

Alt Histories

If hippos took over the South BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

I knew I liked Sarah Gailey when we met in a bar in Montana and they bought me a shot of whiskey before I even had my coat off.

Gailey (who uses the pronouns they, their, them) and I were in Choteau on the Rocky Mountain Front for a writers' group. I liked Gailey even more after I read the piece of fiction they submitted to workshop. "If this is a draft," I wondered at the polished writing, "what's a final version look like?"

In the space of a short story, Gailey had a created a whole world. Me? I submitted a blog about my horse.

Gailey was living in Portland at the time, but tells me they have since moved to Los Angeles. The big city is perhaps where you go after you win the Hugo Award for fan writer, which Gailey did this year.

After reading the writer's group work, I was curious to read more, and hit up publisher Tor.com for *American Hippo: River of Teeth, Taste of Marrow, and New Stories* (\$18.99). Published in 2018, the volume, together with the promised "new stories," is Gailey's two novellas about alternative-history 1880s America, in which the Mississippi River is dammed and the swamp overrun with feral hippos that were brought into the marshlands of Louisiana as part of a harebrained scheme to breed and slaughter them for meat.

In Gailey's world of hippo wranglers, people don't just eat (and get eaten by) hippos — they train, ride and love them. And former hippo rancher Winslow Remington Houndstooth plots dam-exploding capers and exploits with a ragtag group of miscreants who sound peculiar but really shouldn't be in this day and age or any other one — an agender/nonbinary demolitions expert and poisoner, a pregnant Latinx assassin and a cross-dressing con-artist make up some of the crew.

Eugene Weekly asked Gailey to respond to a few quick questions about their work.

So this hippo thing, it really was something that was proposed. How did you learn of it and why did it grab you?

I learned about this proposal when I was a kid, and the idea stuck with me as I grew older. It's the kind of thing that has a lot of legs, because it engages with a lot of different vectors of American culture. This thing almost happened because of the American tendency to believe that our collective willpower can overcome biological realities like the adaptability of an invasive species and the tenacity of highly aggressive megafauna.

How do you create a world (or history) like that? Do you line it out, map it, feel it?

Creating a new world is a lot of fun! When I'm writing speculative fiction, I usually start with the rules of the world — the boundaries that define it. Because the fiction is speculative, those rules are different from the rules that define the world we currently live in. So, I define the differences, and then I determine how those differences shape culture and society.

Is it something like the hippo scheme that generally generates your ideas? I'm curious in particular about what spurs science fiction or alt history.

Most of my ideas come from a sense of curiosity about the rules that shape *our* culture and society. Our world is defined by a relatively narrow set of truths, and many of them are coincidental or arbitrary. When I come to understand a new one, I start to wonder what would happen if it wasn't there.

You won the Hugo for Best Fan Writer, I'm going to admit I read sci-fi but I don't follow it. What does that award entail?

The Best Fan Writer award is an award for works related to science fiction or fantasy, which appeared in low- or non-paying publications such as semiprozines or fanzines or in generally available electronic media during the previous calendar year. I write literary analysis of genre media — for instance, "This Future Looks Familiar: Watching Blade Runner in 2017," an analysis of police brutality in *Blade Runner*, or "City of Villains: Why I Don't Trust Batman," an analysis of the capitalist problems with Batman. The award I won was effectively in recognition of my entire body of media commentary and analysis to date.

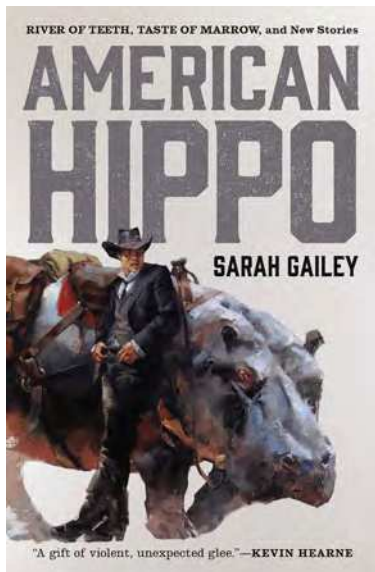
Tell me about your upcoming book, *Magic for Liars*.

Magic for Liars is a novel about a private investigator who finds herself embroiled in a murder investigation at a high school for magical teens. It's about sisterhood, class, grief, identity and the lies we tell ourselves in order to survive the cruelties we visit upon each other.

What are you reading currently?

I just finished *Spinning Silver* by Naomi Novik, which was absolutely perfect. I've also been reading Shirley Jackson, whose work is beautiful, unflinching and terrifying.

This Q&A has been edited for clarity.



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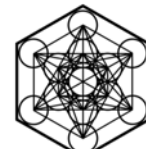
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