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The Midwest, that vast tranche of the United States that politicians worry about when it comes to elections, is rarely the setting for crime fiction, a fact that, alone, makes Gillian Flynn's debut novel stand out. But *Sharp Objects*, described by Stephen King as "a relentlessly creepy family saga", is anyway good enough to put its author on the map. "Midwesterners pride themselves on being a little low key, and I think a lot of people have an interest in the Midwest but not a clue what it's like. It's an unexplored mid-section of the country."

Flynn loves it. She grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, a place within 250 miles, a stone's throw in American terms, of both the geographic and population centres of the United States, that lies on the Missouri-Kansas state line. Flynn was 10 before she saw "the ocean", on holiday in Florida. "I love it, and I had no intention of leaving until I did, aged 22, after college. It's cool and laid-back, and all my family and friends are there... It's really Irish. St Patrick's Day is one of

grown-up book was Agatha Christie, and I tore through her, and Daphne du Maurier." Shirley Jackson's American gothic novels were also a favourite. "As much as mysteries, I like a good character study," she continues, citing Kate Atkinson and Martin Amis. Having decided against farming, she studied English and Journalism at the University of Kansas. Already, she had ambitions as a novelist, "but I was realistic enough and scared, and my parents have always been great but very practical." She graduated to a job on a human resources publication in California: "I learned to write about hiring policy and termination and redundancy. You get a byline and you learn how to put things together quickly." After two years of that she enrolled for a Masters in Journalism at Northwestern University, Chicago, though by then Flynn had realised that she wasn't "aggressive enough" to be an investigative journalist. Within no time, she was hired by *Entertainment Weekly*, where she's been for seven years, working out of LA, New York and now Chicago, where, with her advance money, she has bought an apartment.

Out of the Midwest

From the American heartland comes **Gillian Flynn** with a sinister and disturbing debut that's had the critics raving. **Liz Thomson** met her at BEA

Flynn: not sold on "gadgety, grisly, gruesome police procedurals"

the country's biggest parades. I wasn't raised Catholic, but it was definitely Irish." Both her parents are professors at a local community college: her father teaches theatre, speech and film, her mother reading "to kids who've passed through the school system but aren't quite up to college level. So I came by reading honestly, because one of my earliest memories is of reading with her," Flynn recalls. "I joke that, as early as third grade, I was announcing that I was going to be either a farmer or a writer. Within half-an-hour of Kansas City you see cows and farms. I thought that might be my calling." Indeed, Cowtown is one of the city's nicknames.

Sharp Objects is set in Wind Gap, Missouri, a fictional town that could be almost anywhere in the Midwest. Oppressive, claustrophobic, it's clear from the outset that it's a place that doesn't give up its secrets easily and, when two young girls are abducted and killed, crime reporter Camille Preaker of Chicago's *Daily Post* is sent down by her editor to investigate. It's potentially a big break, but Camille goes unwillingly, for she hails from Wind Gap, "white trash from old money" as she describes herself. With undealt-with family issues of her own and a myriad emotional problems, she sets out to confront a past she hoped she'd left behind.

"It's not really a police story – more a psychological mystery," Flynn explains, "for Camille as much as for the reader. She's a bit of an unreliable narrator; she's not quite well, and I wanted the reader to find out what's wrong with her. You find out more and more of her back story as you read." As a reader, Flynn is not sold on "gadgety, grisly, gruesome police procedurals" and that certainly wasn't what she wanted to write. The novel "wasn't something I approached as a straightforward mystery, working from A to Z. I started with Camille and the little girls, whom she gets obsessed by. She identifies with them too much. But for a while I wasn't sure who'd done it."

Whodunits were, inevitably, part of Flynn's formative reading experience, including, of course, *Nancy Drew*. "My first

At the outset, her beat was movies, "which was a great experience. I got to go on the set of *Troy* in Mexico and I covered *Lord of the Rings* for three years. I went to [Paul Newman's] Sundance Festival... My job was to cover movies and meet the stars. You almost have to be blasé, but it was great to meet all those people whose work you've admired." For the past two years, "I've watched TV for a living. People will say, 'do you want to come over and watch *The Sopranos* and we'll get some pizza?' and I tell them it's like my asking if they'd like to come over and do some accounting... It's an odd little job. Sometimes I think it's really weird, being paid to watch the tube."

Sharp Objects had been marinating for some time. The murder would often be different, but this small, "almost haunted", town idea remained. Eventually, she began to write, telling only her best friend. "It seemed rather overwhelming. I'm used to a weekly column – a quick burst and then giving it up and not living with it. Living in that town, and in Camille's head, for that long it got pretty dark. I don't know how people write series – the next book will not be a sequel." Flynn wrote and rewrote and tweaked and then, in early summer last year, sent it to an agent recommended by a friend. Within a month she had a contract. "Getting paid for it was the icing on the cake in a way – I was just anxious that it be a book, not just pieces of paper." That Frankfurt, she received a string of one-word emails: "Holland!" "France!" "Brazil!" It was, remembers Flynn, "a neat week".

Now book two looms. "I know exactly what I want to write but I had to get this one out of my system first. It's going to be set in the same region – Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma. I really find the middle of America very interesting. It's not over-exposed. And I like the mythology of the Dust Bowl, the anti-heroes like Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, and I'm going to have a little of that time period in it with flashbacks." As for the day job, she's not giving it up just yet.

Sharp Objects is published by Weidenfeld on 3 January, price £10

