

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Where did the idea for 'A World Invisible' come from?

The world invisible was tangled right from the start with wanting to write about an insane treasure hunt. I loved the idea of having to find the clues and then work out their meaning. And all that causes my characters so much trouble the purpose at the end of it had to be pretty important.

The Victoria and Albert Museum plays a key role in the story. Why the V&A?

The V&A is a crazy, intriguing, awesome place, marvellous for a story with a mystery at its heart – long passages, corners hardly anyone visits, and a labyrinthine floor plan. I've been backstage too, drawing from the collection in storage, which I suppose is another kind of invisible world.

So all the settings in the museum are genuine?

They were at the time of writing. Anyone who regularly visits the V&A knows things change, and sadly the Devonshire hunting tapestries have been moved from their stuffy, dim corridor where I set one of my key scenes to a much wider, brightly lit one. Oh well!

Why did you choose to include a fantasy element?

Somehow I knew from the start that the other artist in the gallery was, let's say, uncommon. The rest followed naturally. I have always enjoyed fantasy elements in fiction, although rarely whole fantastic worlds. If you can't meet 'otherness' in stories, where can you?

Do you believe in magic?

No, I don't believe in magic. But there is the question of how it is defined. For example, I'm what some people call a horse whisperer. We know now that horse whispering is based on body language, energy levels and equine psychology, but only a century ago it was thought that the men who could bring about such dramatic changes in horses' behaviour were whispering a magic spell – 'The Horseman's Word' – into their ears.

I'm married to one engineer and mother to two more. They tell me that radio waves are simply an hypothesis that seems to work for a phenomenon that cannot be seen, heard, touched or smelled – magic, really. And when nuclear physicists find measurements don't add up, they invent a particle to

explain the discrepancy.

It has been proposed that a particle can be everywhere in the universe at the same time. My 'magic' seems quite pedestrian next to that!

What age of reader did you write 'A World Invisible' for?

I didn't have any particular reader group in mind while I was writing it, although I hoped teenagers would enjoy it as well as adults. I wrote what I would enjoy reading in a style that felt natural. Since it has been published it has been enjoyed by readers in their teens, twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties and seventies – so it is truly a cross-generational read!

You are fifty-three and Rebecca is nineteen. Was it difficult to write from her point of view?

Not really. The world looks different when you are fifty from when you are twenty, but we can all remember what it was like. Having said that, my nineteen-year-old son saved me from a major bloomer by pointing out to me that only *old* women wear 'nighties' in bed.

May I turn it around and ask whether at nineteen Rebecca isn't too old to appeal to younger readers still at school?

I sincerely hope not. When I was a child I was as much interested in young-but-grown-up characters as I was in children, and my favourite novels were often led by adult characters: 'Jamaica Inn' by Daphne du Maurier; 'The Flight of the Heron' by D K Broster; Rosemary Sutcliffe's books, of course, and K M Peyton's.

I find it sad that the label 'young adult' has been hi-jacked for fiction aimed at readers as young as twelve. It seems to me there is very little for the sixteen-to-twenty-year-olds who don't want to read about high school kids fighting drugs, pregnancy or vampires, but who would sometimes like a hero younger than thirty.

Which authors have influenced you?

I've already listed several. I read all the classic children's fantasy books – the Narnia series, Tolkien, Alan Garner, 'Tom's Midnight Garden' by Philippa Pearce, Ursula le Guin's 'Earthsea' trilogy, anything by Nicholas Stuart Gray – all wonderful examples of fantasy integrated with reality. I read plenty of pony books too, of which my favourites were Ruby Ferguson's 'Jill' books which are full of spot-on conversation, and in my teens hit the novels of Margaret Campbell Barnes and Norah Lofts, where the historical setting is what contributes the magic.

Jane Austen tells such a good story without any tricks but always

keeping you hooked. Anne Hoffman's novels prove that you can slide a little magic into even a contemporary American setting. Barbara Vine stretches a secret with ease to last a whole book, and her prose is so beautifully balanced. Diana Norman creates marvellous, gutsy heroines. Helen de Whitt's wonderful contemporary book, 'The Last Samurai', had me spluttering with laughter even in public – most embarrassing. And there are many others.

What made you decide to write a novel?

I was writing fiction by the time I was twelve; I used narrow-ruled A4 pads because they packed in more words per page. But I always destroyed it within a day or two, and no-one was allowed to read it. I felt too exposed.

But then, as I turned fifty, two things happened which made me think again. First, my father became ill with dementia, and it became important to prepare for my own old age. I knew I wouldn't be able to work with horses into my eighties, and the kind of art I create will become difficult when my hands stiffen. But you can write by proxy if necessary, dictating into a recorder, and I decided I ought to concentrate on writing for public consumption.

The other factor was the daybreak realisation that writing a novel is like painting a picture. An artist doesn't start at the top left corner and paint her way down to the bottom right; she works in layers, underpainting first followed by blocking in the major shapes, and detail is added incrementally with an eye for balance and focal point.

With a novel the general ideas come first, followed by the characters, and the scenes, dialogue, descriptions can be layered on top. If you realise something needed to happen earlier for a development to work, you go back and put it in. You balance the story in the way the artist balances the painting – a touch of blue top right to echo the expanse of blue bottom left. All of a sudden a novel seemed possible after all.

How do you balance writing with being an artist?

Good question! Both need high-energy input, and my high-energy time is straight after breakfast. The business part can be tackled in the afternoon but creative work flows – or sometimes sadly creeps – early in the day. However, I've been creating art for over twenty years so I'm concentrating on the writing now.

Does that mean your art has been put aside?

Not entirely – I'd find that frustrating and stifling – but I'm producing fewer pieces and consequently exhibiting far less often. However, I still give talks on aspects of my work, and have recently begun judging textile art competitions, which keeps my eye in.

What are you writing next?

I am now deeply into a sequel to “A World Invisible”. Although the story was conceived as a single novel, once finished it seemed impossible not to wonder about the characters and to want to answer some of the questions remaining. Three years have elapsed between the close of the first story and the opening of the second, so there is some catching up to do!