



Vol. 2, No. 17, April 24, 2020

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From the Editor

Our world has turned upside down over the past few months, but it keeps spinning. We keep waking up to find the sun rose and will set again tonight. Our world is different for everyone right now. But we keep reading. We keep writing. We keep loving. And we keep looking for the bright spots in the day and finding laughter.

I hope all is well in your world and you're tucked in as much as possible and safe!

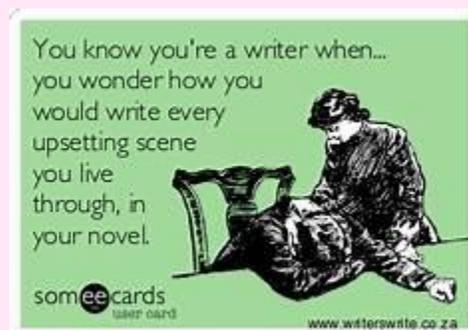
Stay tuned for future issues – Today we have a fascinating interview with Marilyn Pemberton, and in the weeks ahead we have author interviews coming up for Madeline Tasky Sharples, Marion Kummerow, Mary Lingerfelt, Lindsay Downs, Johanna Wittenberg, and more!

Trisha

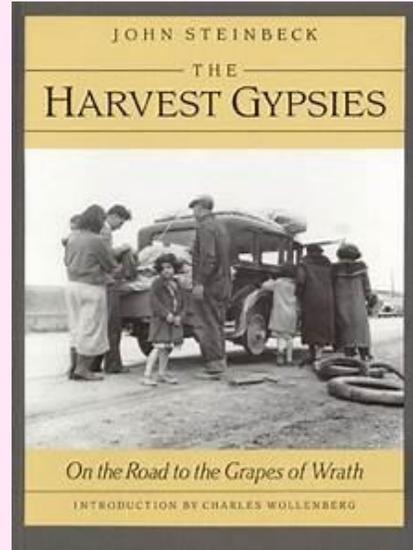
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Journals of the Grapes of Wrath



If you asked me what my favorite book of all time was, you'd get an answer of one of two books. It depends on which day you asked me the question. One is *Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand, and the other is *Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck.

John Steinbeck originally wrote seven articles, published in the San Francisco News, from October 5-12, 1936. These articles focused on the migration in the post-Depression years, primarily from the Dust Bowl to the agricultural oasis of California. He interviewed many sharecropper families and wrote the articles from the information he obtained from so many down on their luck families. These are available in [The Harvest Gypsies](#). (free) These articles became the early basis for his well-known book, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In 1938, from June to October, he furiously wrote what would become his epic novel, earning him a Pulitzer Prize and a Nobel Prize. While he spent huge portions of the day penning his award-winning novel, he also maintained a journal about life and his writing progress. Years after his death, his words were published – [Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath](#).

What I find interesting, as an author that wrestles with self-doubt on an almost daily basis, is that despite the accolades this book would bring him, Mr. Steinbeck also fought with his own doubts about his writing and about his book. On one day he writes:

This book has become a misery to me because of my inadequacy.

On another, as he neared the completion, he wrote:

If I can do that it will be all my lack of genius can produce. For no one else knows my lack of ability the way I do. I am pushing against it all the time. Sometimes, I seem to do a good little piece of work, but when it is done it slides into mediocrity.

Even closer to the end, his self-doubt remains firmly entrenched. He writes:

I only hope it is some good. I have very grave doubts sometimes. I don't want this to seem hurried. It must be just as slow and measured as the rest but I am sure of one thing — it isn't the great book I had hoped it would be. It's just a run-of-the-mill book. And the awful thing is that it is absolutely the best I can do. Now to work on it.

“.....it isn't the great book I had hoped it would be. It's just a run-of-the-mill book...” Really? How wrong he was!

Brainpickings, on their post ‘John Steinbeck Working Days’ puts the authors self-doubts into perspective with the success of the book. (<https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/02/john-steinbeck-working-days/>)

“The book, of course, was far from run-of-the-mill. In addition to earning the two highest accolades in literature, *The Grapes of Wrath* remained atop the bestseller list for almost a year after it was published on April 14, 1939 and sold nearly 430,000 copies in its first year alone. And therein lies the very thing that makes *Working Days* a necessary creative scripture for anyone laboring in the arts — the journal's deeply assuring testament to the fact that even those of exceptional genius are plagued by constant self-doubt, and that perhaps the most important quality setting the brilliant apart from the mediocre is their willingness to let the doubt happen but plow forward anyway, not to be shown up by it but to show up doggedly for the day's task, however monumental its ask and however small its give.”

I know that I'll never be in the same league as John Steinbeck (hear that 'ole nasty self-doubt monster rearing its ugly head in my life?), yet, I'm so glad to see that no matter the measure of success he achieved as a highly acclaimed author – the man himself grappled with his own inner monsters. I don't feel so bad, knowing that I'm in good company.



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Author Spotlight: Marilyn Pemberton

This week Pages of the Past welcomes Marilyn Pemberton as our spotlighted author. Her historical fiction books take the reader in unusual directions. As further proof of her excellent writing, one of her books, ***The Jewel Garden***, is a semi-finalist in the Chanticleer International Goethe Book Awards for post-1750s Historical Fiction. Come see what fascinating tidbits she shares with us here today.



Hello, Marilyn. Welcome to Pages of the Past. You caught my attention with your two historical fiction books, *The Jewel Garden* and *Song of the Nightingale: a tale of two castrati*. But I see that although these two books are your first historical fiction works, they're not your first published books.

Two other books were published as a result of your PhD research on the utopian and dystopian aspects of Victorian fairy tales. In 2010, *Enchanted Ideologies: A Collection of Rediscovered Nineteenth-Century English Moral Fairy Tales* was published. It was followed in 2012 by *Out of the Shadows: The Life and Works of Mary De Morgan*. Can you share with us how your PhD research and these two books drew you down the path into the world of historical fiction?

First of all, thank you for letting me share my writing experiences with you. I didn't go to university after school as I went straight into a career in computing (which was very new in those days!). When I turned 40, however, I felt the urge to exercise the creative side of my brain and to see whether I could get a degree, so I took a part-time BA in Literature & Cultural studies. It took 10 years but by the end I definitely had the bug, so I went on to do an MA. One of the modules was Children's Literature and I was introduced to some wonderful Victorian writers. Having completed my MA the next logical step was to do a PhD and I chose as my thesis 'Glimpses of Utopia and Dystopia in Victorian Fairylands.' During my research I kept coming across the name Mary De Morgan but none of her fairy tales were reproduced in the academic book. I was intrigued by her name and did a bit of digging on the internet and found her three anthologies of fairy tales had been reproduced in the 1950s with a short introduction. Her fairy tales are marvellous and fitted very nicely into my thesis but the introduction fascinated me even more because it mentioned that she had travelled to Egypt and become a directress of a girls' reformatory, but no explanation as to how or why. My mother was born in Egypt and I suppose this link just piqued my interest.

Enchanted Ideologies was written after I gave a paper on Edith Nesbit at a conference (as part of my PhD) and someone there said if I collected some little-known fairy tales, he would publish it. I did a lot of research in 19th century magazines, children's books etc searching for fairy tales that had never been re-published. It was quite time-consuming, but I really enjoyed sitting in libraries reading Victorian Girls' and Boys' Books, scouring for fairy tales.

Having gained my PhD, I couldn't bear the thought of not writing or researching and it was an easy decision to try and write Mary De Morgan's biography. Despite carrying out a lot of research and finding out all sorts of fascinating things, there was still a fair bit I was never able to find out: why did

she never marry; was she really the devil incarnate as George Bernard Shaw suggested; why did she go to Egypt in her 50s; how on earth did she become a directress of a girls' reformatory? The (imaginative) answers to these questions are the basis of *The Jewel Garden*.

Whilst I was still writing my debut novel, I heard a radio program on the only castrato ever to be recorded (Alessandro Moreschi) and the interviewee mentioned almost in passing about the practise in 18th-century Italy of buying young boys from poor families and having them castrated so that they could use their sublime voices for the glory of God. I immediately thought this would make a great story so once *The Jewel Garden* was finished, this was my next project.

What were some of the research methods you utilized to find the background you needed for these books?

Mary De Morgan's father, Augustus, was a renowned mathematician at the University of London and their library hold all his papers, as well as some of his wife Sophia Elizabeth (a great reformer and spiritualist) and of their children, including Mary. In a couple of boxes I found typed stories that I cannot find have ever been published; letters from her sister, who later died of tuberculosis; newspaper reviews of her collections of fairy tales (all, incorrectly in my opinion, considered them as for children only); and very interestingly, a notebook kept by her mother in which she recorded the dreams of six-year-old Mary in which she played with her sister Alice, who had died three years earlier. I of course searched the internet and investigated every reference to Mary De Morgan that I could find (at the time there was not many). Mary and her brother William were good friends of William Morris and there are references to Mary in Morris's diaries and biographies, as well as snippets in other books. Interestingly, Mary's mother wrote a biography of her husband (Memoir of Augustus De Morgan) in which she mentions all her children except Mary. One really useful book was the biography of William De Morgan (best known today for his wonderful tiles and pottery) by his sister-in-law (William De Morgan and his Wife, by A. M. W Stirling), which again had only few mentions of Mary, but did help me to build a pictures of her as a child. I went to Kew Gardens, where they keep records of passengers on ships but could not find details of a Mary De Morgan sailing to anywhere in Egypt in early 1900s (I did find a Morgan and I have assumed this is her). What I did find, however, were letters and documents relating to her death in Helouan in 1907, again from tuberculosis (her brother called it the De Morgan Curse.) Lastly, I went to Egypt for my holiday whilst writing De Morgan's biography, and managed to visit her grave in the British Protestant Cemetery in Cairo. I obviously did a lot of research for De Morgan's biography, and for the novel I bought a few books on travel within England and overseas, life in a reformatory, the East End of London – just so I could make my descriptions more realistic.

For *Song of the Nightingale* I bought books on the life of a castrato, life in Italy in the 18th century, Italian folk songs and the history of Italy. However, I didn't want this to be a history book - I just wanted to make sure I made the life the characters led believable. Unfortunately, I couldn't justify a trip to Tuscany!

***The Jewel Garden* takes us to worlds all over – London, Egypt, Venice, and Kent. Did having so many locales in your book present any complications while you were writing?**

No, I had books and articles written by Mary De Morgan herself on visits to families in the East End of London and her experience with meeting a young Jewish girl whose wedding she did actually attend. There are lots of contemporary article and photographs which all give a good flavour of life in that area at the time – especially Charles Booth's Life and Labour of the People in London. I had visited Egypt with my parents when I was a teenager and read articles and books on Helouan (which was a health resort for sufferers of tuberculosis) and life in a reformatory. I had visited Venice a few years previously, but I have never been to Kent! In the end, though, it is all a matter of imagining what it was like and trying to describe it so that readers believe they are actually there.

***Song of the Nightingale* centers around an unusual and little-known subject. How did this topic work its way from an idea into a full book?**

As I said earlier, the seed was planted after I heard a radio program on the only recorded castrato. I let the seed germinate whilst I completed *The Jewel Garden*, and I played around with different points of view. I always knew that I wanted to follow the journey of two young boys and that one succeeded and one failed as a castrato. I initially thought that I would tell it from the unsuccessful boy's point of view, but I then thought that that would be too one-sided. I then hit upon the idea of writing it from someone else's point of view and I decided this would be the man responsible for taking them to be castrated, Philippe. I had written *The Jewel Garden* in the 1st person and this seems to be my natural style so I wrote *Song of the Nightingale* from the point of view of Philippe. I plotted it roughly, but as I wrote and the characters became more formed and I imagined what it would actually have been like to live the boys' lives, I changed the ending quite dramatically. The concept of success and failure came to mean a very different thing than I had originally thought.

What challenges have you found with writing these two books?

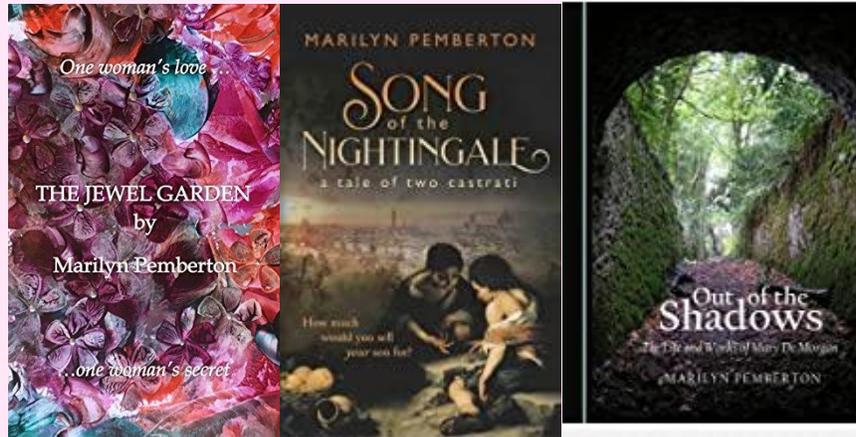
When I worked fulltime I could only write at weekends (I was too drained in the evenings) so I suppose having enough time was the biggest challenge. However, I didn't have an agent so I didn't have any deadlines and therefore didn't feel under any pressure. I live alone so don't have any distractions (housework is very low on my list of priorities) and I retired October 2019 so I have far more time to write, which is great.

Your research and knowledge of the times showed its result in the awards you're in the running for. I see that *The Jewel Garden* is a semi-finalist in the Chanticleer International Goethe Book Awards for post-1750s Historical Fiction. (Awards ceremony with the final announcement any day now. Fingers crossed.) It's also on the short list for the Chanticleer 2019 Goethe Book Awards for post 1750s Historical Fiction. How do you feel having your debut novel in the running for these awards?

They are the same award – the book is a semi-finalist in the 2019 Chanticleer International Goethe Book Awards for post-1750s Historical Fiction. The award ceremony has been delayed due to the pandemic so I have no idea when I will hear the result. To be honest, I am not sure what to feel. I am pleased, obviously, as any recognition is wonderful, but I don't know whether it is a big deal or not. I don't know if I am 1 of 10 semi-finalists out of 20 submissions or 200!

Is there anything you'd like to share with us that I didn't ask you about?

When I decided I wanted to write *The Jewel Garden*, I realised I hadn't written anything fictional since I was 15 years old – did I even still have an imagination? I decided to join a writing group and it was the best thing I could have done. It was originally a six-week course but seven years later we still meet. The leader made me realize that yes, I did have an imagination and she really helped me stretch it, by making me write short stories, poetry and flash fiction – all of which helped me become a better writer. I often read bits of the novel to the other members and they were really very supportive, which kept me going. So, my advice to any writer, experienced or not, is to join a writers' group.



You can find Marilyn's books here:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Jewel-Garden-Marilyn-Pemberton-ebook/dp/B079ZY877T>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Song-Nightingale-tale-two-castrati-ebook/dp/B082S6LHT3>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Out-Shadows-Marilyn-Pemberton/dp/1527534960>

You can connect with Marilyn here:

Website: https://marilyn_pemberton.wixsite.com/author

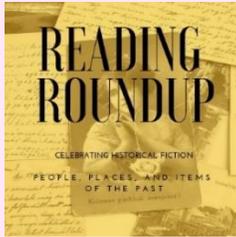
Blog - writingtokeepsane.wordpress.com

Facebook - https://www.facebook.com/marilyn_pemberton.391

Marilyn Pemberton's ambition is to bring Mary De Morgan, Victorian writer of fairy tales, out of the shadows. Marilyn has fictionalised her life in "The Jewel Garden." Her second published novel, "Song of the Nightingale," tells of the fate of two young *castrati*. Marilyn is now working on the first of a historical trilogy that will tell of three generations of women who have their own stories to tell in a world that does not want to listen.

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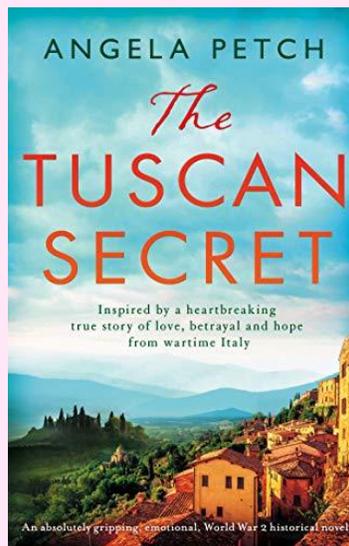
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The 1940s

The Tuscan Secret

Angela Petch



Anna is distraught when her beloved mother, **Ines**, passes away. She inherits a box of papers, handwritten in Italian and yellowed with age, and a tantalising promise that the truth about what happened during the war lies within.

The diaries lead Anna to the small village of Rofelle, where she slowly starts to heal as she explores sun-kissed olive groves, and pieces together her mother's past: happy days spent herding sheep across Tuscan meadows cruelly interrupted when World War Two erupted and the Nazis arrived; fleeing her home to join the *Resistenza*; and risking everything to protect an injured British soldier who captured her heart. But Anna is no closer to learning the truth: what sent Ines running from her adored homeland?

When she meets an elderly Italian gentleman living in a deserted hamlet, who flinches at her mother's name and refuses to speak English, Anna is sure he knows more about the devastating secret that tore apart her mother's family. **But in this small Tuscan community, some wartime secrets were never meant to be uncovered...**

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