

The Sarah Waters Interview

Sarah Waters, the author of three wonderful historical novels, *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, and *Fingersmith*, was in town last month for the Cambridge wordfest. She kindly agreed to be interviewed by Sister Act (Alison and Rachel asking the questions, and Janie as fixer and groupie). Unsurprisingly to anyone who's heard or seen her give readings, she turned out to be straightforward, open, charming, and extremely modest - and she gave us some great insights into her writing process and the ideas behind her novels.

R: I'm interested in the way that your books somehow manage to be marketed as both mainstream *and* lesbian. Not many authors get into that position - was that deliberate? Do you have any say in the marketing?

SW: No, I mean it wasn't deliberate on my part precisely because as a writer you just don't have much input, especially early on in your career - even now, actually - and that was something I really hadn't anticipated, what it would feel like to write a book that I felt was a thoroughly lesbian book - *Tipping the Velvet*, anyway - and to see it in a certain kind of context but then have to hand it over and see it being marketed entirely in line with what your publisher wants to do with it. But at the same time that just felt to me like part of the contract of being published, you know, it's just what you have to do really. But I'm quite pleased with having ended up with being clearly known as a lesbian writer with a lesbian audience but also with this kind of mainstream appeal as well.

R: Has it changed the way you write as you go on writing the next one, knowing that you now have this dual audience?

SW: It hasn't really because it's always ultimately about me and an idea for a book. But I did - I think especially moving on from *Fingersmith* because *Fingersmith* did have much more of a mainstream audience, find a much bigger audience - and I did have a kind of like 'oh my God, you know, will the next book be too lesbian?' - or will it not be lesbian *enough*, for the lesbian audience? But you just have to shrug that off, really.

A: Can I ask you about *Fingersmith*, because it's my favourite of your three books, and I loved the way the different plots were woven together? I'm curious about what a book like that looks like, say, halfway through the writing process. Do you start at the beginning, and what notes do you make?

SW: Well, with a book like that I had the whole plot worked out in advance and so on, I think, apart from the very end. But I had all the twists and stuff worked out so it actually just looks like a skeleton and then I'm adding bits of flesh to it. It really is like that. I think I did start at the beginning with that, I think I wrote the first part, which was Sue's. I can't even remember now! And then I think I did go and write Maud's then. I didn't do all of Sue's and then do Maud's. But then, you know, that was for a first draft, and I mean quite a finished first draft but still a draft that I'd have to go back to and do a lot of tidying up with. *Tipping the Velvet* was the only book that I started in the middle. Because again I had the whole plot worked out but it's in three parts and I knew most about that London rent boy bit so I started with that and meanwhile researched oysters and music halls and then went back to the beginning and then just joined them up! But you can do that when you work the whole thing out in advance.

A: And is the joining-up process difficult?

SW: It's a little bit, but then no more difficult than any of the problems with a manuscript that I'll have that need sorting out when I come back to a complete draft. It's just a whole series of things that just need work when I've got a complete draft. And then I'll just spend time sort of hopefully taking care of them.

R: Are you always actually writing something? Do you keep your hand in writing, or is there time when you're just researching and letting the ideas work out?

SW: There is time when I'm just researching. I don't write other things, I don't write short stories, and I don't even really write bits of journalism. I'm often asked to, but I just don't, I'm not really interested, and so I do just work a book at a time, and writing a book does usually involve a bit at the beginning that's just thinking really, and research. And then there comes an awful moment when I have to just sit down and start something, which is awful but kind of exciting as well I suppose. And it's a long process: I mean, the book I'm writing now, this is the third year I've been working on it. So I'm kind of used to working at a slow pace.

A: Can you describe a typical writing day to us?

SW: Well, I just treat writing like a day job, so I get up about nine o'clock these days, but then I can be at my desk at half nine and beginning to work, and then just sort of write right through until about four when I'm usually a bit knackered. But that is quite sporadic, you know, I mean quite a lot of time just sitting there looking at the screen, and bursts of sometimes covering a lot of ground, and sometimes working on a paragraph, or not even working but just looking at a paragraph for ages and thinking, 'How can I do this? How can I make this work?' But I aim to write about a thousand words a day, because if I can do that, then by the end of a week I'll have written five thousand words, and at least it keeps it moving forward.

A: I want to ask about a character I don't like at all, and that's Gentleman [in *Fingersmith*]. I mean, I like him as a character, but he has no redeeming features at all as far as I can see, and I just wonder when you create a character like that do you identify with him or is it hard to create somebody that you don't even feel for when he dies?

SW: Actually, I liked Gentleman a lot because he was so different to me, and because he was so dastardly, and I kind of enjoyed... I didn't exactly inhabit him in the way that I probably inhabited somebody like Maud a bit more because I felt more emotionally similar to Maud. But it's like trying on a costume. It's fun being Gentleman, and he has funny lines and things like that. So, no, I mean it was much harder for example to write somebody like Mr Lilley, who I was just never very interested in, actually, and so never really knew what he should be saying at times. Whereas with Gentleman I could always find something for him to say. I don't know what it is. Sometimes characters just work with you and sometimes they don't. The hardest thing is when you're just not really interested in a character, and can't find a way of becoming interested in them. They remain sort of opaque to you. I find that really hard.

R: Going back to *Tipping the Velvet*. I've heard you talk about it, and you're always quite cautious not to say that you 'recreated' something you'd researched and it's all there, and instead you say that you 'reimagined' it. What were the starting-points that you took for reimagining things? How much of it did you have a solid starting-point for, and how much was pure imagination?

SW: Well, male impersonation's probably the thing I knew most about, or that I found out most about, and it was the starting-point for me because I was interested in male impersonators. I'd started collecting images of them and reading biographies of Vesta Tilley and people like that; I just found it really fascinating. And there's a lot of work been done on music-halls, so there was a lot for me to read, but not much done about the lesbian impact of male impersonation. So that was that, and then things like the Sapphists' Club, I knew there were women's clubs and there was one club called the Pioneer Club which was a kind of feminist club, but certainly not a lesbian club in the way that I described. And then the working-class world at the end around all the socialism, again a lot's been done on socialism, a lot's been done on women and trade unions, and suffrage, but not much about working-class lesbianism because it's very hard to find evidence for: I really had to do most of the work around that really. But there's a book called *Dear Girl*, edited by Tierl Thompson [Women's Press, 1987]. She found a lot of correspondence, and

diaries, around a group of - mainly two women, but other women as well, working-class women, so it's very interesting, all active in different kinds of social movements. It's not really lesbian but there are certainly very strong bonds between these women, so that was a starting-point for me. And then all the rent-boy stuff, there's actually much more about that, Oscar Wilde and all his contacts, and then there's some Victorian pornography. Actually, Victorian pornography, Walter's *My Secret Life*, that was a good source. It's an anonymous erotic memoir supposedly written by a man who just has endless sexual encounters, and every so often he'll meet a woman who'll recount some sort of lesbian adventures that she's had, and you get these tantalising glimpses of lesbian life, or not even *lesbian* life, but *something*, you know, that we might call lesbian. So all sorts of things really - I just put them all together.

A: Do you think it matters if readers in the future look at what you've written about the past and take it as being totally historically accurate?

SW: Erm - I can't imagine anyone in the future will be reading my books! But no, because you can't, and I don't think you should try to control how people read your books anyway. But with something like *Tipping the Velvet* I did try quite hard - it's a fun book and there are lots of jokes in it and there's lots of references to other lesbian novels - and I did try by doing that to sort of signal the fact that it was a bit playful. Whereas with the other books, and especially with *Affinity* in a way I do feel like it has more to say possibly about the reality of women's situations.

R: I wanted to ask you about *Affinity* because it's my favourite of the three, and I find it strange that it seems to have got less general attention than the others. Do you think there's a particular reason for that?

SW: Well, it did get quite well reviewed, but *Tipping the Velvet* overtook it because it's raunchier, you know, and it had that element to it, and then of course with the TV adaptation, and then *Fingersmith* did well. Possibly again the lesbianism is more incidental in *Fingersmith* and that might have helped it find a larger audience. But it's true that *Affinity* does tend to be the middle sister, a bit overlooked, and I feel a bit sorry about that as well. I feel if I published *Affinity* now on the back of *Fingersmith* it would do really well, but I don't know, that's just the nature of it - when you've got a few books they can't all get the same attention. But it's quite nice because often people do say they like it best.

R: I wanted to ask you whether you think that there is a specific women's tradition of writing or a lesbian tradition of writing, because the people who are perhaps the most obvious influences on some of your novels, like Dickens or Wilkie Collins, are men. Do you see male and female writers differently or is it all part of the same tradition?

SW: I don't see them especially differently, and certainly to the extent that nineteenth-century fiction, a certain kind of nineteenth-century fiction, was an influence on me I would say that *Jane Eyre* had as big an impact on me as anything by Dickens; and then Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her sensation fiction had an impact on *Fingersmith* in particular. But I think there were probably a whole lot of modern women writers, like Angela Carter who I was a big fan of, and even someone like Iris Murdoch and her really well-constructed plots. Philippa Gregory, I don't know if you know her stuff, she's a much more commercial writer, really clever women's historical novels. And so certainly that's a very female tradition, a very contemporary female community of writers - not that they might see themselves as a community, but for me I can draw inspiration from them.

A: Can you see yourself writing literature set in the present day?

SW: Possibly, although not right now. The thing is it's always been something about the past that's got me going really, got me writing. And it was very much something about *Tipping the Velvet*, you know; I didn't plan to be a writer, I just had this idea for one book and each book has then grown out of the last, so that's been the impetus behind my writing. But I'm writing something set in the 40s at the moment so I have moved forward a bit, but again it still feels very

period to me, very much like you have to make this leap into a different mind, and that's what I like, you know, that's what I like to write about.

R: I was interested in the 40s one - I heard a bit of it that you read at Libertas, and I was interested that in that one you seem to be in a situation where you're dealing with characters who are *within* a gay community, in a way that you hadn't in previous ones (except perhaps a bit in *Tipping the Velvet*). Does it make a great difference writing about dynamics *within* a gay community rather than writing about these rather isolated characters who are trying to find their way?

SW: It does, it does. And in some ways, some obvious ways, it's liberating, because nobody has to go through a kind of 'ooh, what's this feeling?', and especially because they're older women as well, and they've done all that, and they're just living a lesbian life, you know, like I am, or to a certain extent. But in other ways that I hadn't anticipated it's more limiting somehow, because I think in the Forties people would have had a label to pin on lesbian sexuality, immediately, the lesbian label, whereas in the nineteenth century when that wasn't around it made things slightly more interesting in a way. I mean, in *Fingersmith* the girls fall in love with each other, but it doesn't mean they then say, 'Oh, I'm a lesbian then.' You know, it's just not there as a category, even though it's there as an important thing in their lives. Other categories, like class, are more pressing for them. Whereas I think from the 20s onwards, at least, it became much more like, you just step into a little box immediately.

A: My last question is: what are you reading at the moment?

SW: I'm reading *Middlesex*, that Jeffrey Eugenides book, for my book group, and kind of liking it, but not as much as his last book, *The Virgin Suicides*, which I really liked. And I'm reading *The Willow Cabin* by Pamela Frankau, which I think was written around 1950. Anyway, it's set in the 1940s and I've been doing a lot of reading for the 40s, so I've got those two strings going on at the same time.

R: Do you feel with your novels that they're supposed to make us think about our own society?

SW: I can't say that I honestly do. I'd like to say that I do, because it would sound clever, but to be honest I don't really. But I suppose at the same time I'm very much aware that what I'm looking for, and finding, is very much dictated by preoccupations in the present. That's what interests me about historical fiction, that it always tells you more about the period it's written in than the period it purports to describe. But no, I'm really much more interested in thinking about the past through the lens of the present, rather than reflecting back on the present.

A: Thanks very much!

SW: My pleasure.

If you want to read more about Sarah Waters, you'll find lots of information on the web. Why not start with her official website <http://www.sarahwaters.com/> Or try the British Council site of Contemporary Writers (<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth03A23O034012634831>) - she's had an outstanding number of literary awards since 1999!