

## **“Definitely an Author to Watch”: Rosie Garland on the (Neo-)Victorian Freak**

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**Abstract:**

This interview with Rosie Garland, conducted by Dr Lin Pettersson, gives insight into the author’s writing and her concern for issues regarding gender, normalcy and identity through a discussion of her acclaimed debut novel *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013). Garland speaks about the difficulties of being a woman writer and going from struggling to getting published, winning the Mslexia novel competition, and subsequently signing a two-book contract. She is a writer, singer and performer – labels that blend together in the prose of *The Palace of Curiosities* as the author combines the performativity of the neo-Victorian literary mode with the visual dynamics of Victorian popular entertainment in an exploration of gender issues, identity and deviance through the trope of the nineteenth-century freak show.

**Keywords:** deviance, freak, freak show, Rosie Garland, gender, identity, normalcy, performance, *The Palace of Curiosities*, visibility.

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Rosie Garland (b. 1960) is a multifaceted British author, performer and singer who resists categorisation and normative restrictions. Her different roles both on and off stage testify to her fascination with the Gothic as well as a prolonged interest in gender and deviance. She is known as a musician, burlesque artist and performing poet, and her artistic experience is deeply rooted in her writing and vice versa. Garland has been the lead vocalist of the post-punk Gothic rock band The March Violets since it formed in the 1980s and also acts as a cabaret performer in the role of the lesbian vampire Rosie Lugosi – a character she claims to be her alter ego (Garland 1998: 201). As an author Garland writes both fiction and non-fiction; to date she has published two novels and is currently writing her third. She explores different historical settings on the verge of change in her novels with the aim to delve into issues regarding gender identity, bodily transformation

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through performance and human interaction; *The Palace of Curiosities* is set in 1857-58, shortly before the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), whereas her second novel *Vixen* (2014) unfolds between 1348-49 at the time of arrival of the Black Death to England. Her forthcoming third novel, as Garland reveals in this interview, straddles two centuries with the story set close to the outbreak of WWI but harkening back to the Victorian period. In 2011 she won the Mslexia novel competition with *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013), which subsequently launched her career as a novelist signing a two-book deal with Harper Collins. The main body of her poetry is highly personal and intimate, but it also testifies to her versatility as a writer. While her collections *Things I Did While I Was Dead* (2010) and *Everything Must Go* (2012) mirror her experience of throat cancer, *Creatures of the Night* (2003) and *Coming Out at Night* (2005) are collections of performance poetry voiced and enacted by Rosie Lugosi. Garland has repeatedly referred to herself as an outsider and stated elsewhere that her impersonation of Rosie Lugosi represents “an inroad into my own self-awareness of what it means to be a lesbian performer. I am looked at, but the difference is that I am in possession of knowledge and I look back” (Garland 1998: 203). This same self-awareness is embedded in *The Palace of Curiosities* as freak characters manage to gain a voice, take charge of their self-representation and self-determine the ‘meaning’ of their queer embodiments.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen a growing interest in corporeality, its cultural construction and performance. Many contemporary authors turn to the nineteenth-century freak show in order to trace the antecedents of present-day notions of ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ body images, as well as highlighting the inextricability of lived embodiment from the social frameworks and technés that shape it. Drawing on the notion of “embodiment as the incarnation or materialisation of historically and culturally specific discourses and practices” (Sullivan and Murray 2009: 3), neo-Victorianism has found the nineteenth century to be a fruitful ground for examining bodily-produced gendered identities beyond the scope of normative gender performance. For example, novels such as Jane Sullivan’s *Little People* (2011) and Essie Fox’s *Elijah’s Mermaid* (2012) pay heed to ‘deviant’ somatic features to discuss topics of gender in the context of representation, agency and identity. These issues are brought to the fore in *The Palace of Curiosities* as Garland envisions the disavowed

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body in the making through a combination of magic realism and freak show dynamics. The plot is situated within the context of Victorian freak shows and with two human exhibits in main focus: Eve, “The Lion-Faced Woman”, and the self-healing Abel, “The Flayed Man”. The novel is supported by a social constructivist approach to gender and corporeality – Eve’s character builds on the display of her disability and femininity, whereas Abel’s character is more fluid and transferable when it comes to sexuality and corporeal (im)materiality – in either case, their identities are understood and embedded in performativity.

*The Palace of Curiosities* is contextualised within the Victorian world of spectacle and sustained by visual strategies as well as the inherent performativity of the neo-Victorian literary mode and can aptly be defined as a novel of spectacle. Sarah Gamble affirms that the performative capacity of the neo-Victorian literary mode becomes apparent as the Victorian era, both as a historical and a literary past, is displayed from a contemporary viewpoint, which she describes as “the contemporary gazing at the Victorians gazing at itself” (2009: 127-28). Accordingly, the reader is placed in the position of an observer who reads present-day values into the past to visualise the Victorians from different angles and interlock the past with the present in the process. Other scholars have similarly drawn attention to the visual characteristics of neo-Victorianism. Heilmann and Llewellyn explore the development of the literary genre into the twenty-first century in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010), arguing that “neo-Victorian literature sets up a mirror-like or reflective stance between our period and that of the nineteenth century” (2010: 144). Helen Davies develops the mirror trope further in *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (2015) in a thorough examination of the renewed fascination with the nineteenth-century freak, paying special heed to neo-Victorian self-reflectivity. She claims,

there are some oppressive reiterations of the boundaries between self and other, “normalcy” and the “abnormal”, but there are also possibilities for understanding and empathy, learning about different ways of being and living which can lead us to question our presumptions about “freakish” Victorians as well as about bodily diversity in our cultural moment as well. (Davies 2015: 15)

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This social constructivist approach to the freakish body invites revisions of both past and present views on unexceptional corporeality and discloses the somatechnical affects of freak narratives. Garland explores these in *The Palace of Curiosities* by juxtaposing the materiality of the body to the different technés that shape corporeality and technologies of power that attempt to control bodily divergence. As she characterises human exhibits as active agents in their performance she draws on her experience as a performer. Garland has explained elsewhere that she discovered the pleasure of being watched, being admired, having power and being in control on the stage (Garland 1998: 204). In the novel, she plays with visual strategies to interlock the reader-observer in a negotiation of the human identity of the freak character by using the neo-Victorian performative mode as a “transmitte[r] – of visual and material culture” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 1). In doing so she collapses the boundaries between past/present, us/them, self/other, human/non-human, and normal/abnormal by interweaving Victorian freak-show discourses with the contemporary reader’s perspective. Consequently, the objectifying gaze no longer suffices as a critical perspective to analyse literary refigurations of human exhibits. There is a need for new approaches that acknowledge the freak’s subjectivity, and, as I have suggested elsewhere (Pettersson 2013: 352-54), I find Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s conceptualisation of the stare as “an intense visual engagement [that] creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making” (2009: 3) to be an apt critical tool to appraise neo-Victorian enfreakment. *The Palace of Curiosities* is of neo-Victorian interest as it testifies to how the performative mode of neo-Victorianism is pushing towards new fronts.

The novel’s structure builds on two narrative strands that interweave the voices of Eve and Abel. The author has been compared to Angela Carter and Hilary Mantel who have also turned to the circus and freak show to “explore modern alienation” (Flanders 2013: n.p.). In comparison to *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *The Giant, O’Brien* (1998), both of which are told in the third person, Garland decided to use first-person narrators to let the characters speak for, and hence, represent themselves. For this purpose, she prefers using dual or multiple storylines to intertwine different perspectives in the plot. *The Palace of Curiosities* is full of extraordinary characters such as the excessively hirsute Eve, the immortal Abel, freak mongers and a manifold of freak exhibits, and has been praised by Sarah Waters as “a

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jewel-box of a novel, with page after page, scene after scene, layer after layer of treats and surprises. Garland is a real literary talent: definitely an author to watch”.<sup>1</sup> One of the text’s central characters, Eve, is partly inspired by the tragic life of Julia Pastrana (1834-60), a freak show exhibit who suffered from hypertrichosis (extreme hirsutism).<sup>2</sup> Pastrana was originally from Mexico and started her career as a freak in the United States. Later she was traded off to her husband-manager who displayed his wife across Europe. Like Saartjie Baartman (exhibited as “The Hottentot Venus”), Julia Pastrana was embalmed and displayed after her death and continued to be so long into the twentieth century. Although Garland fictionalises Pastrana’s life from a feminist perspective, the novel consists of something more than a retelling of her fate. As Marie-Luise Kohlke asserts, neo-Victorian literature has from its early beginnings “been crucially concerned with gender issues, particularly the role of women and the historical discrimination and abuses perpetrated against them [...] and has been engaged in feminist consciousness-raising” (Kohlke 2013: 207). Along these lines, Garland’s novel heightens awareness of embodied subjectivity as the author casts freak characters in a different light than passive victims as they struggle to assume control of their self-determination.

Garland is deeply concerned with all manners of deviance, ranging from gender to corporeality, and interrogates its reciprocal production vis-a-vis normalcy through the lens of magic realism, which repeatedly violates and deconstructs multiple binaries in her novel. See, for example, the way the deeply humane portrayal of Abel’s immortality and relationship to men and women disrupts structures such as human/non-human and heterosexual/homosexual, or how the contrast between Eve’s hairy body and her femininity pose a challenge to dichotomies such as human/animal and male/female. In her study of the Victorian fetishisation of Pastrana’s hair, Galia Ofek highlights how

the liminal nature of her hairiness [...] challenged distinct borderlines between male and female anatomies, human and animal life, reflecting and feeding into Victorian concerns that such divisions between the sexes and between the species were not so clear. (Ofek 2009: 57)

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Similarly, Garland’s heroine, the Lion-Faced Eve, a respectable, ‘normative’ Angel of the House displayed as a freak in her own home by her husband-manager, disrupts and defies clear-cut ontological and ideological demarcations and expectations.

The following interview was conducted in a face-to-face meeting in Málaga (Spain) in January 2014 and later followed up via email. The interviewee speaks about the hardships of being a woman writer, the writing process and her concern for gender, normalcy and embodied identity, particularly in relation to *The Palace of Curiosities*.

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**Pettersson:** You have won several prizes for your writing. Among those, *The Palace of Curiosities* was awarded the Mslexia prize in 2011 and won the ‘Loved by You Award’ for best novel in 2013.<sup>3</sup> What has it meant for you to win prizes and how has this affected your career?

**Garland:** To be completely honest, when I was starting out as an author prizes were more important to me than they are now, because they were a confirmation that my work was well regarded and I was not wasting my time. Three years ago *The Palace of Curiosities* could not get published; so winning the Mslexia prize was a dream come true. Beside the fact that it was a women’s competition, nothing else was known about me apart from my gender.

Once I went to a reading by Pat Barker who is one of my favourite authors. I particularly like her straightforwardness. When somebody in the audience asked her what it was like to win the Booker, she answered that prizes and awards are more about the judges than about the writer. While she admitted that it was great to win such an accolade, she also insisted on her awareness that she might not have won the Booker if she had had different judges. Then she added that if the judges had read a different book in the morning and hers in the afternoon, she still might not have won it.

I agree with Pat Barker on these points. I have a particular preference for competitions that are judged anonymously. I feel that if I am judged anonymously and if the judges do not know my name, age, gender or status, then it means that it is my writing that is being evaluated. I have been on the shortlist for several prizes and awards that are not judged

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anonymously, and I do not say it is the reason I did not win the competitions, but I think that gender, class and age are brought into the equation as well and somehow the same rules come to bear as in the rest of society: white, able-bodied and heterosexual. Therefore, the “Loved by You” award was important to me, because it was voted for by readers and not by a jury. This prize was a complete surprise to me, and they even used the word “landslide” to describe it. In a way, it showed me that I was right to keep going. So when it is about prizes I have won on the merits of my writing, then, “yes” is the answer.

**Petterson:** You are truly a multifaceted artist: you are a novelist, a poet, a singer and a performer. Do you identify with one label more than the other or are they interconnected for you?

**Garland:** Thank you! I started doing live public performances with the March Violets in the early 1980s. The group reformed in 2007 after twenty-five years, and I use my name Rosie Garland when I am singing in the March Violets. We describe ourselves as post-punk. It is an important aspect of myself, although it is not the entirety of me. I guess with Rosie Garland, the author of *The Palace of Curiosities*, that is just me. Writing and singing are intrinsic parts of my creative self – as close as breathing.

When I started staging cabaret performances I developed an alter ego: Rosie Lugosi. She is a performance character anchored in my interest in the occult and vampires. The performance is tongue-in-cheek, and Rosie Lugosi is very camp and kitsch. I use an excess of costumes, make-up and wigs. I would say that she is a pantomime character or even a freak show character. I have always been told that I am very bossy, and, in a way, she is a small portion of me expanded to a ridiculous extent. That is why I use a different name.

Nevertheless, I am not just a writer, singer or performer; I am also a private person. Sometimes people look at me just as the performer that stands upon stage and sings and performs and do not see beyond that. And that is fine, because that is one of the reasons I developed the character Rosie Lugosi. It is very easy to perform onstage if you stand holding a mask in front of you – there is a safety in it and I found that my confidence increased on the stage. I could be whoever I wanted there: I could stroll around and act as the biggest diva in the world. It is funny, though, how

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occasionally people take the character too seriously and get surprised when they meet me offstage and find out that I am actually a quiet person.

**Pettersson:** You clearly employ strategies of masquerade as an actress. To what extent do you use the stage as a space to explore constructions of gender?

**Garland:** This is what I am doing when I perform as Rosie Lugosi. I am not just enacting a character, but also staging a performance of that character, if you see what I mean? Rosie Lugosi is a dominatrix vampire who manipulates, controls and tells the audience off. But she does it in such a light-hearted way that the audience adores it.

On the stage I am always conscious of what I am doing and that it is a performance. But if you think about it a little more, in some way we all constantly perform, and for me, women in particular are performing their gender. My intention with Rosie Lugosi is to make the performance of gender clear as I enact it in ways that are not always that obvious or very unnatural.<sup>4</sup> This way I draw attention to how we women perform femininity and gender. Rosie Lugosi is to a great extent a female drag queen. Just as drag queens are men pretending to be women, Rosie Lugosi is a woman performing what it is like to be an extreme example of a woman.<sup>5</sup>

**Pettersson:** The performative nature of gender is distinctly pronounced in neo-Victorian novels engaging with the world of spectacle. Particularly novels such as Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and Ann Featherstone’s *Walking in Pimlico* (2009), which are deeply invested with Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity. Similarly, *The Palace of Curiosities* is performative in form, content and style. To what extent do you deliberately engage with theoretical thinking and incorporate your own experience into the writing process?

**Garland:** My reading of Butler has profoundly influenced the creation of the performance persona of Rosie Lugosi. And yes – since my childhood I have occupied the ‘performance world’, so it is bound to leak into my writing. I have written papers examining the theoretical underpinning of my writing and performance,<sup>6</sup> but I keep my non-fiction separate from my fiction. In my mind, that is how it should be.

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In my fiction, the influence of theoretical concepts could be better described as a background hum – which is the right place for it. I have a strong belief that research is at its best when it’s like an iceberg, with only the tiniest fraction visible.

**Pettersson:** *The Palace of Curiosities* is set in Victorian London. How did you end up in the Victorian era, and did you choose London for any particular reason?

**Garland:** Some of the answer to your question lies in the way I wrote Eve. I have actually written four and a half novels, and I came up with the character of Abel – the man who lives forever – in my second (but unpublished) novel. I tried to write his story through a timeline of three or four timelines, but he did not find meaning and the novel did not go anywhere. It was a mess! Since it did not work I decided to put Abel down and write about something else. However, he was the character I really wanted to write about, so I always kept him in the back of my head.

Sometimes characters just come to me very fully formed, like Eve, who is inspired by the life of Julia Pastrana. Eve was the character Abel needed, the one he could interact with and come together with. I first read about Julia Pastrana when I came across Christopher Hals Gylseth and Lars Toverud’s biography *Julia Pastrana: The Tragic Story of the Victorian Ape Woman* (2001). However, this was simply the start of the process, as *The Palace of Curiosities* is in no way a re-telling. I felt fascinated by Eve and realised that Abel might work better if he came into her world. You could say that in a way I had two characters from two different novels finding each other!

London happened to be the right setting for this novel. Of course, there is something really special about London, and I have a personal relationship to the city. I was born there and my father comes from the East End and is from a very poor background. Partly, to write about London is to look back at my family’s background, how it is to live in poverty and how it really is not glamorous. I felt that the novel just had to be set in London... Veracity is vital to writing about nineteenth-century London, but I do not want detail to drag the story down. Just think about the streets as Abel gets to work. I have not named them, because I do not think anybody is that interested in looking at a map of London in 1857 to check whether the street

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names are right. That level of detail feels like an interruption to the story and a way for the author to show off to the reader what he or she knows. What is more important is for the streets to feel real and for the right atmosphere to be created.

**Pettersson:** It is interesting that you say that Abel came to you first, because although Eve seems to be the central character, she and Abel complement each other in such a wonderful way that you cannot have one without the other.

**Garland:** I could not have written Eve without Abel. They obviously need each other, and that is part of the way I write fiction. I am preoccupied with the way people come together, or do not come together. I am also concerned with the friction between people when they do come up against each other. That is the reason why I like to have more than one narrator.

**Pettersson:** Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) was a precursor to the neo-Victorian literary mode, but it was also the first novel to explore the Victorian world of spectacle to push a feminist agenda. You recur to the same era and like Carter you use magic realism. Has *Nights at the Circus* been a source of inspiration when writing *The Palace for Curiosities*?

**Garland:** Well, yes and no. I read *Nights at the Circus* in the 1980s when it came out, and I was blown away by it. Angela Carter is the godmother of many writers and so she should be! Not one of her novels was the same as the other, and you cannot classify her into one single category or genre. I love that about her. I was very aware of *Nights of the Circus* when the character of Eve came to me. I read the novel in the 80s and was very clear about not re-reading it while writing *The Palace of Curiosities*. I think that reading other people’s writing can be a bit like walking through a meadow in autumn: you end up covered with sticky seed heads and thistles. Little bits stick to you even though you did not mean to pick them up. I have a usual habit of devouring history, and when I am writing fiction I prefer reading poetry and non-fiction, such as history, social history, medicine and linguistics.

While I was writing the *The Palace of Curiosities* I did a lot of research. I read a lot of non-fiction, especially about freaks. I particularly

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like Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996). As mentioned earlier, the sad story of Julia Pastrana got me started. I thought about what it might have been like if her life had not been as tragic and she had had some extent of agency. Still it had to be something realistic: I wondered about what corner in the world she might have been able to carve a place for herself. Also, I wanted to incorporate a beautiful hirsutism into the novel and found inspiration in Lavinia Fontana’s sixteenth-century painting of Antonietta Gonzalez and the freak-show performer Stephan Bribowski. I imagined Eve looking a bit more like them and being gorgeous. During the writing process I knew the story I wanted to tell. I have always been very interested in views on the inside and the outside of the body. I am fascinated by museums like La Specola in eighteenth-century Florence and its anatomical wax models. In fact, the character of the Italian anatomist in *The Palace of Curiosities* was also in novel number two, where he is more expanded, while he is more of a side character in this book.

**Pettersson:** There has been a parallel upsurge of critical studies and fiction about the Victorian freak show in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, works such as Lillian Craton’s *The Victorian Freak Show: The Significance of Disability and Differences in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Fiction* (2009) and Nadja Durbach’s *The Spectacle of Deformity and British Modern Culture* (2010) contextualise the freak show in terms of British culture as opposed to the American side show. On the other hand, there is an accentuated concern over corporeal deviance and agency in neo-Victorian novels such as *The Palace of Curiosities*, Essie Fox’s *Elijah’s Mermaid* (2012) and Jane Sullivan’s *Little People* (2011). What do you think the renewed interest in the freak show is indebted to? Why this fascination with representations of divergent corporeality in the past?

**Garland:** *Zeitgeist*? How fascinating you should say so. A previous agent told me that publishers and the public were not interested in *The Palace of Curiosities* precisely because of its ‘divergent corporeality’. Clearly, he was wrong. I cannot speak for the motivations of the other authors. I can only speak personally, and for me it is no mere fad. Telling stories about life on the boundaries of what is human, acceptable or normative is what I do.

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As for the issue of writing the past: paradoxically, I do not regard myself as a historical novelist. Yet over and over I am drawn to writing novels located in the past. For example, my second novel *Vixen* is set in 1349 and the new novel I am working on takes place on the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are a number of reasons why I keep being drawn into the past. I am intrigued by times when the world was on the verge of change (e.g. 1349 is when the Black Death arrived in the United Kingdom).

In addition, I am interested in unravelling hidden histories. There is the old adage that ‘history is told by the winners’. My histories are told by those who never got into history books – which, let us face it, is most of us. Hence my belief that *The Palace of Curiosities* addresses universal themes that resonate with a modern reader. As one of Emily Dickinson’s poems reads, “tell the truth but tell it slant” (Johnson 1961: 507). I am telling history, and telling it off kilter.

**Pettersson:** Both Eve and Abel are described as freaks in *The Palace of Curiosities*, yet you manage to turn such an exploitative space as the freak show into a site of self-reliance, self-expression and even fulfilment for the protagonists. To what extent do you think the freak performer is in charge of his or her self-representation? You have stated elsewhere that, as a performer, you promote activism through entertainment (Garland 1998: 205-06). How is this reflected in *The Palace of Curiosities*?

**Garland:** I did not want Eve’s story to be unrealistically sweet, or a fairy story (even though her invisible friend Donkey Skin is a character from a fairy story). I wanted her to have real struggles and to fight for agency. To let agency fall into Eve’s lap would have been too simplistic and unrealistically optimistic. I am not sure to what extent Julia Pastrana had any real choices, but I feel that the level of agency is embedded in gender issues. For example, the freak performer Stanley Berent (1901-80), aka Seal the Seal Boy, probably had more influence over his performance and control over his own finances than Pastrana.

However, it is ridiculous to say that no people with spectacular bodies have ever been exploited. Yet, it is equally foolish to say that all have. I am particularly thinking about performers that I know who are working at the present. During the 1970s and 80s there was a time when the

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whole idea of the side show or freak show went out of fashion, because they were perceived as politically incorrect. The line was ‘we should not exploit disabled persons’. The word “we” invariably refers to an able-bodied default. I am glad to see that, in particular, for the last years there has been a resurgence of disabled people performing. Take for instance, Mat Fraser, who describes himself as having short arms. One of his many shows is a one-man play called *Seal Boy*, which is based on the life of Stanley Berent.<sup>7</sup>

I remember going to a Christmas pantomime of ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’, where they advertised that the show included “genuine dwarfs”. Afterwards I was chatting to one of the guys in the bar and he said, “pantomimes are great because I can make money to pretty much pay for the whole year. Besides, this is what I want to do! I’m a performer, and I’m never going to be James Bond, and I don’t care”. So, he was choosing to do this, and using what he had to earn money. Obviously, it is a complicated subject.

**Petterson:** Do you think this attitude is rooted in the politics of the 1970s when disabled and visually different people were kept secluded in various kinds of institutions and hidden away from the public?

**Garland:** I think that this is reflected in the demise of the freak shows. To a great extent, it was the able-bodied not wanting to be reminded of the visually different and to hide them away. ‘We’, or ‘the able-bodied’, did not want to look at them anymore. I feel this is comparable to responses to cancer: ‘Please stay at home, because I do not want to have to look at you’. This is what actually worries me about the invisibility of freak performers. Just as cancer reminds us that we all have to die one day, physically different people are uncomfortable to look at. In a discourse about normality, we are presented with an impossible ‘normal’ to which we are supposed to aspire, whether it is to be able-bodied, (hetero)sexual, feminine... I think at heart that ‘normal’ does not exist. It is the will-o’-the-wisp! The world seems to spend so much time trying to be ‘normal’ while none of us are... but still we try to be ‘normal’ in order to be happy.

**Petterson:** While Eve is clearly portrayed as human and feminine, Abel is a queer character in every possible sense and it is difficult to decide who or what he is. What is your intention with this?

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**Garland:** Abel is a strange and magical character; therefore, I used elements of magic realism. I needed him to be clear and right in my own mind, but I did not want to spell everything out. I do not give a precise answer to why he has lived forever: it simply had to feel real. However, I wanted to avoid frustrating the readers and was conscious about this during the writing process. Abel is continuously asking himself questions throughout the novel, and his character is based on the questions he raises.

**Pettersson:** Eve feels very human, although she is unconventional in many aspects, almost contradictive: she is a sexualised Victorian woman and also an extremely hairy woman, which does not fit the current view of femininity. In what way do you think the Victorians were different, yet similar to us?

**Garland:** I do not think that we have changed much at all. I have a belief that people feel the same way about the same things and dream the same dreams that people did 500 years ago. I do not think that air travelling and the Internet have changed much about who we are as human beings. They say that the past is foreign country, but I find it a cliché, and I really think they felt the same as us. A lot of what we know about the Victorians is filtered through Victorian media, and you can draw a parallel between that and how we are filtered through our media. Imagine 200 years hence: somebody reading a women’s magazine would think that all women living now are obsessed with hair, want to wear pink, get married and have children. That is not the totality of who we are. There were many pronouncements regarding morality and behaviour during the Victorian era. I suggest that they could indicate the opposite of what they seem to imply: Victorians were not prudish and buttoned-up. People only need to have dire warnings about correct morality and behaviour to avoid straying from the ideal.

Generally there was a lack of basic sexual information for women in the Victorian era. I actually have stories from my family about women not knowing what sex was until they got married, because nobody had told them. Still, all you have to do is read Victorian women’s writing to know that they were just as passionate as we are today. I think there is prevailing arrogance in each generation thinking that it has invented sexuality. For me,

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Eve’s sexuality was not an issue. Although her mother finds it disrespectable, that is not a lot different to present-day mothers. I was intrigued by societal discomfort about women having sexuality at all, and in particular women with a physical disability. The idea that disabled people have a sexuality still provokes social discomfort, now as much as then. However, even with all the issues of gender and sexuality discussed above, I do not write with a particular agenda in mind. I prefer to describe myself as a storyteller, because that is what I do. I tell stories.

**Pettersson:** As a reader, one perceives that Eve fits the present-day image of womanhood. In contrast, her hairiness and refusal to shave does not correspond to contemporary discourses of female beauty. To what extent does hair circumscribe femininity?

**Garland:** I think that women’s relationship with their hair is fraught with difficulty. Sure, I cannot be sure what it was like 150 years ago, but I have had experiences of different cultural relationships with female body hair. I worked in Sudan for two years and noticed that women removed all hair from their bodies (arms, legs, and genitals): everything except for the hair on their heads. In British culture it has always been common for women to remove hair from under their arms; now removal of pubic hair is increasing. Hair is a locus for real discomfort. I guess that issues of hairiness/hairlessness came into very sharp focus during my experience of cancer. I lost all my hair and became completely bald. It was then that I realised how profoundly hair on your head is tied to femininity. Although you must have hair, you cannot have too much of it, or rather you must have it in the right places. The dominant message seems to be that hair is only OK on a woman’s head. Anything else is deemed unfeminine and unsuitable. Eve’s relationship with her hair is troubled and changes throughout the novel. I wanted her to have an excess of hair but still be beautiful.

**Pettersson:** In your poem ‘Dignity’ you put emphasis on the importance of “learning to stare back”.<sup>8</sup> What does staring mean for you?

**Garland:** One of the things about having cancer is that you feel very visible, as you are visibly different. For instance, I had no hair. For some people it became a reminder of mortality: you look like a *memento mori* and

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that is terrifying. Each culture has its own taboos, and while the Victorians had a taboo on sexuality they did not have a taboo on death. They were fascinated by death, whereas today there is an unspoken unwillingness to speak about death. The insistence on tropes like ‘60 is the new 40’ appears more like a refusal of death than a celebration of life to me. Cancer is a real leveller, because it got me to accept that I was going to die; so it has brought me relief and today each day is like a gift.

**Pettersson:** It is amazing to hear you say that you felt visible, because you are such a public person and you go onstage as a lead singer, dominatrix and performing poet. Yet in spite of this, you say that you worry about feeling visible offstage?

**Garland:** The whole idea of visibility is interesting and complex. It has to do with being a performer on the one hand, and with being a private person on the other, and moreover, with having the ability to switch on and off. When I am performing as Rosie Lugosi I am very visible. As Rosie Garland, less so. People do not even notice me when I slip into the dressing room. However, makeup transforms me into a highly visible character. When I had cancer and was wearing an intravenous feeding tube up my nose, I could not hide. I had no choice. It is interesting learning to handle different levels of visibility, and again this is linked to Eve and Abel. I think that one of the reasons that Eve is the first person that the reader gets into is that she is very clearly visually different. Abel’s difference is not visible; instead it is revealed gradually through the story.

**Pettersson:** You struggled with cancer between 2009 and 2010 and lost your voice for a period. Was writing part of the recovery process?

**Garland:** Well, I would say both yes and no. First of all, being diagnosed with throat cancer was a total surprise. I have not smoked a cigarette in my entire life and I do not drink very much, and I had what is called ‘a smokers’ and drinkers’ cancer’. And having throat cancer is, for a singer, the irony of ironies. Cancer is connected with my writing in a number of ways, but maybe not in the way you expect it to be. When I had cancer I could not write, and I hope this does not sound offensive to anybody who lives with cancer, but I felt bereavement. I was unable to write, partly because of all

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the drugs I was on. The medication was really intense, and it just knocked me out. I had to use all my energy on getting better. So not being able to write, which is such an intrinsic part of me, was like losing part of myself. I was afraid that I was never going to be able to write again. Also, my confidence was not very high at the time, so when writing started trickling back, writing was not part of the recovery process. I would rather say that part of the recovery process was beginning to write again. It felt like a homecoming when the writing came back into my life again. It was a really emotional experience and poetry simply flowed out of me.

**Pettersson:** Was there a connection between losing your voice and writing?

**Garland:** I think my most difficult time was when I had a nurse counsellor visiting me. She was a member of the charity organisation Macmillan that offers support for people with cancer. The Macmillan nurse told me to prepare and consider what my life might be like if I never recovered my voice again. That was the first time I cried. It made me realise just then how integral my voice was to me, and the idea of potentially losing it was just terrifying. I had not cried up to then because I was convinced I was going to get better, and this made me fall apart. So I worked very hard and got very assertive talking to the doctors in the hospital. I got speech therapy and even got two lessons with a singing coach. Today I can sing again, although there are a couple of notes which I cannot sing as high as I used to. Still, I do not see that as a problem; the other alternative is far less pleasant. I am thankful for every day that I got my voice back, and now I have moved on from poetry to fiction. I have not only recovered my voice but also my ability to write creative fiction.

**Pettersson:** Has your cancer experience influenced the process of creating characters that have no voice?

**Garland:** I have always written about outsiders even before my throat cancer, but I honestly think that it has made my writing better. I genuinely think that my poems are better; I do not know why, they just are. It is a life-changing experience because so many people do not live... I wrote *The Palace of Curiosities* before my cancer, and for me it was very important to have Eve and Abel speak for themselves. That is why I wrote in the first

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person. Many ‘freak’ narratives, as for instance *Nights at the Circus* or *The Giant, O’Brien*, use the third person, which creates a sense of distance. I wanted the reader to be much closer to the freak.

**Pettersson:** You favour marginalised characters and multiple storylines in your writing and use historical settings to portray issues of human interaction and gender relations. Both *The Palace of Curiosities* and *Vixen* contain many Gothic elements, and issues concerning identity are at heart of your novels as you delve into questions regarding gender, normalcy and fitting in. Could you talk a little bit more about yourself as an outsider and in what way it shapes your writing?

**Garland:** I have always written about outsiders; whoever they might be. My fiction is about people who will not (or cannot) squeeze into the one-size-fits-all templates on offer and the friction that occurs when they try. I know this comes from having always been an outsider myself. I never did fit in. I will be honest, when I was a kid this led to lonely times. I was bullied, but I was lucky to get through it. One of the things that helped get me through was reading. I devoured books, because they offered me other worlds, escape, other ways of being. I found it an easy step to start the process of creating my own stories, my own worlds.

However, I feel it is an oversimplification to shackle what I write to my identity in some kind of 1+1=2 determinative way. Sure, I am queer/feminist/Goth (and so on). Although ‘outsider’ issues play a part in what I write about, the breadth of my work demonstrates far more than a conglomeration of labels. They may inform, but do not limit my creativity. My characters are not token weirdos and their difference cannot be reduced to some clunky plot device. Nor have I any desire to preach (memories of being forced to sit through church sermons as a child). *The Palace of Curiosities* is neither a diatribe nor a treatise. It is a novel, and to quote Tom Clancy, a novelist should “just tell the damn story” (Struckel 2001: 21).

**Pettersson:** On your web page you declare that the biblical overtones that some readers perceive were not intentional on your part.

**Garland:** Well, what I said on the same web post is that people read their own stories into any narrative. That is part of the alchemy of story-telling. I find that the act of reading itself in many ways is similar to the act of

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observing; the subject changes the object according to his or her perspective. It is almost as if the text does not become a novel until it is read or observed.

**Pettersson:** Then, does Abel bear more mythological and supernatural meanings than biblical overtones?

**Garland:** Yeah, it is the idea of somebody who lives forever. It grew out of a question I asked myself: what would it be like to actually be Prometheus? What would it be like to be the person that everybody has written the myths about? I guess that is why he came to me first... Also, there was a lot of literature around the 2000s about living forever, vampires in particular, which everybody seemed to perceive as something very glamorous. People have a very romantic view of vampires, but I actually think that living forever would be unbearable! I do not think that the human mind can cope with it, and that is exactly why I came up with Abel. In some ways Abel could be read as having a boring existence, because he keeps on doing the same things over and over again. However, he keeps forgetting as a kind of survival mechanism and to avoid going completely mad. My take is that remembering everything for thousands of years would drive you crazy. He is one of the answers to one of those complex questions regarding what it would be like to live forever.

**Pettersson:** Lately, much has been done to recover queer history and to rescue voices of previously marginalised people. For example, in literature authors as Emma Donoghue and Sarah Waters queer up history and address issues of lesbianism in the Victorian period. Queer identities are also a central issue in *The Palace of Curiosities*, yet you apply a different slant to your treatment of sexuality. Do you write with a specific purpose in mind?

**Garland:** As I have said before, my purpose is to tell stories and I do not write with a polemic in mind. I am interested in how people who are perceived as different cope in a normalising world. That is what gets my creative engine running.

I am a feminist but I do not write with ‘an agenda’. Feminism is only an agenda for those who do not have to deal with feminism, just as gay rights are only an agenda if you do not need those rights. Anything that is

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outside the norm does not necessarily have to be pushing an agenda. Honestly, I consider that when a book is described as feminist or as having a feminist agenda, it is merely a way of pigeonholing or diminishing it. Rebecca West once stated that she was called a feminist when expressing opinions that differentiated her from a doormat. In this regard, any novel that suggests that a woman is a regular human being is called radical and feminist or described as ‘having an agenda’. So I suggest that we turn it the other way around and ask ourselves, who is saying that? Whose voice is that? Why is this considered as a feminist novel? Is it simply life?

The way I see it, when people are asking about agendas, it actually reveals how they categorise deviance as abject from their own world of normality. And it is difficult to speak about these topics without reiterating the terminology you want to avoid. Rather than considering the category itself we ought to take a closer look at who defines the category in question. Who has defined them? Who is talking about them? Whose point of view are we looking from?

**Pettersson:** Could you tell me something about your future projects as an author? When will we see your next book?

**Garland:** In spring 2015 I am on a hectic book tour for the paperback publication of *Vixen*. I am also working on a new poetry collection – a sequence of narrative poems inspired by the time I worked as a teacher in Darfur (Sudan) for 2 years. I was truly a stranger in a strange land. If that was not enough, my band the March Violets is touring Europe and the USA in autumn 2015.

In addition, I am getting on with my next novel for HarperCollins. As I mentioned above, it takes place at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century in Manchester, England. Unsurprisingly, it features some odd characters... I love the interesting projects that come into my life! One I am particularly excited about is being invited to co-curate the John Rylands Library Gothic exhibition in summer 2015.<sup>9</sup>

**Pettersson:** Thank you for granting me this interview. It has been a pleasure talking to you!

**Garland:** Thank you! The pleasure is on my side!

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### **Notes**

1. The quote is taken from a personal conversation between Sarah Waters and Rosie Garland’s editor, Katie Espiner (HarperCollins).
2. Julia Pastrana was brought to the United States where she was displayed as “The Marvellous Hybrid or Bear Woman” at the Gothic Hall musical theatre on Broadway and later toured the country (Gylseth and Toverud 2001: 10). In 1857 Julia Pastrana married Theodore Lent who took her to London and exhibited her in freak shows as “The Non-Descript”. Julia gave birth to a son with the same medical condition as her while on a freak-show tour across Europe. Both child and mother died soon after birth and Julia’s husband-manager mummified their corpses to continue making a profit. They were later sold to a Norwegian amusement park impresario (Hans Jaeger Lund) who exhibited Julia Pastrana until the cultural conscience changed. Withdrawn from public view, the bodies of both mother and son were donated to Norway’s National Hospital (Oslo) where they remained stored away in the basement. When they were found decades later, the infant mummy had been destroyed whereas Julia was expatriated in February 2012 and granted a proper burial. Her tragic story is by no means an isolated case –as mentioned above, the South African human exhibit Saartjie Baartman (1790-1815) suffered a very similar fate and has been portrayed, among others, by Barbara Chase-Riboud in *The Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003).
3. The “Loved by You Award” is a price granted by the LBGT network Respect in 27 different categories to acknowledge the achievements of members of the LBGT community. Awards are based on anonymous voting and being the people’s choice. For more information, visit <http://www.cooperative.coop/corporate/RespectLGBT/Loved-by-YouAwards-2013/>. Mslexia is a network for and about women who write. It was founded in 1999 with the aim to help women overcome difficulties in getting published. It has its own magazine and organises workshops as well as yearly

competitions on poetry, short stories, pamphlets and novels. For detailed information, visit <https://mslexia.co.uk/>.

4. Rosie Garland uses burlesque performance to enact unconventional female sexuality in the role of the lesbian Vampire Queen Rosie Lugosi, who is comfortable with both her body and queer gender identity. There are several videos available on YouTube, however, it is highly recommended to watch her performances live as she interacts with the audience through direct address. Upcoming live performances are available under ‘News and Events’ at Rosie Garland’s official webpage: <http://www.rosiegarland.com/>.
5. Rosie Garland writes performance poetry and addresses issues such as femininity, unconventionality and emotions, as for example, her poem “Angry”, which was originally published in *Coming Out at Night* (2005) and later televised on BBC Three. The poetry collection is currently out of press, but a clip from BBC is still available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWBojBkzpdg>.
6. See, for example, the book chapter ‘Manchester Survivors Poetry and the Performance Persona Rosie Lugosi’ in *Occupational Therapy Without Borders* (Elsevier 2011) or the article ‘Coming Out at Night – Performing as the Lesbian Vampire Rosie Lugosi’ in *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (1998).
7. The British actor, producer and musician Mat Fraser (1962) has the same medical condition as Stanley Berent (Phocomelia). He staged *Seal Boy* at Coney Island (New York) in June 2013. Fraser has also appeared as “Paul, the Illustrated Seal” in the fourth season of the television series *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014-15).
8. Originally published in the poetry collection *Everything Must Go* (2012). Several videos of her performance poetry from this volume, among those ‘Dignity’, are available on the Holland Press webpage at [http://hollandparkpress.co.uk/magazine\\_detail.php?magazine\\_id=245&language=English](http://hollandparkpress.co.uk/magazine_detail.php?magazine_id=245&language=English).
9. The exhibition ‘Darkness and Light: Exploring the Gothic’ at the John Rylands Library stays open until December 20, 2015. Further information is available at <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/whatson/exhibitions/darkness-and-light/>.

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