

Interview with Melissa Addey

Where do you get your ideas from?

I call it the ‘footnotes of history,’ usually a brief mention in a history or travel book that attracts my attention. For the Moroccan series, it was a paragraph on the symbolism and beauty of Berber jewellery in a Lonely Planet guide to Morocco. I read it and then thought how wonderful it would be to have a book focused on a Moroccan woman, in which each chapter was symbolised by a piece of jewellery she is given to mark a certain point in her life and the story. This became *A String of Silver Beads*. For the Chinese series set in the Forbidden City, it was mention of the legend of the ‘fragrant concubine’ in a travelogue written about China. The legend had two such very different versions that it intrigued me and the more I read up on it, the more curious I became. That became *The Fragrant Concubine* and once I had read up on the Qing court I found more and more characters whose stories I wanted to tell. For my Ancient Rome series I found myself wondering who the ‘backstage team’ were at the Colosseum and then realised hardly anything had been written about them even though a building on that scale producing that many Games must have had a permanent team. The gaps in the historical record are gold dust to a writer.

What comes first, the plot or the characters?

Usually the kernel of an idea or a very vague person. Then comes some early research, where characters begin to emerge, both from the historical record and those I would like to explore or those who seem to be blatantly missing from the record. The plot comes much later, a part of it may be imposed upon me, like historical events, but part of it is made up of the things I would like my characters to experience within those historical events.

How do you come up with the titles to your books?

Some of them are easy. *The Fragrant Concubine* could only ever have been called that. The Moroccan series I struggled with. It was originally going to

be called Desert Jewel (*A String of Silver Beads*), Desert Flower (the meaning of Zaynab's name, now *None Such as She*) and Desert Slave (*Do Not Awaken Love*). I prefer the current names. For the Roman series, I wanted to work through the four elements and reflect that in the names. So book 1 is fire (*From the Ashes*), book 2 is water (*Beneath the Waves*), book 3 is earth (*On Bloodied Ground*) and book 4 is air (*The Flight of Birds*). Choosing titles is a lot of fun, especially when you hit on the right one, it feels like recognising it rather than inventing it.

Describe your writing space

I have a little room heavily lined with books to one side, with a large desk and also a bike-desk which allows me to dictate some of my work whilst cycling, otherwise I don't think I'd get any exercise at all! I have a collection of funny little cacti and house leeks on my windowsill and a marketing planner on my right, which allows me to see when new books are due for publication, festivals I'm speaking at, etc. In front of me is a beautiful picture of a pelican with its wing up, it looks like an otherworldly being and I love it. Behind me is an old letterpress drawer, now painted in black and gold, which holds lots of little bits that I find interesting, from a genuine tiny Roman statuette which I bought when I started the Roman series, little pebbles I have found over the years and a lovely carved wooden representation of a walnut I bought in China. They're mostly small items that I find curious or inspiring.

Does writing sad scenes ever make you cry?

Not at the time, for an emotional scene I'm just very caught up in writing it. But when I read them back, yes, they make me cry. I hope that's a good sign, that the writing has managed to draw emotion out of me. I always wonder if my readers cry at the same points that I do.

Who is your favourite character?

I quite like the 'baddies'! Because I spend a lot of time thinking about them, wondering what would make them be that way. I liked writing Ula Nara's story in *The Cold Palace* and I found Zaynab very intriguing. I've had readers say they didn't like the way she behaved, but I think if she were a man one would barely notice what she did. And she co-created an empire, she was an extraordinary woman. And I thought, how would she feel about her empire being given to another woman's child? The mystery of that strange choice of heir was the foundation of the whole Moroccan series. I also liked

Hela, in *The Cup*, I think vows at that time would have been very sacred, and I wondered what kind of vow a very young girl would make: probably something too dramatic and impossible to actually fulfil. I also tried hard, in that book, to keep the balance between: is the cup itself magical or is it just Hela's own powers alongside her interpretation of events?

Do you write listening to music? If so, what kind?

Oh yes! When I'm writing the actual story, I try to listen to music from that culture and or era, depending what's available. Some of it takes some getting used to. I found Chinese music difficult at first, but grew to like it over the years that I wrote the series. Moroccan music, I found easier from the start. Ancient Roman music has been a little harder to trace and I'm still getting used to it. Listening to music appropriate to the story is hugely helpful when you come back to a piece of writing and need to remember the feel of it.

Why did you choose certain times and places as your settings?

The Chinese series had to be that time and place because of the fragrant concubine herself. So that set the era for me, and I mostly kept within a couple of decades of that. For the Moroccan series, I travelled back through Moroccan history to find an era that spoke to me. When I came across the Almoravids and in particular Yusuf bin Tashfin I felt that this was a very strong setting. Not only was it the moment when the whole of North Africa came together as one, but Yusuf then went on to conquer Spain as well, he was the leader of the army that conquered El Cid. Then I realised he had a powerful queen by his side, and found Zaynab an interesting person. And finally, his choice of heir made me very curious. For the Roman series, it was all about the Colosseum, and I wanted to begin right at the beginning. I had to go and look up when the Colosseum was inaugurated and when I found that it was 80AD and that Pompeii had been devastated by Vesuvius just before that, in 79AD, I thought that was a very strong time and place to begin the story I wanted to tell.

What is the best part of your working day?

Probably settling down in the office with music, a cup of coffee and a very long to-do list, when you still think you're going to get it all done. I'm a great one for to-do lists and set myself impossibly long ones.

How many plot ideas are waiting to be written? Can you tell us about one?

Oh, so many! I try not to think about them as it can be distracting. I have some very strong and clear in my mind, others aren't quite in focus yet, but have a little element that intrigues me. Right now I'm focused on the Roman series so that's very exciting because I can finally start the research and the writing, having thought about it for quite some time beforehand while I was still trying to finish the Moroccan series and the Chinese series. After that... I don't know yet, I choose the idea that seems most vivid to me at the time when I have availability. One day there will definitely be a series set in New Orleans, because I love it as a location and it has so much history to choose from. I have a lot of random history books in my collection that remind me of ideas I've had. Maybe something in Victorian times too, it was such a strange era, so old-fashioned in some ways and yet so full of ideas and stories that have shaped us now.

Who is your favourite author and why?

I'm very lucky to have three authors whose books I enjoy immensely and who regularly write a book a year, which all seem to come out just before my birthday in October, it's very kind of them. They are Philippa Gregory, who writes wonderful historical fiction: I've learned a lot from her writing style and in particular enjoyed the books where she views the same events and characters from another angle in another book, something I've done with both my Moroccan and Chinese series. I love Stephen King because his storytelling is superb, especially about ordinary people living ordinary lives, he somehow makes it compelling. I wish he didn't write horror though, it scares the living daylights out of me. I don't read any other horror writer or watch any horror films. But I keep coming back to Stephen King because of his storytelling. I wonder if I could persuade him to write a light-hearted romance?! My third author is Terry Pratchett and every year since he died, I still miss there not being a book from him. I cried when the last book was delivered. But I take pleasure in re-reading the books he wrote, they are an extraordinary legacy.

What book is currently on your bedside table?

Um... when you say *book*... there's at least six on my bedside table at any one time. They range from historical fiction, to research books, to books I'm reading for my book club that's been going for more than a decade,

sometimes children's books that I'm reading to my children at bedtime. And then there's more than thirty stacked up in my office, waiting to be transferred to the bedside table... and I keep buying them and people keep giving them to me! There are so many books to read in the world and I'm never going to read them all, which has been a genuine sadness to me ever since I was a child.

What is your favourite book?

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck. It manages to be both devastatingly sad when it looks at the big picture and, at times, hilariously funny about the minutiae of daily life. I don't know how he did it. And when you look at the history of the Great Depression, which to him was current affairs, it is crushingly awful. I think you can look at a lot of his other books and see glimpses of *The Grapes of Wrath* and somehow it all comes together in that book. I read some articles he wrote for newspapers at the time and you can feel the rage building up in him about how terrible life was for the migrant workers.

What was your favourite book as a child?

Well I did play a game centred around the main family in *The Grapes of Wrath* as a child, which sounds peculiar, but they were very strongly drawn characters. I also loved Italo Calvino's folktales, which came in a giant tome. There's a picture of me reading it, having to balance the book on my knees because it's so heavy. I loved mythology from all parts of the world and read voraciously, the main difficulty was having enough new books since I got through them so fast. I think all the reading I did built up my imagination: all that mythology, all those stories, created a lot of worlds to inhabit. I used to play by myself quite a lot and pretend to be everything from Odysseus sailing home to an Egyptian goddess: I think talking to yourself and pretending to be other people is good practice for being a writer one day.

Share something your readers wouldn't know about you

I was home educated, so I never went to school! I've done a lot of dance classes over the years, from flamenco to Kathak, Bollywood to salsa, dancing is something I love to do and I enjoyed giving Zaynab a dance lesson in *None Such as She*.

What research trips have you been on?

I've been on a trip for each one of my series so far. I visited Morocco with my husband, where I got the original idea for the Moroccan series from. It was wonderful to see the landscape, ride camels, and eat the local food. For China, my family and I spent two weeks in Beijing, visiting key locations. The Forbidden City and The Garden of Perfect Brightness were just extraordinary, the city like a maze of endless corridors and doors, the garden like a countryside Venice, they were both beautiful. For Rome, I visited the Colosseum and was able to go underground, where the backstage team would have worked. It was highly evocative, it must have been very dark down there and they have replica lifts to show you how the gladiators and beasts would have been lifted into the arena, appearing through concealed trapdoors. I've made videos of my research trips, which you can see on my website and my You Tube channel. It's not so much about looking at a particular building or location, it's about the feelings it triggers in you, what it tastes and smells and feels like. It's a very sensory experience.

Does writing energise or exhaust you?

Thinking about writing, like plotting and doing the research, energises me a lot. Writing energises me to some degree, it depends how much I'm doing a day. I've taken part in NaNoWriMo a couple of times (an online writing challenge, National Novel Writing Month requires authors to write 50,000 words in one month) and by the end of the month I can barely speak, let alone write, it's like all the brainpower's been used up.

What was the best money you ever spent as an author?

Getting my own business card with 'writer' on it. It made me believe that I was really, truly, a writer.

What would you choose as your daemon (an animal representing your spirit, from Philip Pullman's books)?

My favourite description of myself was by my father, who said he'd never seen anybody get so much done while giving the impression of lying on the sofa all day. So maybe a cosy soft sloth (I love sloths) who secretly turns into a cheetah when there's work to do.

What do you owe the real people on whom you base your characters?

I owe them good quality research, to find out everything I can about them.

Where the historical record has gaps, then I owe myself and my readers a good story, one which I hope reflects the character and their life. Sometimes my characters, although they are a real person, contain composite elements of other people in the same situation, mostly lost to history. For example, with Ula Nara in *The Cold Palace*, perhaps she didn't have a childhood sweetheart, but I imagine a lot of the girls chosen as concubines between the age of thirteen and sixteen did in fact have someone they were in love with and were taken away from. There wasn't enough information to explain why she 'went mad,' so I spent a lot of time thinking about all the aspects of the Forbidden City that might cause someone distress and depression. There were a lot of them. So perhaps they weren't all correct, but I'm sure many of them contributed to her state of mind and the state of mind of many concubines over the centuries. And I hope that any book I write makes the reader go and check out the history for themselves, that's the best thing I can give to the people from the past.

How do you do your research and how long does it take?

Maybe 3 to 6 months at the start, followed by little bits of additional research as I write. I always start from a position of absolute ignorance, so I have to learn everything, which I find very exciting. I start with children's reference books because they tell you what people ate for breakfast, what underwear they wore and how the toilets worked. That's really important to me. Then I start building up my knowledge as I realise what I need to know and start to make lists of what I need. My book collection grows pretty vast during a series, and I build up TV documentaries and pages and pages of notes and articles as well. I go on research trips and also do more hands-on research, like making food from that era or lighting an oil lamp. Sometimes it's only by doing something that you realise a minor detail. I once watched a gladiatorial combat by a re-enactment group on real sand and suddenly realised that the oil and sweat on the bodies of the gladiators would mean the sand would stick to them. No book tells you that. Books for grown-ups tend to focus on the large-scale politics, the grand sweep of history. But I need to know what my characters do when they wake up in the morning, how they eat, what they wear, what kind of bed they sleep in and the work they do. It's fascinating, I love doing research.

Do you work from research notes when you write?

Not really. By the time I've done all my research a lot of it is embedded: I

know what clothes they wear and the food they eat, I know the shape of the story, so I only have to look up the odd detail.

How do you select character names?

Some names are on the historical record, like Zaynab. Quite often I have to make a decision on how to use the names on record. The concubines in the Forbidden City only had their clan names recorded. Rather than make names up for them, I used these clan names as their first names. A lot of the Moroccan names involved the word Abu at the start, which means ‘father of’ and would refer to their sons, but I used them as they were even when the characters were children because their childhood names were lost to us. Sometimes the names are available but completely unusable for my purposes. The Kangxi Emperor had thirty-five sons, all of whose names began with Yong. This would have made things impossible for my readers. So, I chose to focus on only a few of the sons and used their princely titles instead. When I am free to choose, I will gather names that I think are appropriate to that culture and era and choose from them. Partly based on the sound of the name, partly on what the names mean. Sometimes I have to take into account other names in the book, it doesn’t help the reader if everybody’s names begin with the same letter, for example. Many traditional female Berber names begin with a T, and I had to pick my way through them so as not to cause confusion. The Roman naming system is very complicated, I’m still grappling with understanding it!

Do you read your reviews?

Yes, every one. There is nothing more special than reading that someone missed their bus stop or stayed up late to read just another chapter of your book, it makes me so happy. Occasionally the reviews aren’t as good, but I take on board the comments if I can, for future books. I’m always grateful to any reader who takes the time to share their thoughts on my books, it helps my stories find new readers and that’s a precious gift to a writer.

Do you hide any secrets in your books that only a few people would spot?

They’re not really secrets, but I notice that many animals and my own pets have made an appearance over the years. Thiyya, the white camel in *A String of Silver Beads*, came about because of my research trip to Morocco, where I rode camels and really liked their rather grumpy characters. In *The Cold*

Palace, my mother laughed when she read the description of the two dogs in the snow in the first chapter, they were based on two small pet dogs of our own, one who used to tunnel through the snow and the other who used to leap through it like a dolphin. There's also a kitten who belongs to the fragrant concubine, who fights snakes, and that was based on a cat we had, whose fights with snakes were absolutely terrifying to us as children. The cat won every time, though.

What is the most difficult part of the writing process?

Moving from the first draft to the final draft. It's your last chance to make sure you said what you wanted to say, that the readers will receive the story you wanted to tell.

How do you choose covers?

I spend a lot of time looking at the woman who is to appear on the front cover. It's strange how you can see pictures that theoretically are fine, but the person just doesn't look the way you imagined them. When I find the right person, I get very excited.

Do you have any advice for new writers?

Your writing naturally gets better the more you write. So write lots. And it draws on what you read, so read lots: it helps your unconscious mind understand storytelling structure. Tell the stories you want to tell, don't try to follow trends, you'll never keep up.