

SARAH HALL'S NOVEL BURNTCOAT

Sarah Hall'un *Burntcoat* Adlı Romanı

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ABSTRACT

This review offers a critical evaluation of Sarah Hall's novel *Burntcoat* (2021), which recounts the fragmented recollections of a sculptor, Edith Harkness, as she approaches death during a pandemic. Hall employs the pandemic not as a site for social or political critique, but as a backdrop for exploring the entanglements of memory, loss, embodiment, and art. At the heart of the novel lies Edith's belief that transformation, whether emotional, physical, or artistic, inevitably leaves residue and damage. This conviction is mirrored in her sculptural method of "shou sugi ban", a Japanese technique of burning wood to preserve it, which serves as both a metaphor and a structural principle in the novel. While some readers may find the novel's nonlinearity, minimal engagement with social contexts, and intense focus on interiority to be limiting, its achievement lies in Hall's sculpting of a narrative that is as sensually textured and temporally layered as Edith's final artistic act.

Keywords: Sarah Hall, *Burntcoat*, transformation, art and memory, embodiment.

ÖZ

Bu kitap incelemesi, Sarah Hall'un bir heykeltıraş olan Edith Harkness'in bir pandemi sırasında ölüme yaklaşmışken parçalanmış anılarını anlatan *Burntcoat* (2021) adlı romanının eleştirel bir değerlendirmesini sunmaktadır. Hall, pandemiye toplumsal veya politik eleştiri için değil, hafıza, kayıp, bedensellik ve sanatın iç içe geçmişliğini keşfetmek için bir zemin olarak kullanır. Eserin merkezinde, Edith'in ister duygusal ister fiziksel ister sanatsal olsun, dönüşümün kaçınılmaz olarak kalıntı ve hasar bıraktığına olan inancı yatar. Bu inanç, romanda hem metafor hem de yapısal ilke işlevi gören, Edith'in eserlerinde kullandığı odunun korunmak için yakıldığı "shou sugi ban" adlı Japon heykeltıraşlığı yönteminde de kendini gösterir. Bazı okuyucular romanın doğrusal bir zaman akışını izlememesini, toplumsal bağlamlarla asgari düzeyde etkileşimini ve içselliğe yoğun odaklanmasını sınırlayıcı bulabilir. Ancak romanın başarısı, Hall'un Edith'in son sanatsal eylemi kadar duygusal olarak dokulu ve zamansal olarak katmanlı bir anlatıyı bir heykel gibi şekillendirmesinde yatmaktadır.

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Anahtar Sözcükler: Sarah Hall, *Burntcoat*, dönüşüm, sanat ve hafıza, bedenleşme.

Hall, Sarah (2021). *Burntcoat*. Faber, 224 pages.

Sarah Hall's latest novel, *Burntcoat* (2021), is a powerful lyrical meditation on intimacy, creativity, and death. Despite being published during the global COVID-19 pandemic, the novel refuses to being framed solely as a pandemic novel. Rather than engaging with public health narratives or social consequences of the pandemic, Hall uses the backdrop of contagion and isolation to seek answers to the complex questions, such as what it means to live in a body, to create art from the body's memory and decline, and to love while knowing the approaching end. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Hall describes beginning the novel "on the first day of the first lockdown," prompted by "a very primitive fear," death itself. She explains that the project was driven by a "terrible sense of urgency," and that writing became a form of catharsis, a way to confront the immediacy of mortality and isolation (URL-1). This urgency also informs the novel and defines the main character. Edith Harkness, both the protagonist and the narrator, is a renowned British sculptor who reflects on her life while dying from a virus she had previously survived. Through Edith's fragmented reflections towards the end of her life, Hall constructs a narrative about the unreliability of memory, the fragmentation of maternal trauma, and the burnt but enduring power of artistic legacy. The novel's structure, avoiding traditional linear chronology in favour of lyrical fragments, explores: Edith's unconventional childhood with her mother Naomi, a writer permanently altered by a brain haemorrhage; her artistic apprenticeship in Japan where she learns "shou sugi ban," the burning of wood as a means of preservation; her sensuous relationship with Halit, a chef whose intimacy becomes both inspiration and mnemonic; and her final act of creation, a public sculpture, while her body succumbs to a relapse of the virus she once survived.

Burntcoat, at its core, is a novel about embodiment and inscription. Hall portrays the human body not as a stable repository of identity but as a permeable site where trauma, memory, and creativity converge. Edith's body lies at the centre of this exploration: as a child looking after her cognitively impaired mother; as a lover to Halit, with whom intimacy is experienced almost entirely through the senses; and as an artist who translates bodily memory into artistic form. Edith asserts, "We are figures briefly drawn in space; given temporary form in exchange for consciousness,

sense, a chance. We are ready-mades, disposables. How do we live every last moment as this – savant dust?” (2021: 165). In Hall’s fictional world, this temporal volatility becomes generative: the body is fragile, yet it is also the locus of resilience and transformation. This concept is the staple of not only the novel’s thematic architecture but also of its narrative form. *Burntcoat* resists chronological linearity, instead opting for a structure that fluctuates among memories, reflecting how the heaps of loss and intimacy accumulate, recur, and leave their mark over time. As Edith’s dying consciousness cycles through moments of love, loss, and artistic creativity, the reader is seized with her nonlinear memory and sensory temporality. The effect, though gripping and at times disorienting, is always intertwined with the physical: burnt timber, fevered skin, soft food, and the touch of cooling air. Hall’s achievement is to present this corporeal world as the very medium through which meaning is formed and remembered.

Sarah Hall is no stranger to bodily writing. Her earlier novels, such as *The Electric Michelangelo* (2004) and *The Wolf Border* (2015), demonstrate her fascination with the relationship between the body, memory, landscape, and identity. *Burntcoat*, however, is a more intense experiment. The novel is sculptural in both concept and form, rather than one driven by conversation or action. Hall weaves her story from pieces, building texture and voice until an emotional architecture is revealed, much as Edith creates art out of burned wood. In this sense, the metaphorical use of “shou sugi ban” is particularly substantial and thought-provoking. By burning the timber’s surface to increase its durability, Edith embraces destruction as a preservation technique in her art. “It’s counter-intuitive – damaging wood to protect it”, Edith says (2021: 44). This is the main contradiction of *Burntcoat*: Endurance is only made possible by damage, which resonates throughout Hall’s novel.

This paradox inspires both Hall’s novel and her sensory narrative design. In her *Faber Journal* interview, Hall reflects on her aim to create “a sensual world that the reader can really feel they’re immersed in,” and that immersion arises from how the novel treats touch, food, illness, and sex not as themes but as ways of communication (URL-2). Hall’s novel epitomises this absorptive vision. It features short and declarative sentences that co-exist with a lyrical aspect. As Edith’s inner monologue crystalises memories, her language gets tactile and responsive to the texture of objects and the body, evoking heat, pressure, softness, or stiffness. The fragments that include sexual memories are presented sensually as well. Edith states, “At

any given moment the body is simply its state: reformation and decay of flesh, its neutral routes. There was a sensuality – unfrightening, comforting even – of cells altering hour by hour.” (2021: 91). Halit’s cooking, like Edith’s art, becomes a form of sensory ritual that is erotic, nourishing, and vulnerable. Through these motifs, Hall emphasises that both love and art rely on the body’s capacity to be felt, transformed, and remembered. In this sense, *Burntcoat* deals with embodied memory whose power lies in the interweaving of sensory details with philosophical reflection. Edith says, “I’m the wood in the fire. I’ve experienced, altered in nature. I am burnt, damaged, more resilient. A life is a bead of water on the black surface, so frail, so strong, its world incredibly held.” (2021: 208). This articulation of the body as a sensory and transformative material, leaving a trace, is where Hall’s narrative is most original.

Still, some readers may find the novel’s intensity and nonlinearity compelling. The lack of dialogue or continuous scenes may challenge those who seek narrative momentum. However, *Burntcoat* asks the reader to slow down, to pay attention like observing a sculpture. In this regard, another potential difficulty may arise for readers who seek pandemic clichés. Although the virus is at the heart of the plot, Hall does not offer a social or political criticism. There are no hospital scenes, or no media commentary, because the unnamed and mysterious disease functions not as realism but as a metaphor. Hall reframes the concepts that come with pandemic with a new one, transformation, that is the change of not only social conditions but of an internal state. In addition to all other limitations, readers who seek social context or expansive world-building will find *Burntcoat* narrow in scope. The world beyond Edith’s studio and memory is blurred and abstracted. This is not a failure of vision but a choice: Hall is interested in what remains when the world recedes, when only body and art are left. Still, this singular focus may upset readers who dislike limitations on interiority.

Burntcoat can be read alongside other experimental contemporary novels that explore art and embodiment, such as Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy (2014), or Max Porter’s *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015). Cusk’s work is autobiographical; Porter’s novel is a mixture of different genres and told from changing perspectives. Yet Hall manages to merge content and structure in a way that makes the novel not only about sculpture but also sculptural in itself, carefully shaped from both presence and absence. Along with the thematic and formal coherence, the novel successfully holds its tension between fire and preservation, love and obliteration,

memory and forgetting. Hall's writing refuses comfort, yet it offers clarity that emerges only in extremity. Hall not only writes a book about a sculptor preparing for death but also explores the body as a method of perception and transformation, an archive, and a vehicle of love amidst the dualities of life. In conclusion, the triumph of the novel lies in inviting the reader to oscillate between textures and temporalities.

References

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URL-1: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/18/sarah-hall-burntcoat-interview-i-used-to-almost-fear-opening-a-book> (Accessed on July 3, 2025).

URL-2: <https://faber.co.uk/journal/the-faber-interview-sarah-hall/> (Accessed on July 3, 2025).

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