

The Making of an Author

Sarah Hulse shares the creation of her first novel

Sarah Hulse '02 earned a B.A. in English from the University of Montana in 2006 and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Oregon in 2012. Here she relates how she became a full-time fiction writer.



I've always enjoyed writing stories, and I've known all my life that I wanted to be an author. I recently signed a two-book contract with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and my first book, a literary novel titled *Black River*, will be published in January 2015 under the name S.M. Hulse.

While at Saint George's, I developed a strong work ethic that has served me well since deciding to pursue a career as a novelist. Writing requires sitting down with a manuscript-in-progress day after day, and the business side of things (sending out stories, acquiring an agent, working with an editor, etc.) requires dedication and persistence as well. About four years elapsed between when I started writing *Black River* and the day I signed the publishing contract (though work on editing and marketing/publicity continues).

Here's the premise: Twenty years ago, corrections officer and old-time fiddler Wes Carver was held hostage during a prison riot that left him physically and emotionally shattered. Now, sixty years old and a recent widower, Wes returns to Black River, the remote Montana town that is home to the state penitentiary and the men who guard its inmates. There, he learns that the inmate who held him hostage during the riot is up for parole, and Wes must confront his own beliefs about justice, forgiveness, and redemption.

I've always been interested in aftermath—in what happens to people who live through dramatic events like prison riots. What becomes of them after the news stories fade away? How does what happened affect their lives and relationships?

Shortly after moving to Montana for college, I saw a school bus with "Deer Lodge Wardens" emblazoned across the side (Deer Lodge is the real town in which the Montana

State Prison is located). I started to wonder what it would be like to live in a community so defined by a single feature. Add in my desire to write about characters who are mostly good and decent people but who find themselves in conflict with one another anyway, and you have the seeds for *Black River*.

I started writing *Black River* during graduate school at the University of Oregon and finished a first draft by the time I graduated in 2012. I was then selected for a post-graduate fellowship at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and I spent the first half of that year revising the manuscript.

Several literary agents had already contacted me after reading stories I published in literary journals, and I sent the manuscript to them in January 2013. Within a few weeks, all four agents had offered to represent me, and I was in the fortunate position of being able to choose.

I ultimately signed with Lorin Rees of the Rees Literary Agency. He asked that I cut another 20,000 words from the manuscript, which was challenging because I'd already cut about 25,000 words from the previous draft. In June, Lorin and I agreed the manuscript was ready to send to publishers. He submitted it to ten different editors. It was a very exciting time, but also extremely nerve-wracking.

About a week and a half later, Lorin set up a call for me with Jenna Johnson, Senior Editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. I spent an hour talking with her about my book. It became clear that Jenna and I shared a lot of the same interests and had similar visions for my writing. At one point she asked what I planned to work on next, and I told her a bit about a new piece I'd recently started that had begun to seem like it had the potential to be more than just a short story.

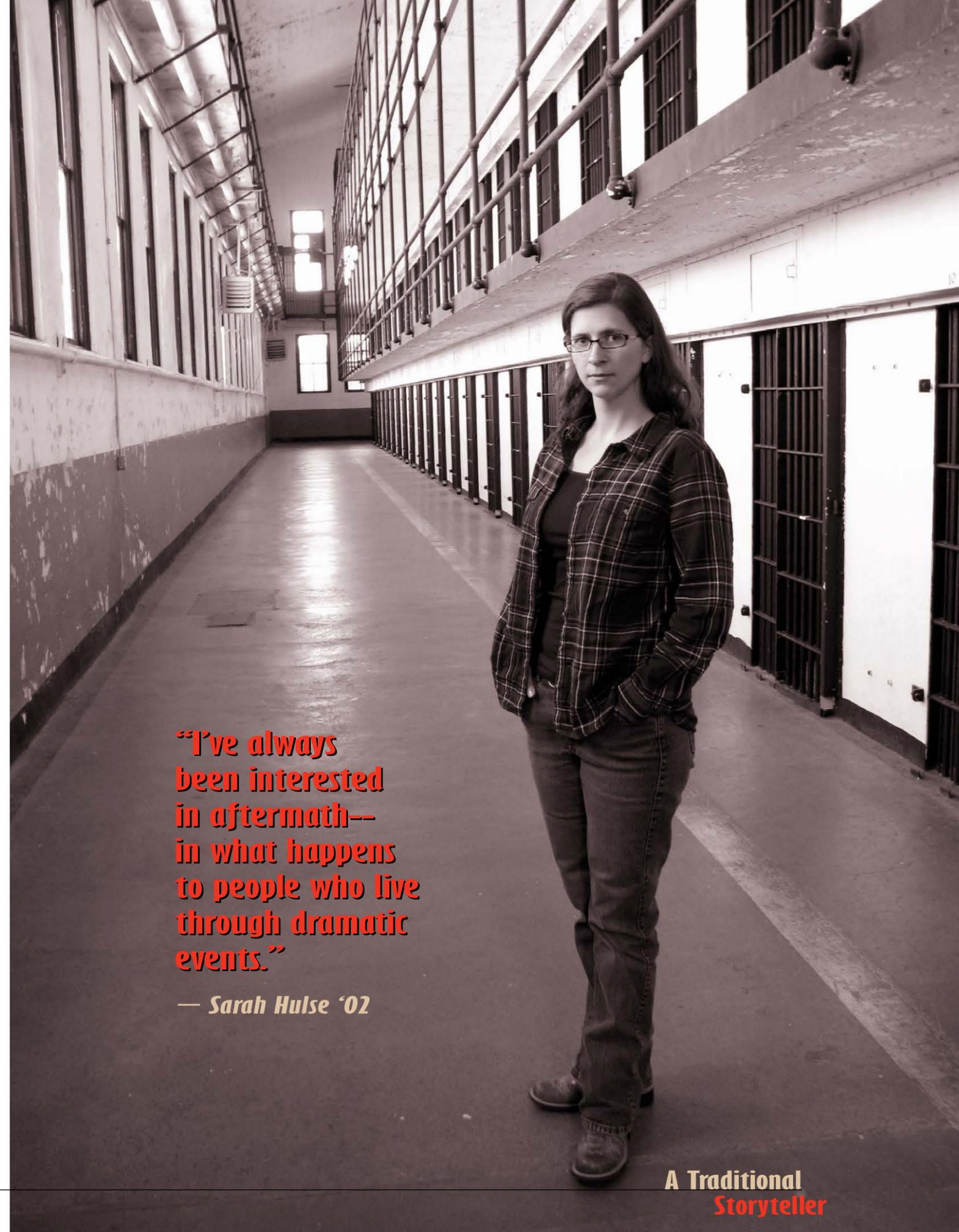
The next day, Lorin called me to say that Jenna not only wanted to buy *Black River*, she wanted to buy my next book, too.

There were then some negotiations that I was very happy to leave to my agent, I signed the contract, and the rest is history.

— Sarah Hulse '02



Above: Sarah Hulse now lives in Spokane
Across: Sarah on a research visit inside the main cell block at the real Old Montana Prison in Deer Lodge



"I've always been interested in aftermath—in what happens to people who live through dramatic events."

— Sarah Hulse '02

A Traditional Storyteller

On the Web
Read Sarah's award-winning short story "Sine Die" at www.sgs.org/magazine