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The Queen of Subtleties
ISBN13: 9780060591588

You've written seven books of contemporary fiction. What initially drew you to the story of Anne Boleyn?

It's a story with everything, isn't it: you name it, but any list would have to include love and passion, heartbreak, scandal, rivalry, politics and the pursuit of power, revolution (kind of ie the reformation), paranoia, betrayal and murder. And — particularly good, in my view — it's all true, too! A big plus for a novelist is that the story is populated by larger-than-life characters: not just Anne and Henry, who were, to say the least, huge characters, but also the amazingly unbending, dogged Catherine of Aragon (often much underestimated); the spine-chillingly awful Duke of Norfolk, snide, callous and calculating; Anne's louche, saturnine brother George etc. The shape of the story, too, fascinated me: that so-slow rise (Henry and Anne were 'together' for seven years before their marriage), beset at every stage by problems, and then, after all that — the breathtaking swiftness of Anne's downfall (which even she never saw coming).

Actually, though, my being drawn to the story was also about all the things that it wasn't: it's usually understood as the story of a middle-aged king leaving an empty marriage for a beguiling young beauty. It's much more interesting than that, and I was keen to put the record straight. Henry wasn't middle-aged: he was 35 and in his prime (and what a prime!) when he fell for Anne. The marriage to Catherine (all nineteen years of it — much longer than most people realize) had been of Henry's choice, very much so: indeed, it was rather an odd choice, at the time (in other words, political expediency had nothing to do with it).

What kind of historical research did you do in preparation for *The Queen of Subtleties*?

I read books, not just on Anne but on life during the period (and it was in one such book, on Tudor food, that I chanced upon a fleeting reference to there having been only one woman — a confectioner — among Henry's kitchen staff of two hundred). I have to admit that I stuck to secondary sources (books written about the period rather than during the period) — no sitting in the Public Records Office, for me, trawling through Tudor English! Perhaps more enjoyable than the reading was the visiting: I took the occasional day 'off', to visit places with a connection to the story, such as Hampton Court Palace, on the outskirts of London, where the vast kitchens have been reconstructed in keeping with how historians have decided they were in 1537 (luckily for me, exactly the time I was writing about!), and then the lovely moated manor house which was the Boleyn family home, at Hever, in the Kent countryside. Sometimes I went to places with no direct connection to the story, but which date from the period: for example, Kentwell Manor in Suffolk, the piecemeal restoration of which has been the labour-of-love of one particular (non-aristocratic) family for several decades.

Can you discuss how writing a work of historical fiction differs from writing fiction that isn't based on real people?

One big plus-point is that I already had the plot! I didn't have to make it up. I have always feared plot-writing (which is silly, really, because in many ways it's the easiest aspect of fiction-writing; or, at least, should be... Making characters feel real on the page is probably harder...) I never got stuck, I worked with a list of 'events' (in Anne's life) at my side, worked down that list. And I didn't have to come up with an ending. Mind you, I still had to present those events in such a way to be plausible, and the stranger-than-fiction elements of Anne's story made that taxing. One such element was her increasingly reckless behaviour at the time when she was clearly in trouble with Henry. It seems like a kind of madness, to me. I suspect she didn't know just how much trouble she was in.

One other aspect of writing fiction based on the lives of real people: I wanted to do justice to them. I wanted to 'tell the truth', which is, of course, exactly what fiction isn't. As a novelist, I've always felt rather bound to 'the truth' (the 'golden rule' that I tell students whenever I'm teaching/running workshops on writing fiction is: stop and think, really hard, asking yourself the question, 'Is this really, really how this is? Is this how this would be? Would someone really think like this? Would someone really do that/say that?'). But there's also a good case for being, shall we say, 'free with the truth', as a novelist, to make a really readable novel. It's possible that I crammed too much of the 'real' story of Anne Boleyn into my novel.

You opted not to use the vernacular of 16th century England in *The Queen of Subtleties*. What considerations went into that decision?

Can I ask you how you know what the vernacular of 16th century England was?! My line on this is that we have no idea how people spoke in those days. We know how they *wrote*, but that's always very different. (You'll know how different if you've ever had cause to look at a transcript of someone's speech — transcripts tend to be unintelligible! We tidy up far more than we realise in order to make things make sense on the page.) Rather than go for some idea of how we feel people might have spoken, some cod-olde-English, I decided to write it in 'normal English'. Anne Boleyn regarded herself as an utterly up-to-the-minute young woman, not as someone who spoke stiltedly, formally.

I wanted to write the kind of novel of Anne Boleyn that I've always wanted to read, and have never had the luck to find. And 'the vernacular of 16th century England' definitely wouldn't be in that novel. For me, as a reader, any 'thee' and 'thou', or even any 'did not' rather than 'didn't', gets in the way: I notice it, rather than having the language as, simply, a clear window on the characters and their lives.

Having said all that, I must admit that I knew some people would hate it, that it would 'ring untrue' to them, go against their expectations of what a historical novel should be and therefore *not* be that clear window — would end up, ironically, getting in the way.

What's your next project?

A novel focusing on the last days (well, year and a half) of Katherine Parr, Henry's sixth wife, the one who survived him (...by a year and a half). Her story fascinates me, because she was such a clever, sensible woman, so good a judge of character, outstandingly diplomatic, not only surviving difficult (indeed, terrifying) times and circumstances but doing so brilliantly, rescuing and reconciling others along the way ...but as soon as Henry died, she fell for a cad and it was her undoing.