Sarah Perry was born in Essex in 1979. She has been the writer-in-residence at Gladstone's Library and the writer-in-residence in Prague, UNESCO city of literature. Her first novel *After Me Comes the Flood*, was longlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award and the Folio Prize, and won the East Anglian Book of the Year Award in 2014. Her second novel *The Essex Serpent* was a number one bestseller in hardback, was the Waterstones Book of the Year 2016, the British Book Awards Book of the Year 2017, was shortlisted for the Costa Novel Award and the Dylan Thomas Award, and longlisted for the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction. Her work has been translated into twenty languages. She lives in Norwich.

Praise for *The Essex Serpent*

'Irresistible . . . the best new novel I've read in years. It's the kind of work that makes you alive to the strangeness of the world and of our history' *Daily Telegraph*

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Sarah Waters

‘Unsettling, thoughtful, eerie . . . very clever and very intriguing’
Tim Pears

Melmoth

SARAH PERRY

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J. A. Hoffman
c/o The National Library of the Czech Republic

December 2016

My dear Dr Pražan –

How deeply I regret that I must put this document in your hands, and so make you the witness to what I have done!

Many times you said to me: 'Josef, what are you writing? What have you been doing all this time?' My friend, I would not tell you, because I have been the watchman at the door. But now my pen is dry, the door is open, and something's waiting there that will turn what small regard you have for me to ruins. I can bear that well enough, since I never deserved your regard – but I am afraid for you, because beyond the threshold only one light shines, and it's far more dreadful than the dark . . .

Ten days have passed and all the while I have been thinking only of my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault! I do not sleep. I feel her eyes on me and with hope and dread I turn, but find I'm all alone! I walk through the city in the dark and think I hear her footsteps and I find that I'm holding out my hand – but she offered me her hand once, and I doubt she'll offer it again.

I leave this document in the custody of the library with instructions that it should be delivered to you when next you are at your desk.

Forgive me! She is coming!

J. A. Hoffman

Part 1

Look! It is winter in Prague: night is rising in the mother of cities and over her thousand spires. Look down at the darkness around your feet, in all the lanes and alleys, as if it were a soft black dust swept there by a broom; look at the stone apostles on the old Charles Bridge, and at all the blue-eyed jackdaws on the shoulders of St John of Nepomuk. Look! She is coming over the bridge, head bent down to the whitening cobblestones: Helen Franklin, forty-two, neither short nor tall, her hair neither dark nor fair; on her feet, boots which serve from November to March, and her mother's steel watch on her wrist. A table-salt glitter of hard snow falling on her sleeve, her shoulder; her neat coat belted, as colourless as she is, nine years worn. Across her breast a narrow satchel strap; in the satchel, her afternoon's work (instructions for the operation of a washing machine, translated from German into English) and a green uneaten apple.

What might commend so drab a creature to your sight, when overhead the low clouds split, and the upturned bowl of a silver moon pours milk out on the river? Nothing at all – nothing, that is, but this: these hours, these long minutes of this short day, must be the last when she knows nothing of Melmoth – when thunder is just thunder, and a shadow only darkness on the wall. If you could tell her now (Step forward! Take her wrist, and whisper!) perhaps she'd pause, turn pale, and in confusion fix her eyes on yours; perhaps look at the lamp-lit castle high above the Vltava and down at white swans sleeping on the riverbank, then turn on her half-inch heel and beat back through the coming crowd. But – oh, it's no use:

she'd only smile, impassive, half-amused (this is her way), shake you off, and go on walking home.

Helen Franklin pauses where the bridge meets the embankment. Trams rattle on up to the National Theatre, where down in the pit the oboists suck their reeds, and the first violin taps her bow three times against the music stand. It's two weeks past Christmas, but the mechanical tree in the Old Town Square turns and turns and plays one final pleasing strain of Strauss, and women from Hove and Hartlepool clasp paper cups of steaming wine. Down Karlovy Lane comes the scent of ham and woodsmoke, of sugar-studded dough burnt over coals; an owl on a gloved wrist may be addressed with the deference due to its feathers, then gingerly held for a handful of coins. It is all a stage set, contrived by ropes and pulleys: it is pleasant enough for an evening's self-deceit, but no more. Helen is not deceived, nor has she ever been – the pleasures of Bohemia are not for her. She has never stood and watched the chiming of the astronomical clock, whose maker was blinded by pins before he could shame the city by building a better device elsewhere; has never exchanged her money for a set of nesting dolls in the scarlet strip of an English football team; does not sit idly overlooking the Vltava at dusk. Guilty of a crime for which she fears no proper recompense can ever be made, she is in exile, and willingly serves her full life term, having been her own jury and judge.

The lights change – the crowd surges on – Helen is taken on the noisy tide and pitches up against an iron railing, withdrawing her gloves from her pocket. It is then she hears – above the noise of wealthy Koreans bound for the brass-clad riverboats moored down in the dock – her own name lifted on the wind coming off the river. 'Helen – Helen Franklin!' – called frantically, as if perhaps she's dropped her purse. She looks up, gloved

hand to mouth, and sees – standing still beneath a street light, coatless and shivering – a tall man, blue-shirted, clutching a large dark object to his chest. Eye meets eye; an arm is raised. 'Yes?' – imperious, impatient – 'Yes! Come here, would you? Come here now, please.' The man plucks at the fabric of his shirt as though that half-transparent silk irritates his skin: within, his body is violently shaking.

'Karel,' says Helen, who does not yet move. It is Karel Pražan, who constitutes precisely half her complement of friends and acquaintances, their friendship struck up in the café of the National Library of the Czech Republic, there having been no free tables available that morning. He is tall, and carefully thin; his dark hair always gleams against his scalp; his shirts are silk, his shoes suede or calfskin, according to the season; he is not handsome, but gives the illusion of it, and seems always to have only just shaved. But even at this distance, jostled by passing children in bright padded coats, it is possible to make out the greyish pallor, the sunken eyes, of a man who does not sleep. The cold has touched his lips with bluish dust; the arm that clasps the object to his shaking chest is locked in place as if all the joints are fused. 'Karel,' she says, and moves unhurriedly towards him. Ten paces on she sees he holds a document file, its leather black and coarse; it is worn pale at the edges from much use; it is bound three times with a leather cord. The street light gleams on a mark in the corner, but she can't make it out. 'Karel?' she says. 'Put on my scarf. What's happened – where is your coat – are you hurt?' A likelier thought occurs. 'Is it Thea?' She pictures Thea, his partner and certainly his better half, lifeless in her wheelchair on the ground floor, eyes fixed at some point beyond the plaster ceiling, taken – as they'd always feared – by another clot of blood to the brain in the night. 'Thea?' Karel is impatient. 'What? She's

fine – no, I don't want it' – he pushes fretfully at the offered scarf, then surveys her as if he cannot think why she has troubled him.

'You will get ill.'

'Take it back! I won't. I don't care. Look: I suppose we should sit down.' He looks about, as if he might simply sit cross-legged on the pavement; then he lifts the leather file, and shakes it at her. She sees it is heavy, stuffed with documents and stained with water; he moves his thumb, and reveals in the corner a rubbed gilt monogram reading *J.A.H.* She notes with unease how he holds it with both avarice and distaste, as if it were an object he had coveted all his life, only to find that having paid the asking price it had a foul smell. 'It's no good. I shall have to tell someone, and you of all people will bear it. I mean' – he breaks off, and laughs without merriment – 'I believe she could walk up and look you dead in the eye and still you'd not believe it! Not a word!'

'She? Who is "she" – have you taken this file, Karel – does it belong to some friend of yours? You ought not to play your tricks.'

'Oh . . .' He grows vague. 'You'll see.' He begins then to walk on; calls over his shoulder that she must keep up, as though she were a child, and a tiresome one at that. She follows him down a cobbled alley beneath a stone arch which is hardly ten yards from the tourists' thoroughfare, but which you would certainly not find, were you ever minded to try. He pushes open a painted door, slips between heavy curtains drawn against the chill, and sits – beckoning – in a dim corner. The place is familiar – the wet fug on the windows, the green ashtrays, the 40-watt bulbs in their green glass shades – and Helen's anxiety diminishes. She sits beside her friend (he shivers, still), removes her gloves, smooths the sleeves of her cardigan over her wrists, and turns to him.

'You must eat. You were already too thin; you are thinner now.'

'I don't want to eat.'

'All the same –' Helen gestures to a girl in a white shirt, orders beer for Karel, and for herself, only water from the tap.

'You think me ridiculous,' says Karel. He neatens his hair, serving only to demonstrate that he has aged five years in the short course of a week – lean face gone over to gauntness, stubble glinting white. 'Well, perhaps I am. Look at me! I do not sleep, as you see. I sit up at night, reading, and re-reading . . . I didn't want to bother Thea, so I read under the covers. With a torch, you know. Like a boy.'

'And what have you been reading?' The beer is brought; the water, with its single cube of ice.

'What was I reading, she says! Not a wasted word. How like you. Already I feel better – how could I not? In your presence it all seems – fantastic, bizarre. You are so ordinary your very existence makes the extraordinary seem impossible. I mean it as a compliment.'

'I'm sure. Tell me, then' – Helen places her glass more precisely in the centre of its paper mat – 'Tell me at least what you've been reading – is it this, here, in this file?'

'Yes.' He shakes out a Petra cigarette, and lights it on the third attempt. 'Take it. Go on. Open it up.' The look he gives her then is one almost of malice: it puts her in mind of a child concealing spiders in a bag of sweets. She reaches for the file – it is very cold, having taken up more than its fair share of the night air; she unwinds the cord, which is bound tightly, and gives her trouble with its knots and turns; at last it gives unexpectedly – the file opens, and there spills out across the table a sheaf of yellowing paper. 'There,' says Karel. 'There!' He stabs it with a forefinger then retreats against the wall.

'May I look?'

'If you want – oh wait, wait' – the door is wrenched open, the velvet curtains billow – 'Is it her – has she come? *Do you see her?*'

Helen turns. Two boys come in – eighteen, no more, swollen with pride in earning a day's wages and spending it well. They stamp snow from their workman's boots, bawdily summon the waitress, and turn their attention to their phones. 'It is only men,' says Helen. 'Two men, quite ordinary.'

Karel laughs, shrugs, rises once more in his seat. 'Don't mind me,' he says. 'Lack of sleep, you know – it's only – I thought I saw someone I knew.'

Helen surveys him a while. Anxiety and embarrassment move across his face, and she feels curiosity sharpen in her like a hunger. But kindness wins out – he will speak, she thinks, when he can – and she turns to the manuscript. It is written in German, in a tilted copperplate as difficult to read as it must have been to master; there are crossings-out, and numbered footnotes: the effect is of a palimpsest pulled from museum archives, but the title page is dated 2016. Separately, fastened with a paperclip, one typed sheet of Czech is dated the preceding week, and is addressed to Karel.

'It's not intended for me,' says Helen, turning the page face down. Unease causes her to say more sharply than she intends: 'Ah, I wish you'd just tell me what's the matter – you're behaving like a child having nightmares. Wake up, won't you!'

'I wish I could! I wish I could! All right.' He draws breath, places both hands flat upon the document, and remains very still for a moment. Then he says – casually, easily, as if it has nothing at all to do with the matter at hand – 'Tell me: do you know the name Melmoth?'

'Melmoth? No. I'd remember it, I think. Melmoth – not

Czech, is it? Not quite English, either . . .' She says the name a third time, and a fourth; as if it were some new thing placed upon her tongue which might well taste bitter. This has a curious effect on her companion; it seems to animate him, to cause an avid shining in the bruised sockets of his eyes.

'No, why would you: it meant nothing to me, a week ago – a week! Is that all!' There is again that unhappy laugh. 'Melmoth – she . . .' his hands dabble on the sheets of paper with a curious action that puts Helen in mind of a man fretfully soothing a bad-tempered cat. 'D'you ever feel,' he says, 'the back of your neck prick – all the hairs lifting there – as if a cold wind had come into the room and hunted you out, and only you? It's nothing, you say to yourself – what's the English phrase – the goose walks over your grave? – but if you knew!' He shakes his head; lights another cigarette, draws deeply, stubs it out. 'It's no use. You wouldn't believe me, and would be foolish if you did – here: take this, take the letter.' He slips the typed sheet free from its paper-clip. 'I'll get another drink (God knows I'll need it) and leave you to read – take it, go on, aren't you all curious, you women, always putting your ear to the door?'

Helen is poised between a dark sea and a certain shore. Karel has never, in the years she's known him, shown fear of any kind, nor any inclination towards superstition, or to giving credence to legend. The change that has come over him is nothing less than the change from mortality to immortality: it all at once occurs to her, as it never has before, that he'll die; that death already has its imprint on him, on the days he's not yet lived, like a watermark on empty sheets of paper. He is at the bar, leaning with a stoop to his shoulders that is all the more troubling for being unfamiliar. She thinks how tall he had seemed, how upright his bearing, when he first approached her in the library café, there having been no other tables free. 'May

I?' he'd said in Czech, and not waited for her response, but having sat down turned his attention to some incomprehensibly complex diagram (intersecting circles; lines converging on a point), and to an apple pastry. Her own cup of black coffee, bitter and cold, was set beside a pamphlet which she was translating from German into English at the fee of nine pence a word. They had looked, Helen felt, like a peacock and a sparrow; Dr Karel Pražan in a violet cashmere sweater, Helen Franklin in a cheap and colourless shirt. Certainly nothing more would have come of the encounter had Thea not arrived. Helen, looking up, had seen a woman of middle height and late middle years, standing with her hands in the pockets of woollen trousers with a deep hem, stooping to kiss Karel on the crown. Her hair was short and red; she smelt of cologne. She gave Helen a merry appraising look. 'Have you made a friend?' she said to Karel in English; and Helen had blushed, because the inflexion, if not precisely unkind, had been disbelieving. Karel looked up from his notebook and surveyed Helen with vague surprise, as if in the intervening minutes he'd forgotten she was there; then said swiftly in Czech that he was sorry to disturb her, and that they would leave her in peace.

Conscious of a desire to wrong-foot this elegant pair, Helen had said in English, 'Please don't go on my account: I'm leaving, anyway,' and begun to return her work to her satchel.

Thea then had brightened, with the sudden blaze of delight which Helen later learned was characteristic of her ability to take pleasure at any time, from any source. 'Oh, but that accent – you have brought me home in my time of exile! London? Essex, perhaps? Stay, won't you – sit, let me bring more coffee – Karel, insist she stays – she is leaving, and I won't have it!' There had been then a look of understanding that passed between Karel and Helen – *there is no use at all resisting, I'm afraid; it's all right, I*

quite understand – which was a surer footing for friendship than any Helen had felt for years.

And indeed there had been no use resisting. That weekend, Helen Franklin – who resisted pleasure and companionship as assiduously as a Trappist avoids conversation – was welcomed into an apartment where Thea stirred a copper pan on the stove, and Karel sat at a scrubbed table measuring the depth of a curve on a convex glass disc. He was, she discovered, attached to a university department, his subject that of the history of the manufacture of glass, and all its uses both domestic and industrial. 'It's a telescopic mirror,' he had said, greeting his visitor with very little interest, and no sign of abandoning his task, 'so the curve must be the depth of a parabola, and not a sphere.'

Helen took off her coat and gloves, and handed Thea a bottle of wine (which she herself would not drink). Then obeying a gesture from her host she sat at the table, and folded her hands in her lap. 'Tell me about it,' she said.

'I am making a reflecting telescope,' he had said, 'grinding the mirror by hand, as Newton would have done, back in 1668.' He set down the glass and showed her his hands. They were rough, and looked sore; remnants of some white paste adhered beside the nails.

Thea put bread and butter on the table. She wore on a long silver chain a curious green pendant, rather like a flower cast in glass. The copper pan spat on the stove. 'He will never finish it.'

'The focal length,' said Karel, 'is half the radius of curvature.' He looked at Helen, who could not suppress her old pleasure in being taught, and listened with unfeigned interest as he explained his intention to create a mirrored surface by evaporating a layer of aluminium.

All that evening she watched her hosts. Thea, who had ten

years on her partner, mothered and petted him – cuffed him, sometimes, if she felt he overstepped the mark ('Don't be nosy, Karel – let her keep her secrets!'). To Helen she was attentive and warm, though always with faint amusement, as if she found her guest odd, but not unpleasantly so. Karel, meanwhile, had an air of cultivated irony, of indifference, which slipped most when he was watching Thea, which he did with a kind of loving gratitude; or when treating Helen as if she were a pupil. Later Helen understood that his partner and his subject were really all that ever occupied his thoughts – that he was like a man who dines so well on the dishes he likes best that he has no appetite for anything else.

Helen – refusing wine; accepting only a very small portion of meat – said to Thea, 'Do you teach at the university too?'

'I am retired,' said Thea, with a smile anticipating Helen's protests that surely not – surely she was nowhere near retirement age.

'She was a barrister, back in England,' said Karel. He gestured to shelves that bowed beneath the weight of legal textbooks. 'She still keeps her horsehair wig, over there in a black tin box.' Then he said, with as much pride as if it had all been his own doing, 'She chaired a government inquiry, you know. Could have taken a title, if she'd wanted it.' He took her hand, and kissed it. 'My learned friend,' he said.

Thea offered Helen buttered potatoes in a porcelain dish. Seeing her guest decline – seeing the half-eaten food on her plate, and the few sips taken from her glass of water – she said nothing. 'It had been all work, and no pleasure,' she said. 'So I took a holiday in Prague, and that became a sabbatical, and that became a retirement. And then, of course, there was Karel.'

Karel accepted a kiss, then looked with disfavour at Helen's

plate. It seemed he lacked his partner's tact: 'You're not hungry?' he said; and then, 'You're very quiet, I must say.'

Helen said, 'So they tell me.'

'Well, then.' Thea put down her fork. 'How long have you lived in Prague?'

'Twenty years.'

'And what do you do?'

'I work as a translator, though my German is better than my Czech.'

'How wonderful! What are you working on at the moment – Schiller? Peter Stamm? A new edition of Sebald?'

'An instruction manual for operating Bosch power tools.' (Helen smiled then; and she smiles now, remembering.)

'I can't pretend I'm not disappointed! And tell me: was I right – are you from London, or from Essex?'

'Essex, I'm afraid.'

'Ah. Well, that can't be helped. And you came to Prague because –?'

Helen flushed. How could she explain her exile, her self-punishment, to these smiling strangers? Thea saw it: 'Forgive me! I never quite lost the habit of cross-examination.'

'If our guest were in the dock,' said Karel, 'I wonder what the indictment could be?' He peered at Helen over a glass of wine, then drank it. There was a flash of dislike in Helen then – for the pair of them, with their good clothes, their warm apartment, their ease; for their unlooked-for hospitality, their charm, their way of wheedling out confidences. But it was swiftly extinguished, because Thea said, with a repressing pat on Karel's hand, and a mollifying smile, 'Did either of you see that old man in the library the day we met, crying over a manuscript? What do you think he was writing – love letters, perhaps, to some man

or woman long dead?' And later, helping Helen into her coat, 'I have so loved having you here – won't you come back, and we can talk about England, and all the things we hate about it, and how much we would like to go home?'

All this Helen recalls with a kind of disbelieving fondness, because they are gone now, those easy evenings; have seemed, in the few months since Thea's stroke, to have actually been erased. And now she is at this small table, with this glass of water – with this new Karel: stooping, uneasy, a little frantic. If whatever was concealed in that file, wrapped three times in leather cords, has had such malignant power, might it also disrupt her peace of mind? But – no! – it is impossible. That peace of mind, so hard won, is buttressed with stone. She draws the sheet of paper towards her, and reads: *My dear Dr Pražan – how deeply I regret that I must put this document in your hands, and so make you the witness to what I have done . . .*

Helen Franklin, having read the letter, feels no chill – no lifting of the fine fair hairs at the nape of her neck. She greets it with interest, no more. An old man, confessing some long-forgotten sin (*my fault*, she murmurs: *my fault, my most grievous fault*), which doubtless could not, these days, tweak the eyebrow of the most ascetic priest. Nonetheless (she draws the paper towards her; reads: *my pen is dry, the door is open*), there is something curious in its fear and longing that is something very like the half-shamed anxious glances of her friend (*she is coming!*).

Karel returns with food: slabs of beef, thick gravy seeping into porous dumplings. 'Well?' he says, with a not quite pleasant grin. Helen takes the offered plate; eats deliberately, in small bites, and without pleasure.