have a sense of what it was like to experience the world as an individual living in a particular time, and that means recognizing limitations as well as the thoughts and feelings and situations that are constant. Historically, women's lives have been particularly restricted by their biology, economic dependence, and lack of political power. I don't write to convey a message, but I did have that fact very much in mind when thinking about and creating the female characters in *The Boys in the Trees*.

3. The narration of the story switches from character to character to great effect; however, one significant perspective is missing. Did you deliberately avoid including a section from the point of view of the adult William Heath?

Yes, I knew from the beginning that I wouldn't have a section from Heath's point of view, just as I knew that I wouldn't deal any more directly than I have done with the murders themselves. To have done either of those things would have made it a different kind of book. I suppose that I am most interested in the ripples caused by events, and the way so many things, especially human beings themselves, are ultimately unknowable.

4. At the end of the novel Eaton looks back on the town's reaction to the murders, which linger in his memory. Did you always plan for the novel to span multiple generations?

That wasn't part of my plan, but then again I didn't have much of a plan when I began to write the book, only an idea of a number of things and characters that I wanted to explore. At a certain point, however, I began to feel a need to somehow bring things forward, and to give an

idea of what might have happened to some of the characters, without using a neat, summative epilogue. In thinking about it now, I suppose that I was also not ready to let them go, if that makes any sense. I particularly didn't want to leave Eaton stuck in that tree, without the suggestion that his life was all right, in the end, when it easily might not have been. Not exactly a happy ending, but as close as I'm likely to come to one.

5. What resonance, if any, does this story have with your own personal experience? Are the themes of family and memory ones that you have explored in your other works?

When I began thinking about this story, the idea of family was central to what I wanted to explore. I thought a lot about happy families and miserable ones, about lost families and damaged families, and about how much of our sense of belonging in the world is bound up in that relationship, in one way or another. The importance of memory ties into that, of course, and it does seem to work its way into almost everything that I write.

6. Your writing in this novel is very suggestive, details and their meaning rising slowly to the surface as the story progresses. Was this style particular to *The Boys in the Trees*?

I don't think it's particular to *The Boys in the Trees*; more likely a function of the way my mind works. Things usually take a very long time to gel for me, and I can walk around for months half-thinking about something I want to be writing, my pockets filling up with scraps of paper where I've scribbled phrases or ideas as they bubble up. It wouldn't be true to say that I don't have any kind of plan, or any idea about the direction I want for a story or the connections I want to make. But those things really only happen through the process, when I actually start writing the story.

7. You've captured the interior lives of young and old, male and female, with deft assurance. Did you find any section or character particularly difficult to write?

I started a number of versions of the "Forgiveness" section before I worked out one I was content with, and I think that a lot of the difficulty had to do with the character of Sarah, whose intensity and joylessness are quite alien to me. I was trying to find a way to communicate some kind of sympathy or understanding for a character who is not, to me at least, particularly likeable. Also, as I mentioned earlier, I began by trying to write what is now the last section, "Eaton—1889," but didn't get very far. I came back to it a number of times while I was working on the rest of the book, but it wasn't until I thought of using dime novels that I was able to actually write it from beginning to end.

Discussion Questions for *The Boys in the Trees: A Novel* by Mary Swan

1. In what ways was your reading enhanced by the novel's shifting points of view? How do the narrators' voices compare? What new perspectives arose through this unconventional storytelling?
2. Throughout the novel's interwoven timeline, how did your perception of the Heaths change? What makes the flashbacks a powerful way to convey the experience of myth versus memory?
3. What accounts for the differences between Robinson's family and Heath's? How does each man address his role as a father? Among the various sorts of families portrayed throughout *The Boys in the Trees*, which one resonated most closely with your own?
4. Revisit the novel's initial chapter, "Before." How do these scenes of abuse and fear affect your understanding of the subsequent events?
5. The chapter titled "Gun" is immediately followed by "Forgiveness—1889," which contains the story of Alice and Sarah's Forgiveness Potion, prescribed to them by their father. What is significant about the placement of these sections? Does the notion of forgiveness vanish after that scene?
6. How does the author use artifacts—a button, a locket, a knife—to develop our understanding of the people who possessed them? Which small items have played a large role in your life, or in your ability to recall important events?
7. In "Consequences," we're told that Heath's defense was insanity. How would you have approached the case if you had been his defender? How would you have assessed him if you had been his judge or juror? What was your reaction to his execution? Where did guilt reside in this case?
8. How do Abby's recollections capture the Heath legacy in the aftermath? What are the differences between the stories that will be passed on for generations and the photographs she and Sam produce? Which serves as a more accurate reflection of the past: pictures or stories?
9. As an older man, how does Eaton seem to be affected by his memories of the past? What was the impact of Rachel's trusting him with her treasure?
10. In what way do the trees mentioned in the title almost become a character themselves in the novel? In what way are they a refuge, an observation post, and a keeper of secrets?
11. Mary Swan began the research for this novel as a reference librarian, gathering facts about nineteenth-century Canadian life and justice to create a realistic image of the past. How would a similar story play out in contemporary times?