

[The Write Place at the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Poetry](#)

["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)

[Writers' Craft Box](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Feedback & Questions](#)

[Artists' Gallery](#)

[Indie Bookstores](#)

[Literary Arts Patrons](#)

[Scrapbook of Eight Years](#)

[Archives](#)

[Inscribing Industry Blog](#)

Come in...and be captivated...

Search



Audio photo of Tracy Chevalier (Image credit Nina Subin); <http://www.tchevalier.com>

Though every issue of the magazine has its own signature way of magnetically drawing forth the material that will define it, the approach of the anniversary granted several reminders of why our publication, given its serendipitous ways, is so aptly named. This interview has been several years in the making, and in trying to coordinate schedules to find ideal alignment, I feel that no more appropriate time than now could have been reached. At the Edge of the Orchard is the latest novel from Tracy Chevalier, the NYT best-selling author of Girl with a Pearl Earring, and when doing research for the introduction to the interview excerpt we featured on our blog in March, I came across two things of great interest. The first, was that the earliest apple orchard planted on this continent was planted right here in Boston, MA; the second, was that the American British author, living in the UK, whom I'd admired for many years, would be in the US on a book tour, with a stop right near Boston.

I first fell in love with the work of Tracy Chevalier when I was at a pivotal crossroads in my youth, about to make the choice to forge my own path and enter the world of the written word. In likeness to some of the themes of this issue and the author's latest novel, it was a time of personal growth and transformation. I've come to understand that when it comes to the creative realms, there are no coincidences. There are, however, adventures to be had and there was an opportunity on St. Patrick's Day to heed the call of one. I felt as though a circle was being completed, drawn around those early days immersed in her novels, to now, at the threshold of a new personal and professional chapter, celebrating our magazine's anniversary and the cultivation of the path that I'd chosen.

The evening of the event included a powerful reading from At the Edge of the Orchard by Chevalier herself in different perspectives, giving a deep view into three of the book's principal characters, as well as a discussion of a few of the sources of inspiration for the book. The first of three poignant reading selections revealed the visceral, vitriolic nature of the female protagonist, Sadie, in first person. It was done with an accent, voice and distinctive persona that was deserving of a stage; it felt authentic to the point of sending chills through the audience as a disturbing scene of deception unfolded amongst the characters around the dinner table. The second selection, in third person, depicted Sadie's husband, James, and his witnessing what seemed a symbol of his son's growth and similarity to his father. It spoke of the familial things that

don't necessarily have to be acknowledged but are seen, the bulk of the importance being in the latter, to be known by those who love us. The third selection depicted Robert, the son now grown, in third person, able to run no further from the past and his understanding of his role in it.

The selected readings were a credit to the craft and how a writer can inform the 'character' of history by having well-formed characters explore those facets of the past that we cannot know. Within this settler saga set amidst the juxtaposition of opportunity and struggle in the mid-nineteenth century, the quests for survival, growth, and flourishing in unforgiving and foreign landscapes, belong as much to the varieties of trees as they do to the individuals that foster them. Inspiration for the novel partly stemmed from imagining the discord between a couple over the different kinds of apples (sweet and sour) a tree can yield and their divergent purposes. Rich with cultural and mythical symbolism as an "origin fruit," the apple beats as the heart of the story with its timeless dichotomy of sweet and sour connotations—redemption, health, youth, love, knowledge, sin, death, temptation and destruction.

Further sources of inspiration that led to the inception of the novel showcased the inner workings of the mind of a writer—what is absorbed and observed from words (a chapter she'd read of Michael Pollen's Botany of Desire which debunked the mythical qualities assigned to Johnny Appleseed); experiences (a memorable visit to Charles Ackers Redwood Grove that displayed the towering products of seeds that had been brought over from California and planted in 1857); and interactions (a moving and synchronistic encounter with an Amish family where she recognized in a nine-year-old boy, the personality of her protagonist, Robert—though her character belonged to another time and circumstance, there was a behavioral reflection as though she was getting to meet the young man forming in her imagination). In detailing some of the sources of inspiration, Chevalier gave a generous glimpse to the gathering of how a final creation blooms from the initial seedlings of insight.

In Chevalier's capable hands, symbols of history transform into live talismans, emphatic question marks inviting the possibility of answers. Her work makes an art of asking about the unknown, and the untold, letting wonder, imagination and interpretation fill in the blank spaces. In the end, by infusing the richly diverse works with our feelings, thoughts and views as active readers, we come to feel we own a bit more of the

periods we're reading about, walking through the doors the author has pushed ajar.

In the exchange below, we ponder the formative uses of adversity in nature and man, gain perspective on our roots as we place ourselves along the continuum of the past, sew the fabric of our narratives, find communion with fellow creators, and sift truth from myth through the textual history of the unsaid.

Tracy Chevalier is the author of eight novels: *At the Edge of the Orchard*, *The Last Runaway*, *Remarkable Creatures*, *Burning Bright*, *The Lady and the Unicorn*, *Falling Angels*, *The Virgin Blue* and the international bestseller *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which was adapted into the Oscar-nominated film. She is also the editor of *Reader, I Married Him: Stories Inspired by Jane Eyre*. Tracy is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and possesses honorary doctorates from her alma maters Oberlin College (where she earned her BA in English) and the University of East Anglia (where she earned her MA in Creative Writing).

Interview with Tracy Chevalier by Nicole M. Bouchard

- On parallel catalysts for growth applied to nature and mankind

In your soon-to-be-released novel, *At the Edge of the Orchard*, apple trees and sequoias flourish in environments far from their native lands. There is a dedication at the beginning of the book—"For Claire and Pascale, finding their way in the world"—that could easily also speak to a number of the protagonists in your novels who come into themselves once they cross oceans, city lines or thresholds, reminiscent of your own journey toward destiny from America to England. Plants and trees require space and light to grow. People require the kind of space that delineates their identity, be it a literal distance traveled or an interior journey precipitated by change, inviting 'light' of understanding or awareness.

Yet, another key component of growth, is metaphorically reflected in the findings of your research for the novel that revealed how sequoias require fire to not only release their seeds but to gain access to nutrients that help them sprout and develop. Further seemingly destructive forces that benefit plant life include lightning and lava. It begs a question about the seemingly destructive agents of change that benefit us.

Given the dynamic forms of change that your indelible characters encounter, the internal and societal obstacles they overcome that shape

them, do you feel that just as with trees and plant life, that the greatest growth of an individual is achieved by “space,” “light,” *and* trial by fire?

Wow, that’s a good way of putting it! I admit, when I write a book, I do it by instinct, and analysis comes after. But that makes a lot of sense. One of the fascinating things I learned about redwoods and giant sequoias, for example, is that they actually NEED forest fires—the heat makes the cones burst and the seeds disperse. Plus, fires clear the undergrowth and create nutrients (such as carbon) in the soil that helps the seeds to germinate. Now that we are controlling forest fires so much more, there are fewer seedlings growing in sequoia and redwood groves. That means further down the line there may be fewer trees to replace the old ones that die off. Interesting, eh?

In the same way, I suppose you could say that people grow through adversity—the old adage that “Suffering builds character.” I could never write a novel about characters that just are as they are—that would be boring. At least one character has to change, to grow—usually through suffering in some way. Robert Goodenough, the protagonist of Orchard, certainly does suffer. But that is how he grows.

- Pertaining to roots

Whereas the question above addresses change, travel and formative growth, roots are what anchor us; roots are a constant we carry and if the rest of life is a journey, roots that we set down are ultimately a destination we choose. The next to last few sentences of *At the Edge of the Orchard* seem to connote the idea of patience in the quest to find one’s place in the world: “Seeds could keep for a long time. All they needed was the right place to take root.” Ella Turner of *The Virgin Blue* discovers the right place to take root when she returns to and embraces her original French roots. The story was inspired by your own family’s reunion and familial lore about fleeing religious persecution in the 16th century. You discuss on your website the concept of the stories, the “hopes and tragedies and obsessions” that are carried as emotional baggage along with the literal in moving place to place over the centuries.

In terms of emotional inheritances, how do you believe one should go about embracing and learning from their roots while not being held by the heaviness of them so there is choice in where new roots are set down (as with Robert Goodenough in *Orchard*)?

I think our relationship to the past is always tricky. As you say, you want to know about it, learn from it, but not be weighed down by it. I do think that gaining an understanding of the past is crucial to becoming a more rounded person. It makes you place yourself along a continuum, and you become less self-centered once you realize you are just a speck along that line. It's humbling, but it's also freeing, because it's not all about you! Once you step away from being the main actor in the play, you naturally lighten and can enjoy everything around you so much more.

- The fabric of story, of life

In a 2013 feature from the *Daily Mail*, you share a number of items of personal significance that include themed fabric-covered notebooks for the research of your novels, a handmade quilt reflecting your personal pursuit of the quilting craft and a cherished scarf that belonged to your mother. Fabric features as a symbol in your writing as tapestry in *The Lady and the Unicorn*, as an expression of propriety in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and as quilts in *The Last Runaway* and *At the Edge of the Orchard*. There is a quilting challenge that's part of your involvement in the Charlotte Bronte Bicentenary. Many years ago when reading *Falling Angels*, I remember vividly thinking that the multiple perspectives were so expertly interwoven, that it seemed like seamless artistry and there is actually such a thing as "visually seamless" quilting that reminds me of your prowess in perspective as shown time and again in your work.

Do you feel that fabric is a significant symbol that personally resonates with you, translating specifically into how you approach storytelling (weaving together multiple perspectives, fact and fiction, etc.)?

It's funny: I recently curated a show at the Bronte Parsonage Museum in Yorkshire, and when I was setting it up a few weeks ago I realized that more or less everything I chose or commissioned has to do with fabric, sewing, knitting, etc. It wasn't deliberate, but it's true that these things seem to pop up

more and more in my work and in my life. It makes me laugh, because I really am terrible at sewing. I don't have a machine, I do it all by hand (the quilting), and I'm slow and not very good. But I like doing it a lot because it uses the visual and mechanical part of my brain rather than the verbal part.

What I have noticed about sewing, however, is that it actually ISN'T so different from writing. It is a process of creation, and in all such processes you are working towards hiding all of the loose threads—literally and figuratively. Writing is about drafting and then editing—loads of editing. And sewing is about making an even stitch, and hiding the knots, the back stitches, the little mistakes—tucking in those threads. Making a quilt is about sewing pieces of fabric together so that you can't see the seam—or if you can, it's deliberate. Same with writing. I am much better at it with writing, as I've been doing it longer, but I can feel myself "editing" my simple quilt projects. And that is true of everyone who makes something—whether it's knitting a sweater or painting a painting. The creative process is the same.

- The minds of writers

F. Scott Fitzgerald observed that there “was never a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people if he's any good.” When you walk in the space of the mind of a writer from a different time—whether through adaptation of a work as with your novel that will be a fresh take on Shakespeare's *Othello*, deriving inspiration for a new story from a classic as with *Reader, I Married Him: Stories Inspired by Jane Eyre*, or personification in prose as with William Blake in your novel, *Burning Bright*—does the creative process differ from dealing with other historical personages?

It doesn't. I can see why you'd expect it would for me, looking for the connection of one writer to another. But I just see them as people, making things. Which is what we all do in the end, whether it's a rivet, a computer program, a quilt, a book. I am just looking for the human connection.

- Human truths in historical fiction

You've discussed wanting to include a more realistic, true-to-life portrayal of John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed) in *Orchard* after learning what lay beyond the commonly accepted myths of him. Michael Hirst (writer/producer of the *Tudors* series and writer for the film *Elizabeth*) shared in our 2010 interview his process of expressing the multi-dimensional humanity of historical figures, and how he ultimately found his Queen Elizabeth when he discovered the part of her that had not been portrayed, the unknown image of a young, vulnerable girl before the iconic queen all in white was painted with every previous portrait destroyed. He said, "I don't choose subjects—they choose me." A life-size portrait of Henry VIII taken from the set of *Elizabeth* resided in his office before he knew he would do *The Tudors*. In a similarly serendipitous vein, you came upon Nicholas Tournier's work while writing *Virgin Blue*, his work fitting your story prior to your discovery of him. In your TED talk "Finding the Story Inside the Painting" you discuss the framework of what's said in fact and what remains unsaid, our quest to fill in the answers/gap.

Do you find that it is the historical fiction writer's task to share their human interpretations of historical figures, attempting to use fiction to get closer to the unsaid, unspoken emotional/psychological truths—and, in the words of French New Wave cinematographer Robert Bresson, to "make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen"?

Yes, exactly that—I couldn't have said it better myself! I love using historical figures to "anchor" my books, but I always look for the gaps and silences or the curiosities in a biography, and see if I can fill those gaps or tease out those curiosities. I probably never would have written Girl with a Pearl Earring if we had known loads about Vermeer. But the very sparsity of biographical detail (including who any of the people in his paintings were) made him much more tempting.

As for Johnny Appleseed: well, his story of spreading the healthy joy of growing and eating apples always seemed a little too good to be true to me, even as a child. Though I was pleased to hear that he did indeed go barefoot and wear a tin pot for a hat, I also loved the fact that he was quite a shrewd businessman, anticipating where settlers would go next and being there to sell them apple trees. He was also a Swedenborgian, one of life's strange religious sects, and he plowed his profits back into spreading the word. Best of all, the

trees he sold usually produced sour apples only good for making alcohol. He wasn't spreading healthy eating, he was giving people the means to get drunk so they could get through their hard-scrabble lives. The truth is always more interesting than the myth!

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present subjects for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss life, literature and art with them.

© 2016 *The Write Place at the Write Time*
This online magazine and all the content contained therein is copyrighted.