

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to *The Unseeing*

The Unseeing is a historical crime novel based on the life of a real woman called Sarah Gale who was convicted in 1837 of aiding and abetting her lover, James Greenacre, in the murder of Hannah Brown. Sarah was sentenced to death and petitioned the King for mercy. *The Unseeing* begins with the appointment of the lawyer who is to investigate her petition: Edmund Fleetwood. He - and the reader - has to determine whether Sarah Gale is indeed innocent or whether she is far more involved than she would have us believe.

Writing a work of fiction based on a real case proved simultaneously fascinating and almost impossible, and I went through many drafts (ten, in fact) before I found the right balance of fact and fiction. I received an early critique from TLC in March 2014 that was very helpful in pushing me to work out what I wanted the novel to be. Lesley McDowell's insightful report, though largely positive, pointed out that some of the narrative, 'reads too much like imagined non-fiction – I'm thinking particularly of Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*.' This was interesting as it was in fact in *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* that I had first read of the Edgware Road Murder. Lesley was absolutely right that I had not yet left the realms of fact; I had not yet figured out what kind of story I wanted to tell. Looking back, I realise that I had mistakenly thought that the history was the story, when of course the story has to be the characters' arcs – it has to be about what changes.

Two years on, *The Unseeing* has become something else altogether. Something better. But it was hard for me to let go of the 'facts', and that is part of the reason that one of the key themes of *The Unseeing* is truth and deception – how we interpret other people's stories and how we narrate our own. I'm grateful to both Lesley McDowell and Aki Schilz for their help on my journey to publication. It's a long road to travel on your own.

The Unseeing, by Anna Mazzola

Through her left eye she could see nothing now. Through her right, Hannah could make out the flame of the one candle that still burned, guttering and shivering low in its puddle of wax. It was only the candlelight that convinced her she was still alive. The fire was dying in the grate and the coldness of the flagstones had seeped into her bones, leaving her as icy and insubstantial as the snow that fell outside.

She knew she should call out: for a surgeon, a constable, or simply someone to bear witness. Otherwise, unless they looked closely, they would read it all wrong. But she was unable to cry out. Her body seemed to have slipped from the grasp of her mind and she had a strong sensation of falling; of the world sliding away from her. She was vaguely aware of the flame's shadows fluttering on the ceiling above her. She saw for a moment her mother's drawn, unsmiling face.

'You shouldn't tell lies, Hannah. They always come back to bite you.'

A gust of wintry air blew into the room: the door had opened. Just before she lost consciousness, Hannah heard footsteps coming towards her, footsteps she thought she recognised.

In the draught, the candle dipped, swayed and was finally extinguished. All was dark.

PART ONE

Corpus

Chapter 1

MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR

Yesterday afternoon, about three o'clock, as a police constable of the T division was on duty near Pineapple Gate, Edgware-road, his attention was attracted towards an unfinished house, in which he saw at a distance something lying on the ground at the bottom part of the building; he directly approached the spot, and there beheld, tied up at the top, a full-sized sack, which he lifted up, and found to be of considerable weight.

Without loss of time he untied the fastenings, and, to his great horror and consternation, ascertained that the said sack contained the dead trunk and arms of a female.

Morning Post, 29 December 1836

27 March 1837

'Murderer!' they shouted.

'Whore!'

'Take her eyes out: it's what she did to Hannah Brown.'

Hands battered the wooden roof and sides of the prison wagon and, above the din, Sarah could hear the voice of the driver as he tried to calm the horse and urge it forward. Silently, Sarah willed it too, knowing that if the wagon stopped and the mob got at her, she would be done for. She had heard of such things happening: of a man accused of killing a child, seized as he left the Old Bailey and reduced within minutes to a bloody mess; of resurrection men, chased through the streets, escaping only when a pub landlord helped them over a wall. No one would help her.

The wagon inched through the crowds, away from the magistrates' court and onto a wider street where the horse picked up pace. Through the barred cart door, Sarah could see some of the people running behind them, shouting, shrieking, shaking their fists. Gradually, they fell away, some leaning forward, hands on their knees to catch their breath. The vehicle jolted on over the cobbled stones, past the great dome of St Paul's and then up a side street where the roar of London was briefly muffled.

They came to a halt and the guard wrenched open the wagon door. 'Out!'

Sarah gathered her skirts and stumbled down onto the ground. It was nearly dark now and a thin rain had begun to fall. Steadying herself, she stared up at the high stone arch and, beneath it, the great oaken door, studded with nails and topped with spikes. She had walked past this door several times before but she had never imagined that she would walk through it, for this was Newgate: the most notorious prison in London.

The guard knocked on the door and, a few moments later, a porter appeared, his face the drab colour of tallow. He nodded at the guard and looked briefly at Sarah, his expression unreadable. Without saying a word, he led Sarah through a second door, past a lodge, through an iron-bolted gate and down a narrow corridor until they reached a door that bore the sign, 'Reception Room'. It was not much of a reception. There was no fire in the large stone room and the air was chill. A woman dressed in dark grey sat on a high stool by a desk, writing in a thick, leather-bound book. She pointed at a wooden bench. Sarah opened her mouth to speak, but the woman put her finger to her lips and shook her head. The only sounds were the scratching of the pen, the closing of doors far off and an occasional undistinguishable shout.

After a few minutes, a taller woman, her face bone-white, her eyes small beads of jet, entered the room carrying a wooden box and a bundle of clothing. She was dressed, like the first woman, in a grey dress, grey bonnet and heavy black boots. However, around her shoulders was a black mantle, and about her middle she wore a wide leather belt with a brass buckle from which dangled a chain of keys.

'Name?' she said sharply.

Sarah got to her feet. 'Sarah Gale.'

The woman stared at Sarah, her gaze as cold and hard as a knife.

The first woman spoke. 'She's the one just been charged with aiding and abetting the Edgware Road murder, Miss Sowerton. I've written it all down.'

'Oh, I know who she is,' Miss Sowerton said.

Sarah lowered her eyes, but felt the woman's gaze still on her, dissecting her.

After a few moments, the woman held out her hand: 'Possessions!'

Sarah looked up.

'Give me your *things!*'

From her pocket, Sarah removed the few items she had brought with her – an old silk handkerchief, her locket, and a tortoiseshell-backed brush. The woman took them and put them into the wooden box. To Sarah it felt as though the last pieces of her were being stripped away.

'Undress!'

Sarah looked at Miss Sowerton and then at the other woman, who nodded.

'Do as the matron says.'

Slowly, Sarah removed her cloak, gloves and shoes, then undid the fastenings on her dark green dress and removed her petticoats until she was standing in just her shift, stockings and stays in the cold room. Miss Sowerton regarded her steadily, her arms folded.

Finally mustering up the courage to speak, Sarah said, 'I'm not what you think. I didn't do what they say.'

The matron's mouth slid into a semblance of a smile. 'Oh, no, 'course not. You're innocent as a babe unborn. None of the inmates in this prison is guilty. The place is fit to burst with innocent souls.' Her lips set again into a line. 'You're not to speak unless spoken to. We don't want to hear your lies.'

She looked carefully over Sarah, as though eyeing a suspect piece of meat at market.

'Dark brown hair ... brown eyes ... sharp features ... scars to the chest, wrists and lower arms.'

With cold fingers, she lifted Sarah's petticoat.

'A mole above the left hipbone.'

The woman on the stool scribbled in the leather-bound book. The matron folded Sarah's clothes, placed them in the wooden box and snapped the lid shut. Then she handed Sarah the bundle. While the two women watched, Sarah put on the clothes: a blue wincey dress with dark stripes, a blue checked apron and matching neckerchief, a patched jacket, and thick brown stockings that scratched against her skin. For an instant, she was reminded of her dress fittings with Rosina when they were children: standing before their mother's cold gaze in dark silks and stiff lace. Would it have always come to this?

A thud: two black shoes – old, dirty and mismatched – had been thrown at her feet.

'Put these on and follow me.'

The matron led Sarah along a succession of winding alleyways and down dark, low-roofed passages and staircases, her heels clicking against the stone. They came eventually upon a row of identical doorways and Miss Sowerton paused.

‘The condemned cells,’ she said, watching for Sarah’s reaction.

Sarah shivered, pierced with a shard of fear. Condemned: damned; sentenced to death. If the court decided that she should hang, this would be where she would come on her last night. She realised that she had instinctively raised her hand to clasp her throat, and she lowered it before the matron could notice.

They walked through another corridor that led onto a large, empty quadrangle, lit only by the sickly yellow light from two gas lamps. This, the matron announced, was ‘the women’s area,’ with its own taprooms, breakfast room and kitchen. Sarah was hungry, for she had taken nothing since a few mouthfuls of porridge at Clerkenwell Prison that morning. The smell of the place, though, turned her stomach: a sour smell of unwashed bodies and chloride of lime. It was for the best, she told herself, that George was not here. Some convicts were allowed to take their children into Newgate with them, but this was no place for a child. This was no place for any human. Still, the thought of him without her was a sharp, almost physical pain.

Miss Sowerton stopped before a black door and produced a large key. A rumbling came from within the lock as the key turned, and Sarah had the sudden idea of the place not just as a prison, but a terrible creature: flesh and bone, iron and stone.

‘Your cell,’ the matron said.

When Sarah failed to move, Miss Sowerton pushed her firmly into the room, locking and bolting the door behind her.

Sarah’s first impression was one of complete darkness. After a few seconds, however, she saw that a few grey rays of light filtered through the glass of a small iron-barred window. Against the far wall, under the high window, was a bed. She felt her way to it and ran her hand over the bedding: a blanket and a rough pillow, so cold they felt damp. There was a stale odour to the cell – a tang of must and sweat and something unidentifiable. Fear, perhaps. She could hear the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside and, from far away, a scream cut short.

On a small table beneath the window stood a jug, a book, a candle and a little metal tinderbox. Sarah opened the box and struck steel against flint until sparks became flame. In the glow of the candle she saw a three-legged stool, a burnished copper washbasin fastened to the wall with a water tap over it and, in one corner, a water-closet seat.

She knew that most of the other prisoners had to share cells, some four to a room. Evidently the warders did not trust her with other women. Maybe they thought she would slit their throats as they slept.

A draught, finding its way under the door, caused the candle flame to ripple. In the centre of the cell door, carved into the wood, was an eye, complete in every detail – pupil, eyelashes, brow. A spyhole. Sarah bent down to look through it to the corridor outside, but there was only darkness.

Chapter 2

On Saturday morning, about half-past eight o'clock, as Mathias Ralph, the lock-keeper of the Ben Jonson lock on the Regent's Canal, at the World's-end, Stepney, was engaged in closing the lock after a coal-barge had passed through, he found that the falls or sluices would not close, and that there was a space of several inches between both. On examining minutely to ascertain the cause he was horror-struck to find that it was a human head.

Morning Chronicle, 9 January 1837

Chief Justice Tindal charged the Jury very fully, and very impartially, but rather, as we think, leaning to the impression that Gale may have been innocent. The Jury, however, brought in a verdict of guilty against both.

Spectator, 15 April 1837

20 April 1837

Edmund stood in the bright gas-lit doorway and pulled a shining brass bell, which gave a muted clang. A man in full livery admitted him into the entrance hall and led

him to a door with a small glazed aperture, through which Edmund knew he was closely watched. After a few seconds, the door opened, and a second man appeared, held out his arm and bowed.

'Good evening, sir.'

Edmund passed up the richly carpeted stairs to the first floor and made his way to the large, red-curtained gaming room. The place was already full of people absorbed in play. Around a long table covered with a dark green cloth, twenty or so men sat or stood, their eyes fixed on the dice and the game. Two croupiers faced each other across the middle of the table.

A waiter approached Edmund and handed him a glass of brandy and soda water from a silver tray. Money flowed more freely from a gentleman who had been oiled. The back room contained a large table loaded with cold chickens, joints, salads and glistening puddings. The gambler need never leave. Except, of course, when his money ran out.

Edmund waited for the next game of hazard to commence and then joined the table, feeling the blood pumping faster in his veins as the dice were cast. He would, he reminded himself, stay only for an hour and wager only a guinea. But one hour became two. One guinea became three. Eventually, Edmund conceded defeat. This was not a quick way to make money; only a fast way to get rid of it. He took the stairs back to the street, cursing quietly. He could not afford to lose.

It was after ten o'clock by the time he left the Regent's Quadrant. The streets were still ablaze with gaslight and revellers dressed in velvet, satin and lace returned from the theatres or made their way out into the smoky night in search of excitement or oblivion. Edmund cut through the maze of alleyways to the north of the Strand, his feet crunching on discarded clay pipes and broken bottles. Here was a different kind of London. Barely clothed beggars stretched out their hands from the darkness and a pair of drunks – arm in arm – splashed past through the stinking puddles of refuse. A scrawny woman in a tattered cape pressed herself so close to Edmund that he could smell the bitterness of gin upon her breath.

He was disillusioned and weary by the time he reached his chambers on Inner Temple Lane, where he rented rooms on the second floor of a grimy, once-white building, the stucco façade darkened by decades of smog and soot. He took the stairs quietly, hoping that his wife would already be in bed asleep.

As he opened the door to their rooms, Edmund saw an envelope on the floor on top of the mat. Stooping and taking the letter in his hand, he noticed that it bore a ministerial stamp. He cracked the wax and read the note within.

The Right Honourable Lord Russell requests that Mr Fleetwood call at his earliest convenience at the Minister's office on Whitehall.

Edmund's heart jumped. Why on earth would the Home Secretary want to see him?

He turned the letter over, but it gave nothing away.

About the Writer

Anna studied English Literature at Pembroke College, Oxford, before becoming a criminal justice solicitor. She began writing five years ago after her first child was born (scribbling in cafes while he slept, when she should probably have been emptying nappy bins) and it accidentally took over. Anna has taken courses with Literary Kitchen and City Lit as well as the Novel Studio at City University. After the Novel Studio, she signed up with literary agent Juliet Mushens who sold *The Unseeing* at auction to Tinder Press (Headline) in the UK and Sourcebooks in the US.



Photo: Lou Abercrombie

Though not yet published, *The Unseeing* won the Brixton Bookjam Debut Novel Competition, came second in the AM Heath Criminal Lines Competition and has been placed or shortlisted for other competitions, as has Anna's short fiction. In 2014, Anna came runner up in the Grazia First Chapter Competition judged by Sarah Waters.

Currently, Anna is working on a second novel set on the Isle of Skye in 1857. A young woman goes to work for a collector of folk tales and fairy lore and learns that girl has gone missing, supposedly taken by spirits.

Sadly, however, Anna doesn't live anywhere near Skye. She lives in Camberwell, South London, with two small children, two cats and one husband. *The Unseeing* will be published on 14 July 2016 (February 2017 in the US).

You can find Anna:

At her website: <http://annamazzola.com>

On Twitter: https://twitter.com/Anna_Mazz

On Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AnnaMazzolaWriter/>

To buy the book:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Unseeing-Anna-Mazzola/dp/1472234731>

