

Thursday 22 August 2019

**It's tempting to have female protagonists "more feminist" in historical novels,  
says Tracy Chevalier.**

"The temptation is always to have them be banner waving and more like us," said celebrated historical fiction author Tracy Chevalier at an event today at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. The author of the acclaimed, *The Girl With a Pearl Earring*, discussed her new book, *A Single Thread* with Scottish writer and Banner Maker, Clare Hunter. The pair discussed Chevalier's new book, which is due to be released in September, the temptation to write female characters as aware of the oppression they faced and where her next book is going to take her.

"With *Girl With a Pearl Earring* for instance, it was so tempting to have the main character in that book, Griet, the maid, learn to paint or be more proactive, but I had to keep telling myself that she's really powerless here and I have to respect that. That that was how it was at that time, I can't rewrite history."

The topic turned to how she finds inspiration for her books and Chevalier shared that *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, was inspired by just looking at the poster of the painting that she had in her flat. "I had it hanging in my flat and I was just one morning looking at it and suddenly thought 'I wonder what he did to her make her look like that'... and I suddenly thought, 'this is a portrait of a relationship and I want to know what this relationship is'. So it is really literally like that."

For her new book, Chevalier, looks at the life of one of the "surplus women" who were left single after World War I following the death of their fiancés. "There was a surplus of two million more women than men at the time. "It was a very condescending term and I thought 'what would it be like to have lost your fiancé, realise that there weren't men you were going to be able to find... somebody to find to marry. This was a society that was set up to marry. Women were not really encouraged to go into higher education or have careers. I mean some of them were teachers, some of them were nurses but not much more than that.

"They were looked down on, they were called names, spinsters, old maids, all the pejorative terms and I thought, 'how would a woman fight through that.'"

Chevalier says that a large part of her research relies on her actually doing the trades and hobbies of the people she writes about, saying, "I will often in my research process will do the things that my character does.

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“When I wrote *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, I took a painting class, which I was terrible at, but at least I learned how painters paint and mixed in what they did. When I wrote a novel called *Remarkable Creatures*, which was about a fossil hunter named Mary Anning in Lyme Regis, I spent hours fossil hunting as well. With *Simple Thread*, I learned to embroider. *The Last Runaway*, a few books back, was about a quilter and I learned to quilt. So doing those things make it much easier to write about than trying to recreate without knowing.”

She went on to share that her next book, one that she is currently researching, “is going to be set in Venice and it’s going to go from fifteenth century Venice to twenty-first century Venice, so it’s going to be big. It’s about glass, glass beads and that, I can feel already, I mean I’ve only done a bit of research, I can feel it’s going to take me longer.

“So sorry, but watch this space. It’ll be a few years because...sometimes you can just tell a subject is going to be weighty and other times it feels more manageable, so it just depends.”