

AMERICAN GOTHIC

Mercedes Helnwein's
DEBUT

"I'VE ALWAYS LOVED America. I've loved it for its bygone idealism, and the melancholic ruins of its golden age," Mercedes Helnwein wrote during a recent trip across the country. "Thanks to years of shattered plans and trips that just evaporated before they ever began, the desire to travel through the country hardened in me until I was beginning to feel as restless as a 50-year-old housewife, still waiting for her first orgasm." As the eldest daughter of the Austrian-Irish shock artist Gottfried Helnwein, Mercedes spent her formative years posing for her dad's paintings with her head wrapped in bandages and enduring "boring" family social occasions with Muhammad Ali, William Burroughs and Andy Warhol. During a peripatetic upbringing split between Ireland and the family's isolated Austrian castle, Helnwein cultivated obsessions with comic books and the music of Blind Willie McTell. Her healthy understanding of the isolation and confusion of adolescence provides the basis for her debut novel, *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day*, the tale of two adolescent newlyweds who set out across America in a camper van with a podgy 10-year-old cousin and a hitchhiking "Jesus freak." Helnwein has also garnered attention from the art world for her drawings, photorealistic delicacies reminiscent of her father's watercolours, with an ominous southern Gothic tone that you would expect from someone who spent her teens locked in a castle reading *Huckleberry Finn* and listening to Leadbelly. She has also collaborated frequently with photographer Alex Payer and their road trip documenting the forgotten towns of America's Midwest undoubtedly provided inspiration for her novel, which has the same knack for capturing the strangeness of the everyday seen in her artwork. Its endearing portrait of adolescent rebellion, considering her upbringing, should probably have been about a girl escaping her art-punk parents to become a librarian. Thankfully, she is a chip off the old block. Matt McLean

The Potential Hazards of Hester Day is published by Simon & Schuster on February 19. www.simonsays.com. Right: Illustration by Mercedes Helnwein

