



Inspiration

Caroline Brothers

POETS LIKE KEATS AND WORDSWORTH were famously inspired by nature; authors like Patrick Modiano by long urban walks. For the Brontë sisters and Austen, it was social life and family. For others, it arrives in dreams or conversations overheard on a bus. In my case, I've come to realise, inspiration frequently begins with a sense of place.

Inconveniently enough, this is almost never the place that is nearest to me, rarely even the place in which I live. Most often it is a location encountered on some form of journey, that leaves so deep an impression I feel compelled to explore it in words.

My first novel, *Hinterland*, grew in fact out of three locations that reared out of the landscape latent with possibility. All three of them were on borders, the kind of liminal places we tend to pass through with barely a glance.

The first was a frontier crossing in the middle of winter: leaden skies, a highway and a river, and concrete bunkers at either end of a bridge. This was the edge of the European Union, the land border where Turkey begins. The second was a disused sawmill in the French port city of Calais, a freezing loft where migrants from the Horn of Africa gathered to shelter and sleep. The third was among the sand dunes further along the same coastline – the blue border between France and England – whence Dover's cliffs could be seen with the naked eye.



Mixed up in the mesh of response and motivation we label inspiration was the desire to capture their atmosphere; the power of each place for me was a kind of drive. Destinies are often forged in settings that are far from glamorous; something resonated in the contrast between their bleakness and the momentous events playing out in individual lives.

Description alone wouldn't do it. Instead, I sent in my protagonists, to see these places through their optic and explore how these locations marked *them*.

Setting was also a driver for my second novel, *The Memory Stones*; my familiarity with the Greek islands had to be rendered fresh and without cliché for my young protagonist, for whom this was a first encounter. My more recent experience of Argentina, meanwhile, had to be rendered old and familiar to an exiled man.

Often my fiction is inspired by places I no longer live in, that I *have* some intimate knowledge of, but also the clarity that absence brings. Familiarity risks blinding the writer to what is special. I want to recognise the habitual, but not be numbed by it; to retain both first and lasting impressions of a place. It demands both sufficient experience to write with authority and distance to write with liberty, without fear of misrepresentation or betrayal.

Perhaps, in the end, we have little say in the things that will resonate and inspire us to write; whether family life or nature, the landscape or the city, there is always something mysterious about the collision of possibilities that ignites in us, and sets us off on a creative roll.