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Divine Sarah
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What drew you to Sarah Bernhardt? Why did you choose this moment in her career to focus upon?

After finishing **Mr. Lincoln's Wars**, I still felt as though the themes I had found myself in were not fully answered – that is trying to explore that chasm between the identity of the public and private self. At the time, I thought I would write about another historical – someone who, on the surface, would have nothing in common with Lincoln, but on another level would have everything in common with him. Sarah Bernhardt seemed like a good person to work with. She had the larger than life persona that made people feel as though there was an intimate connection, yet, as with Lincoln, she was very enigmatic. What she thought about in her most private moments, who she was beneath the exterior, all remains something of a mystery. A real plus for a fiction writer!

I think that most so-called literary fiction looks for the defining moment of a life in order to tell the story of a whole life. The circumstance of the boycott in **Divine Sarah** is not a monumental moment in the life of Sarah Bernhardt – if anything it is barely a footnote. But from my vantage point, it seemed as though it was the perfect moment to tell the story of a moment between the past and future that would bring full understanding to the person within it.

Reading *Divine Sarah* is like walking through a time machine, and becoming privy to the innermost desires, thoughts, and motives of the people in your new world. What was the experience of writing *Divine Sarah* like – did you find yourself immersed in the lives of these people? Was it different from writing *Mr. Lincoln's Wars*?

I come to writing through the perspective of a fiction writer. On some level it does not matter whether the characters are based on real people or not, my allegiance is always to the world between the pages. I was always deeply immersed in the characters and their relationships to the setting and events. As with **Mr. Lincoln's Wars**, **Divine Sarah** has a cast that mixes historical figures with fictional characters. I think this made it easier to stay within the fictional world, as the events were always taking place in a world that only fully existed in my head. I really wanted both books to be about people, not the history surrounding them. I had no choice but to become the characters, as well as develop a deep empathy with them, during the writing process.

***Divine Sarah* captures a specific moment in time, but one that reverberates strongly in today's world of celebrity "worship" and mounting censorship laws. Was this intentional? Do you believe these qualities have always – and will always – be present in the United States?**

The parallel in **Divine Sarah** and the censorship hysteria that occurred when it was originally published was unintentional, meaning that I did not start out to address a cultural trend. But on some level, I don't think that I stumbled into it either. This issue of acceptable values has always been wrestled with in this country, from the behavior of celebrities, to the average citizens of the village, to the subject of an artist's work. The major players are all the same. Clearly its roots are in the struggle between the conflation of a secular and non-secular community, although it has been heightened with the introduction of high-stakes politics that has clasped onto the issues of so-called immoralities and values in a thrust for power and greed. And, unfortunately, the politicization of values has taken reason and respect out of the conversation. In spite of political agendas, it did become evident to me after writing this book that this idea of what is acceptable and unacceptable is still being worked out culturally. Some of the things we have feared the most have turned out to be harmless, and some of the best intentions have come around to haunt us.

What is it that draws you to write about the past versus the present?

I am really drawn to a good story about interesting people. Going into the past with **Divine Sarah** and **Mr. Lincoln's Wars** allowed me to get into the heart and minds of people who felt intimate yet were total strangers to me. I also liked the challenge of making the past feel contemporary – that is, giving it an immediacy that took it out of the photo album and onto the front porch. Even when I do write a story set in the present, I still find myself working in the past situations of the characters' lives or situations. I do believe the adage is true that one can't fully understand the present without understanding the past.