



Troublemaker, Agitator: the work of Catherine Barter

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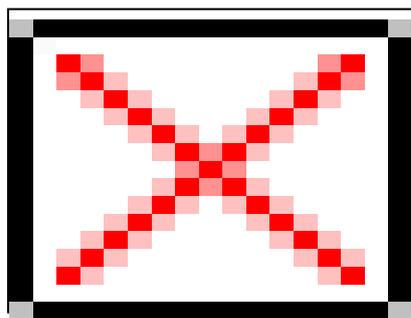
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Fen Coles interviews **Catherine Barter** about her new book, **When We Played with Fire**.

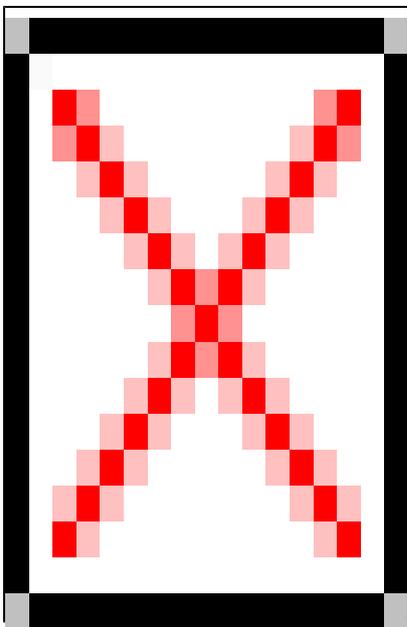
Early on in [We Played with Fire](#) [3], budding Spiritualist Medium, Maggie Fox, remarks, 'It was possible to believe and not believe something at the same time. It was easy?'. When I ask author **Catherine Barter** whether she believes in the supernatural, she echoes, 'I definitely believe in people?s ability to believe and not believe things at the same time?', adding, 'I don?t believe in ghosts with my rational brain?but I also do and I don?t find it hard to reconcile the two?.



This precarious balance between what is real and what is fraudulent, what is earthly, tangible and what is other-worldly, unknowable, is a tension which Barter maintains throughout her latest novel, creating a painfully tightly wound coil which explodes suddenly into extraordinary episodes.

[We Played with Fire](#) [3] is based on the true story of the Fox Sisters, credited with the birth of modern Spiritualism in mid-19th century North America. Catherine wanted to do more than recreate the standard accounts of these young women which have typically reduced them to frauds: 'I couldn?t help wondering whether there might be a more interesting story than just fakery?'. Drawing on her extensive academic background in US Cultural History, she stages her fictionalised biography against a dizzying backdrop of population migrations and industrialisations, and amidst the commotion of mid-19th century political radicalism, feminism and abolitionism foremost. The result is a wonderful hybrid genre: part Historical Fiction, part Gothic, relayed through the thoroughly modern voice of Maggie Fox. It is a luxuriously layered-up novel which thrills with the speed of human evolution itself, cut through by a pull of clamorous voices from the past.

As for whether the novel?s hauntings are real (and, trust me, they really do leave you with a chill), whether the Foxes really do summon up the dead, you?ll find no spoilers here. Maggie Fox is just as earnest in her assertion, 'She knew an extraordinary thing- that ghosts were real?' as she is playful in this tease, delivered with pitch perfect teenage irony: 'Some people were beautiful, some people were intelligent. Maggie and Kate could crack their bones. You had to make the best of what you were given?.



The leap from Catherine's debut, [Troublemakers](#) [4], contemporary social realist fiction, to the historical Gothicism of **We Played with Fire** doesn't seem quite so far flung when you view them through the prism of Political YA Fiction, a genre really earning its title of late. Both novels take place during especially politically turbulent times and centre a teenage girl who observes, absorbs and then marks out her own agency within that exciting unrest. I ask Catherine about her own political journey as a teenager. She describes wryly how, as a teenager growing up in conservative-leaning Stratford-upon-Avon in the mid-90s, simply having left-of-centre views marked you out as somewhat oppositional. The contrast between her household with its energetic left-wing discussions and her school mock elections where 'the mock Tory party always won' led to her constructing her political identity through 'difference and tension'. She remembers, she says, 'dutifully asking for [Naomi Klein's] **No Logo** for my 16th birthday' and the political influence of **Byker Grove** and **Grange Hill** as well as the early days of the internet, but 'there wasn't a big 1990s youth activist movement that I knew about then'. She delights at the opportunities young people are presented with now: 'There are so many ways [they] are being 'radicalised'- in the best sense - getting involved in direct action, campaigning?.'

One of my greatest joys in reading Catherine's work is how she raises up young people's voices. Lena in **Troublemakers** is a case in point. But it is no less true of Maggie as she wonders about her place in the political whirl of 1840s Rochester. In awe of the flurry of pamphlets and the traffic of visiting activists centred around the household of real-life radical Quakers Amy and Isaac Post, Maggie herself questions many of the 'truths' presented by 19th century ideologies, such as the colonial version of US history she is taught at school. And, with the supportive nudges of key older women in her life - activist Elizabeth Reid, teacher Anna Kelly - Maggie Fox finally does find her place in amongst all of this political upheaval. At the novel's ending, she concludes, 'She would probably not change laws, change the world, like Amy and Elizabeth, but she would cause a small disturbance, disrupt the order of things, and perhaps that was worth doing?.'

Finding one's voice, foregrounding unheard voices are central to Catherine's work. And it plays out in quite a complex way in **We Played with Fire**. The original pamphlet, by journalist E. E. Lewis, which documented the 1848 hauntings at the Fox family home through over twenty separate testimonies, excluded the voices of the Fox Sisters entirely. [We Played with Fire](#) [3] is then, at one level, an overt act of reparation. But there are also other voices aching to be heard. The superb Elizabeth Reid, for example, talks eloquently about how her views as a Black woman are diminished by both the feminists and the abolitionists, for fear she will somehow splinter their messaging with her intersectionality. This silencing, even within political circles, is a story as old as time itself but Reid's words will find special relevance with today's politically charged young people. And then there are the repeated references by Maggie throughout **We Played with Fire**, which read like comic asides to her teen readers, about the hushing of female voices more broadly. As an ever-increasing number of people are drawn in to the sisters' spirit circle, more and more men - fathers, brothers, doctors, clerics - must be brought in to act as authenticators. 'More men had to be fetched. Who could know what was real or not, without a few men to say for certain?'

We Played with Fire is at its heart a pulsing feminist novel, if not always in the most obvious of ways. Catherine clarifies, 'the girls are not straightforward feminist heroes'. After all, they profited from their séances. And, while the Spiritualist movement they birthed took place at an interesting juncture with feminism and abolitionism, 'it didn't necessarily advance those movements'. And yet, Catherine also evokes Spiritualism, brilliantly, as a disruptive, anarchic world commanded by women. It is a compelling space in which women are beset by convulsions, 'hysteria' and untrammelled emotions, and communicate with unseen forces, posing a threat not only to contemporary, especially faith-based, patriarchal institutions, but also, quite simply to the certainties of the men in their spheres. As Catherine says, 'the male voices of authority in Maggie's life all have a rigid sense of authority and entitlement, and they are upset by the way this spirit-talking business challenges that.' As a minister cautions Maggie furiously, 'Your activities threaten the moral order of our society.' It is a threat summarised succinctly by Amy Post: 'When men are so full of rage at young girls, you can be sure that they know their power is being threatened' (conjuring up an irresistible image in my head of Trump tweeting his fury at teenage Greta Thunberg?). Maggie and her sisters are troublemakers personified. Not just engaged in some playful bone-cracking trickery but also, however unwittingly, the instigators of a movement which destabilises and agitates with a shortness of breath.

With its feverish political energy, [We Played with Fire](#) [3] is of course very timely. But **Troublemakers** had already marked Catherine Barter out as an astute, wise and witty political raconteur. And she really does dwell in a political landscape. Besides her writing, she co-manages radical bookshop, **Housmans**; she runs **Housmans' Fuse Book Club**; she co-runs the **Little Rebels Award for Radical Children's Fiction**. She says, 'Being able to practise my politics by sharing and promoting books is an amazing privilege'. She enthuses about recent YA political reads from Hargrave's **The Deathless Girls** to Wheatle's [Cane Warriors](#) [5] and says she is keen to bring more political YA events to **Housmans**, adding the likes of Keren David and Nikesh Shukla to the list above. She says emphatically, 'We need a radical YA book prize [**Little Rebels** is for pre-teen]' YA seems like an especially radical space right now. I think that's great but also a necessary response to our times - it's necessary to write back against a society that's still deeply and violently unequal, where most of our leaders are worse than useless, where we're facing environmental catastrophe and where young people bear the brunt of that?.

And if THAT doesn't entice you into Catherine's work, let me just tell you this: [We Played with Fire](#) [3] is an exquisite slice of gothic: haunted houses breathe, objects fly, spirits spook, gaunt white faces loom out of dark room corners? Because, above all, Catherine is a startlingly brilliant storyteller.

Fen Coles is co-director [Letterbox Library](#) [6]

[We Played with Fire](#) [3] is published by Andersen Press, 978-1839130069, £6.99 pbk.

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