

Transcript of *What'sHerName*: THE ABSENCE Maria Branwell Bronte

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[theme music]

Olivia Meikle: Hi Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi Olivia!

OM: I have a very important question for you: *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*?

KN: [laughs] *Jane Eyre*, duh!

OM: Why are you **so wrong**?!?

KN: Wrong?!?

OM: **Wrong!** Obviously *Wuthering Heights*. Obviously!

KN: No! Come on! *Jane Eyre* for life!

OM: If you're a teenager, what is there better than *Wuthering Heights*? It is **peak** teenager.

KN: I read *Jane Eyre* in Junior High and I loved it.

OM: Well, how old were you when you read *Wuthering Heights*?

KN: [whispers] Never.

OM: [gasps] Your vote is invalid.

KN: I know.

[laughter]

KN: Do you know why? Because the cover of your book - it was, it looked like a romance novel or something, so it turned me off, so I never read it all.

OM: I love them both, but when I was a librarian, the High School students were assigned to read either *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*, they could choose - so students would come in and ask us often, like, "Which one should I read?" And it became this comedic running battle with another woman who worked the front desk and I, usually she was team *Jane Eyre*... Well, you need to read *Wuthering Heights*.

KN: I can't, the cover still haunts me.

OM: [laughing] Read a different edition.

KN: I've watched the movie.

OM: I'm going to go find you a good edition of *Wuthering Heights*. I mean, if I can sit through [the worst musical ever written](#), which was based on *Wuthering Heights*, and still love *Wuthering Heights*, you can get over a cover. I'm just saying.

KN: I don't know, I don't know.

OM: I think this is really fascinating because what makes this battle that is a pretty common argument in English literature is the fact that these two authors, who wrote sort of iconic pieces of Gothic literature, are sisters. And so picking a book isn't just picking a book, it's picking a *sister* - in this very fraught, famously dramatic, family.

So what do you know about the Brontës?

KN: Oh you know, they had a ne'er-do-well brother who sucked away their fortunes, so they had to become writers in order to make ends meet. And their dad is like, this aloof person who's not really engaged with the family? And they lived in like this romantic personage in northern England, and moors, and dark, cloudy landscapes, and something about Whitby Abbey... oh that's *Dracula*....

OM: That's *Dracula*. [laughter] But yeah, that *ambiance*, right - this moody, wind-swept moors, and troubled sisters scribbling away in the dark.

KN: Yeah, dramatic, and romantic, and depressing.

OM: Right, yeah. There's the Brontë mythology. Now, you talked about the brother, you talked about the sisters, you talked about the father. Who's missing in the story? Where's the mom?

KN: Well, she's dead, isn't she?

OM: Yes, she's missing from this mythology. And we have done several stories on the podcast about [women](#) who are [mostly famous](#) for [being moms](#). Maria Brontë is famous for *not being there*. Her absence is the most important thing about her story - the way that it's been told. She is the 'missing mom' whose absence leads her remarkable children to the life that they eventually lead.

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle.

KN: And I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: And this is *What'sHerName*.

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

OM: So - Maria Branwell Brontë's life is an *emptiness*, out of which springs the next generation's genius. Our guest thought that was *rubbish*. [laughter]

00:05:06 - 00:10:03

OM: Sharon Wright, who we have spoken to before on our on our episodes about [Sophie Blanchard](#) and [Lily Cove on our Halloween episode](#), author of [Balloonomania Belles](#), [also published as [The Lost History of the Lady Aeronauts](#)] is the author of a new biography of a really remarkable woman, Maria Brontë, the mother of the Brontës that is fantastic. I've read it three times already. I love it.

Sharon Wright: I'm Sharon Wright, I'm the author of [The Mother of the Brontës: When Maria Met Patrick](#), the first biography of Maria Branwell Brontë.

[music]

Sharon Wright: Part of my reason for writing this book is, I am from Bradford. I am Bradford-born like the Brontës. And I grew up with the Brontës perceived as kind of unfathomable figures, really. I wasn't really part of that world that would have studied them, so I came to them as an adult.

This idea that 'there wasn't enough on her' was the received wisdom, and I just set out to decide whether that was true.

OM: And when Sharon Wright gets interested in something, she gets *interested*, and you cannot stop her. She was going to find out if there was something.

Sharon Wright: When I wondered aloud why no one has ever written a biography of Maria, the answer came swiftly: There isn't enough on her. "I bet there is," I thought. If you grab your pen and your notebook and go looking properly.

OM: Surprise, surprise, there was. And this biography has been embraced by the Bronte communities, both academic and popular, which is almost impossible to do. People are *serious* about their Brontës.

KN: Yeah! [laughs] Yeah.

Sharon Wright: And it still surprises me how people have 'their version' of each Brontë, and it's absolutely unassailable.

OM: So making everybody happy really says something. It is very academically rigorous *and* accessible and delightful.

[music]

Sharon Wright: Maria was born in 1783 in Penzance in Cornwall which is in the very far west of England. She was born into a wealthy merchant family in the smartest street in town. She was raised amongst... so she had the life of a young society woman. She was a contemporary of Jane Austen. She would have had access to the Penzance Ladies Book Club. There were assembly room balls at the top of her road, the assembly rooms were actually built by a member of her extended family, and she was educated. She was part of an important family, and she was very much a Cornish woman as well - who grew up amongst myths and legends of Cornwall, as much as the Enlightenment-era manifestations, such as the book clubs, the science, the radical thinking that of course was sweeping a cosmopolitan port like that.

KN: Huh, down at the very very end of Cornwall. It's the last stop before the ocean.

OM: Yeah, and at the time it was seen by London, or much of the rest of England, as a sort of 'rural backwater' but was actually an incredibly cosmopolitan town - because it's linked to the world by the ocean. This is a major shipping center.

KN: And it's the exact same era as *Poldark*, if people have seen that series, Cornwall in the late 1700s.

OM: Yeah, this is *Poldark*.

[music]

OM: Maria is the eighth of twelve children, five of whom are already dead when she is born. Sharon Wright is excellent at giving you context without whacking you over the head with it. For example, finally after the sixth child dies, Maria's mother "takes *or is allowed* a break from childbearing."

00:09:10 - 00:15:01

Her father is a church warden in the Evangelical Anglican Church, so he is... a very high standing within the city, within the community, within the church.

KN: He's a big wig.

OM: He's a big wig. And the whole family are exceptional, they excel at everything they do.

KN: As rich people often did in the 1700s.

OM: [laughter] Yeah. This is the age of [John Wesley](#), the religious reformer. And the Branwell family were close friends with John Wesley. They were very devoted to religious reform and very involved in this 'church-reform Evangelical religion,' which means a very different thing for our U.S. listeners. Evangelical in the U.S. is *very* different than Evangelical in Europe and England. [laughter]

KN: But it has its roots in this movement.

OM: It does, yeah.

KN: The Great Awakening.

OM: Right, and it's this time of huge amounts of religious and social and political upheaval. This offshoot that her family is very invested in, will eventually become [Methodism](#), but at this point that split has not happened yet. Her father is also - as Sharon Wright was the first person to discover - a smuggler!

KN: [laughter] Ah, well - that's how you get rich in Penzance in the 1700s.

OM: Exactly.

KN: Everybody in Cornwall is smuggling.

OM: Right. And the Napoleonic war is going on, there's no navy nearby, there are tunnels that run all over the place under Penzance up from the coast to the merchant row... Smuggling is the regional pastime of Cornwall. It is a proud tradition.

KN: And Penzance, especially down there at the very end - there's so many shipwrecks around there and...

OM: Dangerous waters mean lots to harvest.

KN: Yes exactly.

OM: And good excuses if ships *just happened* to disappear.

Sharon Wright: For ages I've been up to my ears in the archives, so when I found this evidence that he had been tangled up with a) notorious smugglers and b) the revenue men, everyone else found it absolutely fascinating. Because when you talk about the Brontës, I mean - it's like you say, it's romantic, it's dramatic, it's a family secret, it's that they're not all 'plaster saints'... I don't think it spoke to his personality at all, I just think it spoke to his life and his era and his profession.

One person in particular said, "Oh well, he wasn't a bad man, he was a churchman." I said, "I'm not saying he's a bad man or a good man. I'm saying he was a businessman." Smuggling was absolutely endemic, especially in coastal areas during the Napoleonic era. Because there was no - taxes were off the scale, and there was no militia really to enforce it properly, because they were constantly at war with France or building the base of the empire. But everyone was involved,

from the aristocracy down to the miners, I mean it's a fairly industrial scale. All of these tunnels had to be built, so it's quite likely to be moonlighting tin miners.

OM: If you're a merchant in Penzance in the eighteenth century, you're a smuggler. Maria is a Cornishwoman to the core - myths and legends, fairies and romance, *and* Evangelical Religious Reform and social duty, *and* science and Industry *and* progressive politics and radical thinking, hand in hand with ghosts and pixies.

Sharon Wright: Maria was both a child of the Enlightenment, and of 'keeping the candlelight on.'

OM: It's a really remarkable and unique worldview that eighteenth century Cornish people have, and she brings that to her family. And it's glaringly obvious when you look at her children, where they're getting this world that they write, and they put into the things that they do. Those of us who grow up watching and reading [Jane Austen](#) know this can be a very difficult time to be a daughter, and that your fortunes may rise and fall based on the whims of the men around you.

Sharon Wright: She was a woman of independent means up to a point. She wasn't rich, but she had independent income from her father's will, which allowed her to have a comfortable life. She said to Patrick Brontë in one of her letters that, "I was perfectly my own mistress" when she was there - so she was used to being consulted about things, about family matters, a trusted member of the family.

00:14:30 - 00:20:20

OM: She can rule her own life. She doesn't have to marry if she doesn't want to. She can make her own decisions, and run her own establishment, and not be bossed around. And when she eventually does marry at age twenty-nine, which is old for this time period (again another sign that she didn't have to if she didn't want to). She loved her life. She loved Penzance, she loved the coast, she loved her family, she loved her social circle, she loved her book club.

And then in 1812, her aunt and uncle opened up a new boarding school in Yorkshire. This is a free school for the children of Evangelical ministers, and eventually is then opened up to the children of the poor, anyone can enroll at this school.

Sharon Wright: So her aunt Jane and uncle John Fennell went to open this school in a converted manor house up in West Yorkshire. And poor aunt Jane (we think) couldn't cope. Well, she *couldn't* cope, there's plenty of evidence of that really. She wrote to Penzance and asked if Maria would go and help be a junior matron/companion to her. So Maria, an incredibly courageous

thing to do back then, traveled four hundred miles from Penzance to Apperly Bridge in West Yorkshire. And they were very very different places. It was a very subtropical, beautiful place that she lived in Cornwall. She's going to a very wild, bleak part of the country that was just starting to industrialize, so everything was changing.

OM: Four hundred miles is not to be sneezed at.

Sharon Wright: She either went partly by sea or entirely by stagecoach, and I spent a long time charting that. And that was when highwaymen were rife, stagecoaches were crashing - it was an incredibly arduous thing to do, and she did it.

OM: Shipwrecks, as you pointed out, very common. This is as you showed us in the episode on [Caroline Herschel](#), ships wreck, stagecoaches tip over, it's incredibly dangerous to try to travel in England.

KN: And it'll take weeks and weeks of fear and pain and risk.

OM: If you make it at all. And shoved into a highly overcrowded stagecoach with a whole bunch of strangers. And by overcrowded I mean: standing-room-only, sitting on each other's laps, poor people get to hang onto the *outside* of the stagecoach for *fourteen hours a day*. And there are articles from this time of, 'the stagecoach arrives at its destination only to find that everyone in the cheap seats outside is dead and has *frozen* to the stagecoach.'

This is a very unusual choice for a privileged wealthy woman to undertake, but she does. And it is while she is working at this school for a short period of time to help out her aunt and uncle that she meets the school's new examiner, Patrick Brontë. [Patrick Brontë](#) is the Irish-Anglican curate of a nearby parish, but he is a rising star, and Maria's aunt and uncle, especially, feel pretty confident that these two might hit it off.

And they do.

Sharon Wright: And when they met it was an absolute love match. I mean, from the beginning her letters express absolute passion for him. A real meeting of minds, a real meeting of hearts. And they were married, I mean - I think they were engaged by August, 1812. And this is shortly after the [Luddite rebellions](#), which is all happening on Patrick's doorstep over in Hartshead. So it's an incredibly tumultuous time, nationally and internationally, but also for them. They were married on the 29th of December, 1812.

OM: This is peak ‘Georgian romance novel’ drama. This is love, and fear, and *He said he loved me yesterday but what if he doesn't now?* Just the most dramatic soap opera of a relationship you can imagine. And it's from this period of their relationship, these very few months between meeting and marrying, that we have most of what we have from Maria Branwell's writings. These are letters that she sent Patrick, that he treasured for the rest of his life, and that reveal a really fascinating character. In most of the Brontë scholarship that's happened before, Maria Brontë is just sort of alluded to as this shadowy character that we don't know much about - and the implication is given of, again, this mood that we like to impose on the Brontës of ‘dark, brooding, gloomy.’ And she was the opposite of that. She was a bright, vivacious, witty, funny, interested, deep thinker.

00:20:50 - 00:25:03

OM: She *loved* life, she was enthusiastic about everything, and she was so passionate in her feelings that these letters are almost painful sometimes. And we don't have his responses to her, but we do have her responses to his responses, which make it clear that these were also *extremely* flirtatious letters that are being sent - to an Anglican priest. [laughter] And that he felt absolutely as passionately devoted as she did is clear - from their life, but also from many of the other things he wrote later in their life. They just fell totally headlong in love, and when he proposed and asked her to stay here in wildest Yorkshire, she has to decide.

Everyone likes him a lot, and he was even seen as a hero because he would stand up to bullies in really unusual ways. There's a procession of Sunday School children happening, and there is an adult man who is lying in wait for them, ready to beat them up, and Patrick Brontë walks up, grabs him by the collar, throws him across the road, and then just continues walking past him as if nothing happened.

KN: Wow!

OM: And as Sharon Wright tells us, it is “the subject of conversation in and about Dewsbury for weeks.” But, the word that keeps coming around about him is *peculiar*.

By the way: Brontë trivia...

Sharon Wright: Patrick was born into a family called Brunty or Prunty, there are different spellings of his family. When he got to Cambridge, he announced his name to the man who was recording arrivals - and because of his Irish accent, presumably - it was misspelled as Bronte. So when Patrick saw this mistake later, instead of saying, “No, it's Brunty” or Prunty, whatever he's using - he went with Brontë. There's lots of theories: was it a reference to [Nelson](#), was it one of

the Greek gods or goddesses, I think, of thunder. For whatever reason, Patrick took this opportunity to make that part of his reinvention as a clergyman, as a scholar, as someone who was starting afresh.

KN: Wow! It's just a made up identity. So funny how you could just do that back then.

OM: Right, just - new name. I think it was a change that he knew would help him in the high-society Anglican communities that he was hoping to become a priest in. He was very pious, and devout, and very ambitious, and it did help him. Patrick Brontë has a career that Patrick Brunty, Irish son of a farmhand, probably would not have had.

Sharon Wright: I think it's really interesting that he just took that opportunity and ran with it really. That was Patrick all over, he took every opportunity and just carried on, steaming on, didn't he.

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00:24:08 - 00:30:00

OM: Maria Brontë never went home again. Patrick and Maria marry on the 29th of December 1812. They take up residence in Liversedge in Yorkshire and start having children.

Sharon Wright: Maria was thirty by now. Patrick wrote her a lovely poem: "Come Maria, let's walk in the morning air for her birthday." So they had baby Maria, named after the mother, and then they had baby Elizabeth, named after her aunt.

OM: They are smack in the middle of the [Luddite rebellions](#). Now this is - for listeners who might know that word "Luddite" - we tend to use that word to mean 'people who don't own cell phones or hate technology' [laughter] but the very short version of the Luddite rebellion is: this

is a mass rebellion against industrialization, against the loss of jobs and craftsmanship that the industrial revolution is bringing about. And it's an incredibly violent, tumultuous time to be here in Yorkshire. This is happening right all around them. Obviously it's *way* more complicated than this. If our listeners want to understand more of this background of what was happening during this time in context, there's a fantastic short history of Regency England called [Our Tempestuous Day](#) by Carolly Erickson that's wonderful. It's very accessible and entertaining, and I highly recommend it.

This is one of my favorite, most confusing things - about how most people, at least especially most people in the U.S., think about the [Regency era](#). We have somehow convinced ourselves that Georgian England, or at least 'Jane Austen's England', was prim and proper and boring and sort of proto-Victorian - which is *hilarious* in the context of what Georgian England was actually like, on every level. Readers of 'Regency romances' may be closer to the mark, in terms of the type of society that this was. [laughter] The British government is living in *absolute terror* of a 'French Revolution mark two,' and so the entire country is sort of under this martial law/control of these militias stationed anywhere where uprisings might be likely to happen.

KN: It was a *wild* time. A wild time that the Victorians reacted *against*, and that's why the Victorians are so buttoned up, because the Georgian era was so... free. [laughs]

OM: So the Prince Regent had a *good* time.

[music]

Eventually the Brontë family moves to Thornton.

Sharon Wright: And in Thornton is where she gives birth to [Charlotte](#), then [Branwell](#), then [Emily](#), then [Anne](#) Brontë. They were very happy then. And that's where she made friends with [Elizabeth Firth](#), who was a diarist of the time. And I spent a lot of time researching that time, because I think that's when she probably did her writing. She was a prolific letter writer during that time, and there's nothing to say she wouldn't have carried on doing that.

OM: This is probably the happiest period of Maria Brontë's life. She has a strong social circle here, she's very involved in the religious life of the city. There are just a few pieces of her writing left.

Sharon Wright: But for the Brontës, you know, their mother put pen to paper as well as their father. It was normal for the Brontë sisters and Branwell and Patrick that women had opinions and they wrote them down. And they wrote them *for publication* and they took a stand, and you

know, they had an opinion. I just think all that is really quite formative. It says a lot about Patrick as well as Maria.

OM: We have one tract that she wrote for an Evangelical publication that Patrick kept, and it's an argument sort of differentiating between the deserving and undeserving poor. It's not my favorite argument and, especially now, it's easy for us to look back and think this is terrible.

Sharon Wright: Whatever you think about the content, that's kind of irrelevant really. The fact that she *was writing* is really formative in the Brontë story.

OM: It's also fascinating because she's a passionate reader. We have her books and we have her list of her books, and we know that Charlotte inherited her mother's magazine collections. Which again now sounds weird, but was normal. You would bind all of your issues of literary magazines, and these become books. And she - these are some of the only things she brought with her from Cornwall to Yorkshire. When Maria Branwell writes home that she is going to marry Patrick Brontë and stay in Yorkshire, her family starts assembling her things to send her. And also gifts, of course, for her wedding. They send it all by sea - demonstrating the perils of this journey, because the ship carrying *all of her earthly possessions* and all of the gifts from her family for her wedding sinks on the way.

00:30:00 - 00:35:06

OM: And she loses the wedding veil her sister made for her, the majority of her books, her clothes, the majority of her family's gifts... All she has are the things that she brought with her on the original, short-term visit - the books which she couldn't bear to be parted from. And those include these bound magazines. We know what Maria read, since she was in these book clubs, and she was one of the founders of the lending library in Penzance. So we have lists of what she read, what she loved, what shaped her point of view. She knows poverty only second-hand. The only experience she has with poverty is this romanticized, religious-ized view, that sees poverty as romantic and righteous. So this idea of 'good poor' and 'bad poor,' it's not just her idea, it's pretty common. But the fact that she's concerning herself with the poor *at all* is very important and progressive for this time. This is a very 'social reforming' movement, and caring for the poor matters to her - even if she is maybe not as enlightened as we might hope, looking backwards.

KN: She's engaging.

OM: And she is modeling for these little girls, who will grow up to become some of the most famous writers in the English language, that women write.

Sharon Wright: She was very pious, and she was the wife of an Anglican clergyman, and her writing - such as it is - expresses that often. But it wasn't all she was. There was all this other independent thinking, all this wit, all this interest in the world going on, as well. I find that complex and interesting.

[music]

OM: Brontë fans will know that there is a long tradition of Patrick Brontë being cast as a very abusive, bullying husband.

Sharon Wright: It's much different now. There has been a real huge reassessment of Patrick. But he was - thanks to [Mrs Gaskell](#), he was very demonized for decades and decades as this eccentric old tyrant. And he might have been a grumpy old man, I'm not saying he wasn't - but he was certainly a very driven, loving, passionate husband and father. And a very enlightened one, really. At the time, he gave his children - his daughters in particular - the opportunity to have a 'life of the mind.' Of course he became, I'm sure he was quite - *peculiar*, that's the word that always comes up about him.

OM: The men in the Brontë sisters' books are *weird*. They're not the same as anyone else was writing. They're not 'Gothic novel men,' even... they're, you know, *Wuthering Heights* is the peak Gothic novel, but Heathcliff is *not* a gothic novel hero, or villain. Rochester is messy and in-between in ways that was really unusual for this time. And while none of them are great guys from our modern perspective, right - *please* don't model your relationship on Heathcliff and Catherine [laughter] - but I think that the impulse to say *look at all these terrible men that the Brontë girls wrote, it's proof their father was a monster*, is that same thing that we often do to female writers. That male writers 'create works of art' and female writers 'narrate their experiences.' And we try to make *everything* a woman writes autobiographical, in ways that we never do to men. Nobody says, "Oh, Hannibal Lecter - [Thomas Harris](#)'s father must have been a nightmare!" right? [laughter] We say, "That's a wildly creative work of art."

Sharon Wright: And then when Anne Brontë was a very little baby, they moved to [Haworth](#), to the [Parsonage](#) where we always associate the Brontë story as unfolding.

OM: This is Brontëland now. This is the place that is most associated with them. It's here that the Brontë legend will center, and it's here where children will grow up, and it's here that Maria Brontë will die. Shortly after moving here, a year after Anne Brontë is born, Maria is diagnosed with uterine cancer, and has an absolutely agonizing seven month death.

00:35:00 - 00:40:07

OM: Patrick writes about it later in ways that are just heartrending and talks about - this was the most pain that he has ever seen a human being in. And he's a priest, so he has seen all the deaths. Right, he is there for *all* the deaths.

Sharon Wright: One of the things I was looking at was Patrick's medical books, and they're just heartbreaking because he's - as a parson, people would have come to him for legal and medical advice that they couldn't afford. So he would have had to, part of the job then was to be very clued-up in order to give generalized advice. And he would take - he would write in the margins all his sort of findings from, you know, if he tried a certain cure... The cancer chapter, he's written things like "not sure this works" or "it's worth a go" and - not in those words of course, but I mean, that would have come from Maria and him just *desperately* trying everything.

OM: Different treatments that they've tried, or cures that didn't work desperately trying to find anything that will save Maria as she is slipping further and further away. He hires a nurse to nurse her during the day, but he is nursing her all night.

Sharon Wright: And he would get up, try to keep life normal his very little children, go into his parish duties. I mean who knows what's going through his mind then.

OM: During the period in which they *knew* Maria was dying, he presided over seventy funerals, knowing that the next one might be hers.

KN: Whoa!

OM: He writes that for months, he was sure that the next day would be her last. I can't imagine. And they're also contending with this idea, which was very very strong at this point in Evangelical circles especially, of 'the good death.' That you should not be afraid of death. Death is just 'passing over to the other side' and you can do it nobly, and calmly, and in full faith, and never doubting. And that's the goal - but it's also an *expectation* of a 'good Christian' and especially a 'good Proto Methodist Anglican.' And Maria *did not have* a good death. She had an agonizing, appalling death, and he's struggling to make peace with that.

Sharon Wright: And what we know is that she would cry out, "Oh my poor children! Oh my poor children!" because she knew she was leaving six very little children, her husband - and she knew she was dying, and it took a long time. So this idea that she would have such a rock solid belief that it was God's will and all for the best - I find that difficult to understand. I don't talk about it in the book particularly, because that would be subjective, but I do analyze Patrick's take on it, what we know of her condition, what we know she said, and eyewitness accounts from the time.

And it's just *horrible*. And I just think he was heartbroken, and he took a nurse to nurse her through the day, but he nursed her himself through the night. And just, I mean, the despair of that bedroom - you can't imagine, can you? She was in so much pain.

OM: And this is the formative years for Charlotte and Emily. These memories, that Charlotte especially talks about being five years old and that is how - she was five years old when all of these things happen that she talks about, and that's the year her mother died. It cemented in their brains.

Maria Branwell was born in a house in a room looking over the graveyard, and she died in a room looking over another one.

Sharon Wright: She grew up looking out into a graveyard, and she died looking out into another one, and I thought - that is just a similarity and especially when you think when Maria was born eleventh of twelve children, and her mother - she literally had five children safe in their the beds and five others in their graves already. So here you are with your eleventh baby wondering, 'I honestly don't know where this is going to end for this one.' Very traumatic, and of course we can only look at the bare facts of that chronology, but we can... I'm a mother, so I can't imagine it.

[music]

Sharon Wright: [Ellen Nussey](#), who was one of Charlotte Brontë's great friends, says at one point that you could always hear the *chink, chink* of the stonemason outside the parsonage windows. That was one of the things that - when I totted it up and I realized that he'd conducted seventy funerals... I mean the proximity. He's in the graveyard - and at the top window lies his wife, who's dying in the most pain he's ever seen anyone die.

00:40:07 - 00:45:07

OM: This specter of death is always there, but especially it explains - it's fashionable to cast the Brontës as 'obsessed with death,' but if they were? What absolutely good reason they have. Patrick Brontë eventually becomes one of the people who is really instrumental in changing that, and getting the sanitation cleaned up, and bringing the tuberculosis rate especially down, because *all* of his children except one *die of tuberculosis*. Like, he sees firsthand how awful this is.

I think the children of churchmen have a very intimate acquaintance with death that many people don't have even at that time. And of course it's going to feature prominently in their thinking. But

also: Maria's books, that stay with children - Charlotte reads them obsessively, Emily reads them obsessively, and it is her gothic novels that inspires her daughter's work. It's not Yorkshire. They placed these things in Yorkshire, but it is her inherent Cornwall-ness - and their father's inherent Irish-ness - that brings in this supernatural, fairies and magic and demons and hauntings, *and* science and enlightenment, into these really unusual and startling mixes that we have, especially in Emily and Charlotte's books.

Sharon Wright: Analyzing the end of her life, which was then totally forgotten - because the Brontë story largely starts when she dies, doesn't it. When actually I think it's sort of formative, it tells us so much about - especially Gothic fiction, which I really really investigated - which Maria and Elizabeth loved reading their 'Gothic shockers' in the ladies' magazines, and we know that Charlotte's inherited them because she writes about it. And of course from that mind comes the madwoman in the attic, you know - her sister writes *Wuthering Heights*, you don't get much more Gothic, here. I mean, we're all a blend of 'the then and the now,' aren't we, our own individual paths - but the legacy of our parents and those that went before us.

[muisic]

Sharon Wright: [reading a quote from [Charlotte Brontë at Home](#) by Marion Harland] "One day in the autumn or winter succeeding Mrs Brontë's death, Charlotte came to her nurse, wild and white with the excitement of having seen 'a fairy' standing by Baby Anne's cradle. When the two ran back to the nursery, Charlotte flying on ahead, treading softly not to frighten the beautiful visitant away, no one was there besides the baby sleeping sweetly in the depths of her forenoon nap. Charlotte's was transfixed; her eyes wandered incredulously around the room. "But she was here, just now!" she insisted. "I really and truly did see her!" - and no argument or coaxing could shake her from the belief."

OM: She was absolutely formative, in not just her children's work, but in their worldview - in the way they thought about things, in what the expectations were, and the *idea* that they could write when they needed money. Anne becomes a governess for a short period, and then writes an expose that rocks society, of what it's actually like to be governess. A truly remarkable woman has this indelible stamp on, not just this family, on this *remarkable* family, but on this place, on her society...

Sharon Wright: And then she disappears - she literally vanishes from history. Two hundred years, she's just this tragic figure -even at the parsonage she's referred to as a 'shadowy figure.' And I just became really preoccupied with her, thinking - she has these six extraordinary children, I mean - not just the ones that survived, but Maria, the eldest, was an exceptional child by all accounts. There's no literary siblings like them, is there. There's no genetic puzzle there like the

Brontës. And half of that comes from Maria. So it was a real quest to understand her life - and she'd had an extraordinary life. I mean, what a life she packed into thirty eight years!

00:44:50 - 00:46:35

OM: For two hundred years she has been an absence. Hopefully, Maria Brontë is a *presence*.

Sharon Wright: [reading from [Mother of the Brontës](#)] “For two hundred years she's been an absence. The dead wife of the famous reverend, the dead mother of world-famous authors. A life eclipsed by the genius of her children. So I do not approach the family with an air of reverence but of fascination. My Brontës are not the famous ones. Mine are the ‘before they were famous’ ones. The Brontë backstory, I suppose. The prequel.”

[music]

Huge thanks to [Sharon Wright](#). If you'd like to learn more about Maria Brontë or find Sharon Wright's books, links, and other information, all of that is at our website at whatshernamepodcast.com. If you'd like to become a supporter of the podcast just click on the donate link on our website and find great rewards like trading cards, cross stitch patterns, and more. You can also follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#) where we post lots of photos each week. Music for this episode was provided by [Amanda Setlik Wilson](#) and [Half Pelican](#). Our theme song was composed and performed by [Daniel Foster Smith](#). *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.