



The Electric Michelangelo

By Sarah Hall
ISBN: 9780060817244

Introduction

In Morecambe Bay, a seaside resort town in Northwest England, consumptives take the air and a bit of rest from their jobs in the mills and mines. Many stay at Bayview, a hotel run by widower Reeda Parks and her son Cyril.

Cyril is befriended by Eliot Riley who teaches him the art of tattooing. It isn't until both his mother's and Eliot's deaths that he plans to make use of his talent, and heads for America where he settles in Coney Island, Brooklyn.

In the splendor and decadence of 1930s Coney Island, Cyril becomes the Electric Michelangelo and meets his masterwork, an Eastern European circus performer, a woman who would become, at his

loving and talented hands, The Lady of Many Eyes.

Sarah Hall's lyrical portrait of love, human suffering, and the art of tattooing is extraordinary.

Discussion Questions

1. Cyril is keenly aware of Coney Island's impending decline. Discuss tattooing in relation to the public's insatiable appetite for the new thrill, the bigger and better.
2. Hall calls the English seaside towns, "harmless, farcical, if slightly uncouth" where "things never went too far." "The Island, on the other hand was absolute consumer-driven modernism, it was in-vogue anthropomorphism, a swim through the guts and entrails of the world." (page 190) Is there still a clear division from European popular culture and American culture nowadays or not?
3. Is tattooing destructive or liberating? Why?
4. Did the book make you want to go out and get a tattoo? Did it provide a better understanding on why people get tattoos?
5. The book is as much about the world of boardwalk culture, with the carnival folks, freak shows, circus acts and resort town underbelly as it is about tattoo artists. Discuss these other elements and what they contribute in regard to the Hall's overall portrayal of humanity.
6. In your opinion, is *The Electric Michelangelo* a hopeful or hopeless view of human nature and relationships?
7. Why doesn't Cyril make a bold play for the love of Grace?
8. Much is left unresolved in *The Electric Michelangelo*. Grace and Cy's love is never consummated. We also never learn what happens to Grace. Why has Hall chosen to leave out major events in Cyril's life?
9. Hall writes of Cyril going back to Morecambe Bay and taking up his old tattoo parlor on Pedder Street at the end of the book. In your opinion, what is she saying about the art of tattooing in relation to emotional pain and suffering?

About the author

Born in Cumbria, England in 1974, Sarah Hall divides her time between North Carolina and the north of England. Her first novel, *Haweswater*, won The Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. *The Electric Michelangelo*, her second novel, and was short-listed for the prestigious Man Booker prize.