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Melanie Benjamin; Photo courtesy of Todd Rennels

*It's often said that to know where we're going, we have to know where we've been. With the historical fiction of author Melanie Benjamin, it*

*seems rather that to know who we are, we have to know who we've been. Through masterful examinations of what evidence history offers as well as the missing pieces, unheard voices and untold stories within the stories we've all heard, we are offered a chance to get perhaps as close as we might ever be to understanding the interiors of these women. Fiction provides that looking glass through which we can traverse time and space to step into worlds imbued with the symbolic meaning hidden, processed and interpreted as what we hold to be true of life. As much insight, wisdom and significance as we can gain from these reconstructed walls within the minds of the past, we are reflecting upon and learning about ourselves all the while.*

*Whether we're pouring over letters with Alice Liddell, sitting in the dim light with Lavinia Warren as she speaks frankly with Barnum, or standing with Anne Morrow when she meets Charles for the first time, we are there; transported. It is what we feel and not what we know that matters most as we forsake the map and follow the heart through missing journal pages, pages never written and weighted words never spoken. These books open doors that, once opened, cannot and should not be closed. Here we discuss timeless messages to women across generations, the power of fiction to redress and resolve history, exposure and independence for inspiration, the artistic process of historical fiction in reconstructing the psyches of prominent figures and finally the imaginary circumstance of being able to travel back in time and spend a day with one of these dynamic protagonists at any point in their lives.*

*Melanie Benjamin's works ([Alice I Have Been](#), [The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb](#), [The Aviator's Wife](#)) have been chosen as Indie Next Picks, featured in publications such as O Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, Entertainment Weekly and People as well as featured on NPR. [The Aviator's Wife](#) is slated for the silver screen with Jennifer Garner to portray the iconic figure of Anne Morrow Lindbergh. As an adroit storyteller, intuitive, instinctual and attune to the "emotional truths", NYT and USA Today best-selling author, Benjamin, strikes true with the aim of her pen straight into the hearts of her readers.*

Interview with Melanie Benjamin by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) Virginia Woolf once wrote, "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." In *Alice I Have Been*, *The*

*Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb* and *The Aviator's Wife*, there are three strong women whose lives are heavily influenced or overshadowed by prominent historic male figures. Each of these women play a number of roles assigned to them, balancing public and private faces, familial obligation, the preservation of the image of those male figures and the more difficult pursuit of self-identity. Anne Morrow Lindbergh captures the complexity in *Gift from the Sea*: “What a circus act we women perform every day of our lives. It puts the trapeze artist to shame. Look at us. We run a tight rope daily, balancing a pile of books on the head. Baby-carriage, parasol, kitchen chair, still under control. Steady now!”

With two of your novels set in the Victorian era and the most recent set primarily in the early to mid 1900s, do you feel some of the inherent messages of these periods are timeless and needed to speak to the women of today? How do you feel that the roles of women have remained the same and by contrast, how do you feel they have changed (for better and worse with the expectation that the modern women can and must do it all/be it all/have it all)?

***I think the message is that these women, primarily due to their gender, class and time, had their stories told by others during their lifetime—and primarily, those others were men. So in telling their stories now, I'm giving them the voices they didn't necessarily have in their own lifetime. I think it's so interesting that some young women, when they read my books, experience such frustration and respond in manners typical of their generation. I've heard from so many young women that they would have kicked Charles Lindbergh out of the house! But they're missing the point, that women of Anne's generation didn't really have that choice, but that they took baby steps, in their own way, to ensuring that women today do have that choice. I want readers today to see that in my books; to see that “we've come a long way, baby,” and it's because of women like Anne Morrow Lindbergh, and even Alice Liddell and Lavinia Warren Bump.***

***It's been rather heartbreaking for me to hear from some women, though, that Anne's marriage is just like their own. I hear this mainly from older women, but still it's startling to see that women still alive today live life in the shadows of men. And to be sure, it's not only older women who do so.***

***I also hope that readers of my books will see that really, the idea of “having it all” or “doing it all” is still a myth; that we make choices (and yes, we do have more choices today than a woman in the Victorian period did), but even so, some of those choices are going to result in sacrifice or mistake or neglect in another area of our lives. Alice Liddell chose fame over personal happiness, in a way. So did Mrs. Tom Thumb. Anne Morrow Lindbergh chose to follow her husband at the expense of her children, and her own sense of self, for a great deal of her life. Women today make those same kind of deals. The times aren’t so very different, after all.***

2) In the recent film *Saving Mr. Banks*, there is a scene where Walt Disney explains to Mrs. Travers the importance of, in essence, rewriting a segment of their histories to reach back in time and heal through a resolution otherwise unobtainable. “That’s what storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again.” Through your work, you give Lavinia her autobiography, Alice the memory she wanted preserved and Anne the ability to be better, thoroughly known for her different facets. By righting through writing, ‘filling in the gaps’, targeting the unanswered questions and unsettled mysteries, the benefit is not only limited to these women of history, but available to any and every individual who can identify with them. How has being able to attempt to redress and recount the ‘story behind the story’ within history via the power of your pen given back to you as the writer? What have you learned in getting to know these people, bringing them to new life and tenderly, painstakingly preserving then representing them to new generations? How has the process of writing the books and receiving reader reactions changed and enriched your life in unexpected ways?

***I would say that I learn something new with every book; something new about the person whose story I’m telling; something new about the time period, something new about myself. That’s the gift of writing; I write in order to learn more, myself. I think the most universal thing that I have gleaned, over all my books, is how much we have in common with generations in the past. I am always searching for the human element that speaks to us over time; the relationships, the emotions, the frustrations or the triumphs. I am so gratified***

***when I hear from readers who say, “I recognized myself in your characters.”***

***But I’m also gratified when readers tell me, as they so often do, “I didn’t know!” Whether it’s discovering someone lost to history, like Mrs. Tom Thumb, or discovering more about the people who were previously just a paragraph in a high school history book, people learn from my books. To me, that is the special appeal of historical fiction, when done well; it’s relatable and recognizable in the human element but the history always astounds and surprises.***

***Hearing from readers, of course, is the great privilege of a writer. I am never not touched by the fact that someone has read my book and taken the time to tell me how it has affected her. And I think, as a woman writer (and a writer of women’s stories, so far), I’m especially touched when I hear from men, for some reason.***

3) In a Q&A for *Alice I Have Been*, you were asked what one piece of insight or wisdom you would share with writers. You responded with an emphasis on getting out and experiencing the world:

*Open your eyes—get out of the house! I think that authors, very often, get stuck in a rut; they spend their time alone, concentrating on one thing—one story, one novel, one idea—and fixate on it... Authors need to experience life, and art, and keep their minds—and eyes—open to every possibility. We can’t remain chained to our computers all the time.*

We have often discussed a story of Hawthorne where he largely spent a good number of years shut in a room writing. At the end of his isolation, he burned much of the work produced during that time, believing that nothing of great substance could come from working in that entirely secluded fashion.

In addition to exposure and experience, for a female writer, there is also often a thread of needing time of one’s own and space of one’s own that is temporarily separated from the other roles they seek to fulfill in their daily lives. Writers Alexandra Stoddard and Joan Anderson expressed this in our past interviews and the sentiment is echoed iconically by Woolf. Do you personally believe that as well as immersion in different mediums, locales,

personalities and ideas that female authors “need solitude in order to find again the true essence of themselves” (*Gift from the Sea*)? Or have you found the opposite to be true in your experience?

***I think all authors need solitude, period. It's not a gender thing. In order to create entire worlds, and sustain that creation for the time it takes to write a novel, we need some protection from the outside world, for periods at a time. And every writer I know craves this solitude, to different degrees. The perfect writer, if there ever could be such a creation, would be able to balance those long periods of solitude with a healthy curiosity and aptitude for society and culture, as well as an ability to engage with readers in person. But I do think it's difficult for many authors to strike this balance; I think the need for solitude can be overwhelming for many.***

***If we are speaking of gender, then I think that women have an extra hard time balancing all this with the responsibilities of raising a family, especially small children. But again, we always have an extra hard time balancing work with family, period. I knew myself enough to understand that I shouldn't attempt a writing career until my children were well into their school years, because I couldn't see how I could find that necessary solitude. I do need space in my head to carry around an entire novel—or two or three!—and when you're managing a family's different schedules, it's not so easy.***

4) Before I'd even read the Author's Note in *The Aviator's Wife*, I had thought to myself that your books of historical fiction held a truer accuracy, in a sense, than non-fiction accounts because they more closely reflected how the events could have been perceived and internalized by the historic personas themselves. Fiction opens the door to that deeply personal heart and mind connection. When the story is told from their perspective, through those filters of perception that have to do with emotion, background, conditioning, psychology and the time they lived in, a subjective portrait is painted which allows us to get far closer to what they really might have been like both in their public and private hours. A different kind of educational understanding and certainly empathy is made more possible.

*It's the emotional truths that I imagine; the relationships, the reason*

*these historical figures do the things they do. I truly believe that the inner life can be explored only in novels, not histories—or even diaries and letters. For diaries and letters are self-censored even at the moment of writing them; it's impossible to be absolutely honest with oneself.*

According to Emerson, “Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures.” Free from the constraints of debated fact, able to choose particular paths to follow in the pursuit of the most dynamic storytelling and able to apply creative imagination, history is brought to vivid life through this medium.

The focus in these novels, from their flow to the first person narration, is on character first as opposed to simply a reconstruction of events. It would seem a more formidable challenge to shape characters out of historical figures as opposed to formulating characters based solely upon imagination. Given the facts known, the many unknown and the purposeful omissions in letters, journals and diaries, talk to us about your artistic process of molding the psyches of these characters from the inside out, essentially becoming them on the page, the points where imagination and the personal marks a creator inevitably leaves upon their creations step in.

***This is not a question I can answer easily because I work from instinct. I didn't have a plan or a process in mind when I wrote my first historical novel. I just wanted to tell a great story and that still is my driving focus. I have learned some things along the way, however. Primarily I have learned that too much research is worse than not enough, for me. I have to have room for my imagination. If I over-research, I'm tempted to put in too many details that take away from the story, which is always the most important thing. If I over-research, I stifle my own voice. I am not a stenographer to the past. I'm a novelist; I have to make things up! And so it's very difficult for me to outline the process from fact to fiction; it's pure instinct, and it's different with every book. I research until I know, somehow, I don't need to anymore; I have the foundation, the building blocks around which I can construct the fiction. I do focus only on a part of a person's life, a specific journey that becomes clear to me through all the research, a thread that emerges that I believe only I can see—and that becomes the driving arc of the novel.***

5) Through your work, you've undertaken a duty almost sacred in the ancient tradition of preserving and making accessible history through

storytelling. Undoubtedly, there have been connections fostered between you and your subjects through your intensive research and application of creativity. Thus, though it may be a difficult choice, this unusual question asks you the following: If you could travel back in time and spend a day with one of your protagonists (at any point in their life), who would you choose and why? What would you most want to see during this day? What would you wish to ask them and in turn, what would you wish to say to them (not a history-altering caution or hint of the future but rather words you think they might have needed to hear, woman to woman)?

***I would want to be with Alice Liddell and Charles Dodgson that fateful day, that day that still fascinates us all, and learn what really happened to rupture their friendship. Then again, if we did know what happened, I wouldn't have had a reason to write Alice I Have Been!***

***But as far as a specific question to a specific person, I would want to talk to Anne Morrow Lindbergh. I would want to ask her, "How could you leave your children to fly off with Charles, after the kidnapping?" Because that is the one thing I don't understand about her; how, after losing her firstborn, she continued, for a time, to leave her surviving children with others in order to remain Charles's one partner, at his beck and call whenever he wanted her. If I had had my first child stolen from me, as she had, I think it would have taken me years to ever let another child of mine out of my sight.***

***But in a way, I get to do these things through my books; I get these people to speak to me, to answer some of the mysteries. I may not always understand these answers or even much like them, but still, I continue to look for people whose stories only I can tell.***



Margot Datz; Photo credit, Rob Berkley

*This summer, my husband and I got away down the Cape for a few days for our anniversary. My Cape Cod, where I go whenever I have a longing to run away to a place where I can just listen to the surf, a place where there are no doctor's appointments, no obligations, no schedules. Just time to float, play in the surf, collect sea glass and other treasures which come from far-away places. The treasure found might come from within one of the many artisan shops on the coast or it might come in the form of intuition and guidance which wash up onto the shores as gifts that my soul calls out for.*

*One such treasure came into my life from my merman (a good catch in mermaid language). My husband and I were having breakfast in the glass solarium of one of our favorite inns. The trees in the room were lit with their twinkling white lights and we were seated right in front of what I like to call the outdoor secret garden. Directly outside, there is a beautiful old stone wall with a mini waterfall and koi pond. It was here in this setting that I first glimpsed *A Survival Guide For Landlocked Mermaids* by Margot Datz. My husband had just bought me some pearls (which I would soon learn are part of the mermaid's iconography) in the inn's giftshop. He had another bag with him at breakfast in the dining room. "What's in the bag?" I asked. "It's for Nicole [our daughter]," he smiled, proud of himself. As I leafed through the book, I was immediately charmed. It contained the most beautiful illustrations along with essays for the mermaids among us—whether seasoned like myself or emerging like my daughter, still navigating the depths and trying to avoid the undertows.*

*Datz hits on the important issues in a spirited, engaging fashion with great wit; the advice is timeless and paired with her art work, she has created an enchanting book that reminds us to nurture our souls and that not always fitting into our landlocked setting is what sets us apart. The word that comes to mind for me here is authenticity—it speaks to us of being ourselves and not conforming so completely to societal expectations that we lose who we are.*

*In her book, Datz entices us to enter her realm as she waves us in and gently urges us to think upon how to uniquely live our lives no matter the confines of culture, how to tend to the inner garden of our thoughts, how wisdom is "wrestled from struggle" creating "infinite insight and compassion" that increases with age, how to remain playful, how to be discerning in matters of the heart and how to surround ourselves with*

*individuals who encourage, celebrate and support us. Through these gorgeous illustrations and essays, Datz shows us her sage life advice. They are illuminations for us to see through the fog. These essays were just a few of the tips for trying to do it all and yet retain the wild child within, stressing the importance of nurturing our spirits and individuality.*

*Interviewing Datz was like finding a rare tourmaline crystal; more and more layers of vibrant color to be discovered. She's deep, gracious, funny, warm and the work I had the pleasure of viewing was extraordinary. Her talents, however, echo the element of water, nourishing those who partake of them and being able to shift their shape to nearly any medium that contains them.*

*From her fine art, to her mural work, to her interior design, Datz brings heart and soul to all that she does. Her paintings incorporate symbols, mythology and archetypes that, paired with her writings, create an unforgettable way of connecting with readers.*

*Datz's artwork has appeared in publications such as Architectural Digest, House and Garden Magazine, InStyle Magazine, Publisher's Weekly, People Magazine, Rolling Stone and Newsweek. Notable Clients and Collectors include Carly Simon, Billy Joel, Garth Brooks and Dustin Hoffman. Merging disciplines in painting, interiors, sculpture, design, business, and art history, Margot Datz established Margot Datz Designs. Datz has painted hundreds of residential, commercial, and public murals, both regionally and across the country. In addition to murals and paintings, Datz has illustrated six books—illustrating four children's books for singer/songwriter Carly Simon, as well as authoring and illustrating her own book, *A Survival Guide for Landlocked Mermaids* (Simon and Schuster)—and also released a new children's book last spring for Vineyard Stories.*

Interview with Margot Datz by Denise Bouchard

1) I found your book empowering in the realization that sometimes differences just mean that we're meant for bigger waters. What led to the creation of this book in terms of the internal gestation of the idea? Could you give us an anecdote on how your book has touched the lives of other women?

*This book was a breech birth in that the art came first, bubbling up from my unconscious, and grouping together into a theme. When my girlfriend gave me a title and encouraged me to evolve the work into a book, it all made sense. It was a long swim from first art to final production with lots of whirls and eddies along the way. I am so touched that my book seems to keep swimming on, from year to year, woman to woman. I was so deeply touched this year when 5 fabulous women all the way from California designed their annual vacation together to all come to Martha's Vineyard just to meet me and spend time with me! We sat in my living room sharing our hearts and explaining the ways the various pages had touched our lives. They presented me with the longest strand of beautiful, warm pearls, a gift I will cherish to the grave.*

*I spend a lot of time alone, as do many creative people. It is hard for me to know how my work might affect other people's lives and hearts. Books are quiet things. They sail out of our studios and into the hands and minds of people I never meet or see, so I do not know what the afterlife of my creations are most of the time. When I am told that my work actually helped a person through a divorce, or loneliness, or embarrassment, depression, or some transition, I am so honored.*

*We all have pivotal moments of illumination, and one for me happened in 10th grade English. We were about to read a William Faulkner short story, and in the preface was a quote from Faulkner: "It is the privilege of the artist to raise the consciousness of mankind." I remember the slant of light in the classroom, as if time froze all around me. It was a moment of clarity. The word that seized me was the word "privilege". Art has no rules, and that's the great thing about art! We can do what we want and create for whatever reason we please. But it is a privilege to try to contribute to opening people up to healing, awareness, and growth. I work on myself all the time, and in sharing my work-in-progress—my self—with others, and then to receive the blessing that something I offered helped someone, just knocks me out.*

2) You swim in some very interesting circles such as singer-songwriter Carly Simon and writer Nancy Aronie who holds workshops on Martha's

Vineyard. These mermaids, like yourself, are all living near the water's edge. They're still beautiful, engaging and engaged in important and creative work as one would expect from a mermaid. Do tell us, what is the party like when a wonderful, like-minded school of sea creatures gets together?

***Breaking from the mermaid metaphor, I will refer to a very poignant fairy tale, "The Ugly Duckling", one of my personal favorites. From real life observation in the wild, I note that ducks know they are ducks, and swans know they are swans. And ducks don't particularly like swans no matter how friendly the swans try to be. A big step in my life was to acknowledge my inner swan and then go find where the swans hang out. The island has a lot of swans, literally and figuratively, but I do not infer that all celebrities are swans. What I do mean is that it is extremely important to find our own swan pond, inhabited by those souls who esteem and celebrate the same values and meaningfulness. Martha's Vineyard has magnetized a lot of very creative people who love the Earth and there is strong community here. All over the country, enclaves of like-minded people find themselves and celebrate their lives. Life is just more fun and rich when we have others to rejoice with.***

3) One of the people you dedicated your book to was your merman. I happen to love love and was so glad that you found him. What were the qualities inherent in him that assured your mermaid soul that he was the real thing?

***That is a great question. I will answer that on a personal level. I think mermen understand freedom, and the mutual need for independence and expression, yet at the same time love deeply and fiercely. Mermen appreciate beauty in their beloveds, in the world, and within themselves and do not feel compelled to own or enslave that beauty in order to feel secure. They can just swim in it. I think mermen are sensual, imaginative, playful. This culture of ours is very homophobic and these delicious qualities in a man, gay, bi, or heterosexual, can attract cruelty, and so mermen are often rather private. I do see that the merman archetype is schooling up more now, and that a lot of young men are much more nonchalant about expressing these qualities than their more circumspect forefathers.***

4) How does your utterly adorable little dog, Yoda, keep you young and playful?

***She makes me laugh. She is just such an eccentric little nut job. Sometimes I feel like she is my disembodied soul, spinning around in circles wearing a psychedelic sweater. As you know, Yoda is a hairless Chinese Crested. Sleeping with her at night feels like I am cuddled up next to a tiny naked leprechaun. And I get to dress her! As my daughter Scarlet says, "Yoda's not perfect, but she's perfect for my mom!"***

5) Your illustrations are so striking and intricate, they're inspirational. I've read that you also do home murals and that one of the murals you've created is an 85 foot mural and bas relief installation for the Arkansas Children's Hospital.

What was that experience like for you in terms of what atmosphere you wanted to create? What themes do you feel it emphasizes most and what kinds of responses has it elicited?

***My creativity does not seem to want to be categorized as one thing or another and I love taking on projects that stretch my skill sets and perspectives. Mural painting does that for me. Every wall and space is different. I compare a painting to a pond, and a mural to a river—it has to flow; otherwise, it is just a big painting. The Arkansas Children's Hospital installation flowed and meandered over 7 continuous walls from pediatric oncology to the intensive care unit. Working on a project like this requires a wholehearted willingness to collaborate with many people's visions and needs—from designers, art directors, safety engineers, and staff, to patients and families. What I find so fulfilling is that this kind of work asks everything of me—all I have got—heart, soul, body, mind. I get to experience my soul's potential. Working for ten months in a children's intensive care unit puts me right smack dab in the middle of really powerful situations, and it felt absolutely fantastic to be able to provide people with some sort of happiness, relief, beauty. That particular job actually changed my life in many ways, and helped me to see just how much art can contribute to the easing and elevation of the human condition.***

To see an example of her mural work and the extraordinary story behind it that involves community, history and allegory, watch the fascinating Edgartown Whaling Church Mural video below by Martha's Vineyard Productions ([www.marthasvineyardproductions.com](http://www.marthasvineyardproductions.com)).

You can also read more about the project in the following article: <http://mvgazette.com/news/2014/01/02/church-mural-restoration-continues?k=vg52e83476a61dc>

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**HD**

[Edgartown Whaling Church Mural Restoration](#) from [Martha's Vineyard Productions](#) on [Vimeo](#).

\*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

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