

## Interview with Deborah Swift

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Speakers: Kate Loveman (KL) and Deborah Swift (DS)

**KL:** Hello, my name is Kate Loveman and I'm a researcher who works on the literature and the history of the 17th century. I'm particularly interested in Samuel Pepys's diary, which famously details major events such as the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London, along with the great turmoil of Pepys's personal life. I'm leading a project on Pepys's diary called 'Reimagining the Restoration' which includes investigating historical fiction written about the 17th and the 18th centuries.

I'm joined today by Deborah Swift, a historical novelist who has written many novels set in the 17th century which foreground the experiences of women. These are based on very thorough research, but combine that with terrific plots. There are elements of spy thrillers, romances, and adventure narratives in her work.

Among her novels are a trilogy of books based on Pepys's diary, each of which takes a woman who features in the diary as its heroine. Each of these women was involved in some kind of sexual relationship with Pepys, though in very different circumstances. *Pleasing Mr Pepys*, published in 2017, imagines the experience of Deb Willet, who was a servant in the Pepys household and with whom Pepys was obsessed. *A Plague on Mr Pepys* is about Elizabeth Bagwell, the wife of a ship's carpenter, who came to know Pepys through his work for the navy because she wanted promotion for her husband. Finally, *Entertaining Mr Pepys*, the last in the trilogy is about Elizabeth Knepp, one of the first English actresses who was much admired by Pepys.

These are intriguing real people, and Deborah has developed exciting narratives about them from the often very limited facts that we know from the diary. I'm delighted to talk to her today.

Deborah, could you tell us first how you became interested in writing historical fiction?

**DS:** I first became interested in it as a sort of side effect of writing poetry. My first experience of writing any sort of historical fiction was when I was set an exercise by somebody in my poetry class when I was doing an MA and they suggested I might like to turn it into a prose poem.<sup>1</sup> And the prose poem then developed and grew bigger and bigger, until the prose became an enormous tome of paper. And I started really from scratch, not knowing anything about how to write a historical novel and then just learned as I went along, what works and what didn't work by the feedback from the readers of this prose poem, which had expanded.

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<sup>1</sup> A poem which is written in prose form (without line breaks), but which has elements of poetry such as metre, rhyme, metaphors, etc.

So really, I was a complete beginner when I started and it's taken me all this time – I think I've been going now a bit more than 10 years – to unravel all the secrets and the ways of making the fiction come to life.

KL: Can I ask what the prose poem was about?

DS: So yeah, the prose poem was about a flower which grows near my house and the flower's called the lady's slipper. It was really rare because it had been over cultivated in the 17th century, and that's where the historical aspect came from. I was out walking and found this flower and thought it was a fascinating-looking specimen and looked into the history of it a bit, but there were no characters at that point, it was just the flower itself. And somebody suggested I might like to put an artist into the poem who was admiring the flower, and so the character grew from that, and suddenly I had a character. And once you have a character, it's very hard not to have a story – because every person has a story – there was a story about why she was looking at the flower and so forth. And it just grew from that very small seed – if you can excuse the pun. I had to decide what to do with them and what the story was going to be and that was interesting for me to try and plot something when I've never really tried to plot anything before. And I just learnt by trying to make as much conflict as possible between the people, between the characters in the book, and that's what grew the plot.

But then when somebody asked me to write a second book, because the first one<sup>2</sup> was quite a success, so they said would I write a second, I thought, well, I don't know if I can do this again. Can I actually write another book? I didn't know, and so that was a whole different process writing a second book.

KL: So what is your method now?

DS: I think it's two things. One thing is it has to be an idea that really excites me because I know I'm going to spend a year on the book – which I didn't realize when I first started writing because I was just going sort of by the seat of my pants, and I still do that to some extent, but I do need to know that the idea I have and the characters I have are going to be long enough and deep enough for a whole book. And also that they're going to interest me, so it has to be something I'm interested in researching. And that's where Pepys comes in really, because I'd used his books as research for some of the other books, like the seventeenth-century book I'm just talking about, *The Lady's Slipper* about the flower, in order to get some background about the 17th century, I turned to Pepys's diary. So it tells us what people ate; what they wear, you know; what sort of things were going on in the City of London. And it just made me really fascinated with his life and the whole of his milieu. I saw these women coming and going – and thought, well, they're really interesting I need to investigate a little bit more.

KL: Were there particular things that drew you to the 17th century?

DS: Yeah, and I think that it was one of those things where I started in the 17th century by accident and then had to learn about it, and my very first book on the 17th century was one of the Usborne children's guides to the 17th century, which I got from the library and it gave me a brilliant overview and it showed me things like it was a time of great political division where we weren't quite sure how we were going to be governed, whether it was by king or by parliament. There was a lot of religious division as well, so people were trying to decide how to worship their God or who their God might be. So it was a massive

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<sup>2</sup> *The Lady's Slipper* (Pan, 2011)

sort of melting pot of ideas. And one of the periods that particularly fascinates me is the 1660s, which is where Pepys's diaries sort of come in, because I think it was a bit like the 1960s in that you had this sort massive explosion of freedom – sexual freedom and license. You also had lots and lots of new theatre because it was directly after puritan rule, and everybody was wearing flamboyant clothes, in frilly shirts – a bit like the 1960s and it was a very, very short period of time before the Fire and the plague came and shut all that down. So, I found it really interesting to just look into that flowering of culture and interest that happened, particularly in London.

KL: What kind of sources do you use to research?

DS: All historical fiction novelists sort of stand on the shoulders of the people who have done research for them and have written nonfiction books about the period. So for example, with Pepys, there are lots of fantastic biographies like the one by Claire Tomalin is particularly good<sup>3</sup> and also general books on the 17th century. I think there's a great one by Rebecca Rideal, which is *Plague, War and Hellfire*<sup>4</sup> – that's a another really good one. But also as well as these secondary sources, which I enjoy reading, I also like to look at real people's – if you like – their real experiences in writing, such as the diaries of Anne Clifford or Ann Fanshawe who were both writing at the time, or John Evelyn.<sup>5</sup> There's so much material out there now which there wasn't when I first began, so the internet is a huge resource which, when I first started writing the internet didn't really exist, and I was going to Lancaster Library and doing everything from the library. But now I can use JSTOR<sup>6</sup> which is an academic website, which has lots of papers on different specific aspects. I'm researching a novel at the moment set in Venice and I found a wonderful article on JSTOR about the walking culture in Venice.

KL: I know that you have a background in costume design. I felt that came through very strongly in some of the Pepys trilogy – the nuances of clothing. Do you pursue clothing in particular, now that you're writing historical novels, is that something that you go to museums to look at?

DS: Yes, I really enjoy looking at those sort of things, and I find I follow a lot of people on Twitter who are costume historians and things like that. Yeah, I love to look at the clothes because I think they tell you so much about the person. And when Pepys buys his new suit, it's a big event for him.

And the whole silhouette of how somebody looks is really interesting. The wigs I found a particular problem in my seventeenth-century novels because they're quite ugly to our eyes now. And so do you want your romantic hero to be wearing a wig? – and the answer is not really. So, there was a lot of juggling with that when I was writing books where the romantic hero would have been wearing a wig – where I either had him without it or he ditched it fairly soon on in the scene or something like that! Because it's quite strange for us now to think of the fact that people did wear these wigs all the time, and the idea that people would routinely comb each other's hair for nits...

KL: Yes

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<sup>3</sup> Claire Tomalin, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self* (Viking, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Rideal, *1666: Plague, War and Hellfire* (John Murray, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Anne Clifford, Countess of Pembroke (1625-1679) kept a diary; Lady Ann Fanshawe (1625-1680) wrote her *Memoirs*; and John Evelyn (1620–1706), a friend of Pepys, kept journals throughout his life.

<sup>6</sup> [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) – a non-profit, subscription website which holds academic journal articles from a range of fields.

DS: ... is also something that we.... [laughs] you don't really want to dwell on too much in your romantic hero and heroine! Yeah, so the clothes and all that business of the wildlife within them [KL laughs] has to be sort of made into something that people now can read without getting obsessed, or too interested in that side of it.

KL: Were there any other elements where you were having to make accommodations between the past and the present – bits that might have been particularly tricky?

DS: There's always those parts, and mostly it's to do with racism, sexism, and violence because the society then was incredibly racist, sexist, and violent. And now we're endeavouring to move away from that. And what I find really interesting at the moment is that it moves on every year. Things move along every year and we become, we hope, more tolerant to all sorts of different groups, and so our history is moving along all the time. So history that I'm writing about is sort of fixed in time by the documents that we have but it's actually *our* history that's moving along quite fast. And so instead of accommodating the history of the past, I'm actually accommodating the history of now while I'm writing because what was appropriate, five years ago even, is not appropriate now and so those areas are things which worry me immensely because I don't want to offend anybody – I want to include as many people as possible, I want my books to be enjoyed by very many readers. And I find that juggling all that is quite hard. I'm aware as well that I'm one of a majority group, not the minority group, and so if I'm writing anything where I'm including, say, a black woman in my book and I need to interview some black women, or ask them to read it or generally find somebody who's better informed than I am to try and help me with that. And I think that's the way – the only way – I find I can approach it is to be aware that we're moving along, so not to get fixed in my own weird worldview – whatever that is – and to try and expand the worldview to include as many views as I can. So that's the way I approach that.

KL: It's kind of using readers to inform as you go along?

DS: Yeah, I think so. And also to be open to people who don't like what you've written and want you to change it, because nowadays we can change things, you know. It used to be that once something was in print that it was set solid and you couldn't move it.

KL: Yes

DS: Whereas, you can adjust things now because we have ebooks, so you can always make an adjustment to your ebook. And if you get feedback where somebody is not happy with something, and you think “Well, you know, they're probably right. I don't want to offend anybody”. You can go back and make the changes and I think you have to be open to that, to retrospectively changing it. We're novelists, so we're not .... we're there to entertain and reflect the society that we're in now, even though we're writing about the history from a way back.

KL: Yes. Do you think that we have a responsibility – or historical novelists have responsibility – to the people they are writing about, to (in inverted commas) “get things right”? – as much as a responsibility to the people that they're writing for?

DS: Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I was really conscious of this when I was writing about Pepys who is a real person, and whenever I include a real person in my books I have to think about them and their relations – their living relatives who might still be alive. I've written some World War Two

books and so they include some real people whose relations are still alive now. And so you make extra checks to make sure that you're reflecting, as much as possible, the reality of that person's life – but having said that a novel is a very short thing. It's a very few pages to reflect one person's life, so you'll never be able to get the full, rounded character, but I think one of the things is you have to be sure that you're not moving too far away from the real records. So when I was working on the Pepys books, the real records were there and so I felt really uncomfortable if, for example, I wanted to write a scene where I wanted somebody to be running in the rain, and then I looked in the diaries and found it was a lovely sunny day! And so I did try to be incredibly accurate with those things that were actually written down, but then in the gaps, that's where you can invent. So, in the gaps where Mrs Pepys went off to do her shopping and we weren't sure where she went, but we know she came back with a pair of earrings, I can invent what happened in between and the whole dialogue between her and the shopkeeper – and I can invent those things but still be within the historical record and keep that accurate.

**KL:** Pepys's diary is perhaps a really unusual source in that respect, in that it is so detailed. I mean, most historical sources do not tell you what the weather was doing or when somebody went shopping. Was that a problem in writing about Pepys's diary, as much as a benefit, that there was so much information?

**DS:** Yeah, that was a real problem for me! There was so much information, but also there are really strange gaps. So, for example, he might not mention his wife for three weeks, because he's busy with things around the court or he was the administrator for the navy, so there was a lot of things about ships' biscuits and those sort of things, or people's wages, depending on what his interests were. So in those three weeks we don't know what his wife was doing. She just wasn't his priority that week, but that does mean for a novelist I can invent what was going on for those times. So no one is looking into the women's lives. That was what I was doing, looking for gaps where plot could happen.

Then what was brilliant for me was the fact that the diary was online.<sup>7</sup> So I have read bits of the diary in hardcopy (an actual book), but mostly my research was done online, where I could check up. So, for example, Pepys would say he met a certain person and I didn't know who on earth they were: who are they? And then I'd click to find the annotated notes and find that they had appeared in previous entries, and then I'd be able to look them up. And the other thing I found really interesting about the online version was that there are comments there from people from all over the world, who are reading the diary every day, they're using it like a daily diary – they're reading every day – commenting on what he's been doing and what his wife's been doing and it brings it all to life, those comments, because you can see which parts interest people and which parts don't.

**KL:** This is the site [pepysdiary.com](http://pepysdiary.com) which has been going for a while now, and so an entry is released every day and people comment on it. But they're now cycling through, so more than one reading has taken place, so that we've got layers of reader comments and what people are interested in.

Were you ever tempted to write a diary of Elizabeth Pepys?

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<sup>7</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com](http://www.pepysdiary.com), a website begun in 2003 and run by Phil Gyford. Each day an entry from the 1890s version of the diary (which was edited by Henry Wheatley) is posted. Readers annotate the text with information and comments. A second round of publishing of entries and reading began in 2013.

**DS:** I was quite tempted, but the thing that's put me off doing it in a diary form – because at one point my agent suggested I might like to do it as diary – but the thing that puts me off doing that as a historical novelist is that it's always then written in the passive voice. So you're always writing back something that has happened and you're never live in the action. So all you can do is report back as if you're sitting in your room writing, writing the diary. And although Sara George has managed to do that really successfully with her book,<sup>8</sup> because I was wanting to make mine more of an entertainment and include things like spies and romance, and make it a little bit more of a thriller, I decided not to do that because it meant that I could then be live in the situations. What I was trying to do, I think, was to try and bring across the fact that the women are today's women, but just back then, in one way, in that they have the same emotions and the same concerns that women today have. But they're also very different in terms of what they were allowed to do, what they could do, how much restriction was placed upon them, and their thinking was really different from ours. So Elizabeth Pepys thought it perfectly acceptable that her husband should beat her – she didn't like it, but she didn't think it was unusual, whereas today we'd think that was unacceptable, and we'd want to do something about it. And so those sort of things I think are the things that made me want to write it, not as a report, but as a live action, sort of, fly on the wall.

**KL:** Can I ask you why you began your trilogy with Deb Willet, who is the servant figure with whom Pepys is obsessed?

**DS:** I think this was the thing that most fascinated me when I first was reading about it, and one of the things that sparked it off really was reading your article.<sup>9</sup> You wrote an article about Deb Willet and where she'd been educated and what had happened to her, and I thought, ah! Often people think of Pepys's maid as being a maid as if she was from *Upstairs Downstairs*,<sup>10</sup> and somebody downtrodden in the kitchen, but in fact she was a companion to Elizabeth Pepys, and she was better educated. Having researched Elizabeth Pepys – and her education was quite broken up – I realized that actually Deb Willet, although she was a servant, was probably better educated and more literate than Elizabeth Pepys. And so I thought, oh that's an interesting dynamic, because you've got two women in the same household, one's employing the other but one is probably more intelligent and better educated than the other. But it led to me having lots of conflict that could go on between Elizabeth and Deb apart from the actual love interest that Pepys had for Deb. And it also explains why he liked her so much because she wasn't just a piece of something that he found in the kitchen, she was somebody who had interests just like him. She was able to discuss books with him, she read. So, I just thought this was an interesting way of approaching it, and gave a different view of Deb from the view that we have, which was all from Pepys's point of view, which was – he calls her quite often “the little girl”. But she wasn't. She was a grown-up person who had her own life. So that was what I wanted to bring out.

**KL:** There's a bit in your work where Deb finds the diary and reads about herself. She realizes that “other pages might have her name on them... The idea filled her with revulsion; that she might be set down through Mr Pepys' eyes, for other people to read. She knew from even these few pages, that it would be a travesty of herself, that to him she would be something quite *other*.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sara George, *Journal of Mr Pepys: Portrait of a Marriage* (Headline Review, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Samuel Pepys and Deb Willet after the Diary’, *Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), 893-901.

<sup>10</sup> A TV series (first screened in the 1970s) which is set in an early twentieth-century London household and depicts the lives of a rich family and their servants across the decades.

<sup>11</sup> *Pleasing Mr Pepys* (Accent Press, 2017), p. 173.

I think that's a great, dramatic and imagined moment, where we're kind of invited to think about how we're seeing these figures historically. Could you say a bit more about that, about trying to imagine characters who you're writing about that Pepys also wrote about? And is it about balancing the scales?

DS: I think, yeah, I think part of it is that Pepys is extremely self-centered because it's his diary he's writing all about himself and he wants us to know. I think he did hope it would be read. I think anybody who's written a diary dreads the idea that somebody else might read it in one way. You know, I had a diary when I was about 16 years old, and I dreaded the fact that my mother might find it and read all my interior thoughts! Pepys doesn't seem to be like that. He is writing with no holds barred in one respect. But on the other, I think he did think it would be read, and he's documenting the history of the age for people to read about the King's coronation and.... – so he is documenting it. But I think the women were particularly ignored, as people who were not important. So I think it's interesting the whole idea of reflecting back what somebody might have thought about themselves when they're put down in history like that. And I also think that, when I'm reading any historical document “What would they think if they saw me reading it now today”?

KL: Your last novel about Elizabeth Knepp is about the theatre, which is a great and thrilling aspect of the 1660s, because the theatre had been largely suppressed during the civil wars, and it comes back! And it comes back with new scenery, and it comes back with women playing the characters that are female, for the most part. Was exploring theatre one of your motivations for going to Elizabeth Knepp as a character?

DS: I think it was. I think one of the motivations was the fact that that I just thought for the theatre this is just the beginning of a whole new era of the theatre. And we have somebody in Pepys's diary that is in there, but he never mentions it really mentions her really, except to comment on her legs and things like that. And I thought, well, it would be great to have a novel from her point of view so, if you like, instead of Pepys looking at her from the auditorium – which he tends to do and make comments about her singing (he enjoyed her singing) and they were great friends, they did actually make friends – it would be great to have her view of what it was like to be entertaining him rather than our usual view of him looking at her and making judgments about her. What sort of judgments would she make about him? But also, women in the theatre was new. It was also considered to be a situation where you wouldn't really do it, unless you were what we might call “a loose woman”. And so there were all those preconceptions – that there have been through many centuries – about actresses somehow always being somehow involved in prostitution, or that sort of thing and I wanted to get away from that idea really as well. And they do have quite a friendship which I thought was unusual and different from the previous two women that I have written about, and more a more equal relationship. But what I also found interesting was the fact that the equal relationship doesn't last very long. It lasts as long as he wants it to last and then he ditches her and, really, he's using her again.

I think as well, I had quite a few people say to me, because Mr Knepp in the novel is quite unpleasant, but she ends up staying with Mr Knepp and that's part of the history, so it couldn't be any other than that. But I did think well, why? And there is evidence in Pepys's diary that Mr Knepp beat her and things like that, so why would she stay? So I had to provide a good reason for her to stay for the twenty-first- and twenty-second-century readers, that would not just accept, really, that she'd stay, because there was little choice in those days.



So I think that's one thing you're doing all the time in a book like this, is you're trying to take on board the history – which was that people stayed even though they were beaten – and modern sensibilities. So I had to provide an explanation within the narrative, within the fiction, as to why she might decide she was going to stay. And I've had quite a few debates with readers about that afterwards – some people thought that was believable, that she would still stay – but I don't really mind if people don't agree, as long as they have that discussion, because I think the discussion is really important. That discussion about what would make you stay and what would make you go is a conversation that we need to have, so from that point of view I'm pleased with how that went.

KL: Yes. Yeah, I think one of the things that you say in your endnotes is that you want readers to discuss plot points, especially the ones that are sensitive or as you say, sort of things like how has what we would see rightly as sexual abuse being handled, or to recognize, in fact, that that is actually... that this *is* wrong what is happening, which Pepys often doesn't think that what's happening is wrong. So historical fiction can kind of prompt us to have those kinds of personal reflections, but also to discuss it.

DS: I was just going to say, I think we think we've moved on and we often think we've moved on, but actually on closer examination – and I think a novelist has to do this all the time, you know – on close examination I found that there are some places where I hadn't done enough and needed to adjust my thinking or rethink and so for me it's a journey of exploration, but I also hope it is for the reader, that it will make them reflect on what things were like then; what they're like now; how we've moved on between the two; whether we've moved on enough; or whether you're still harboring, as a reader, some of the thoughts that the people in the novel are harboring; and it will enable you to then question your own attitudes and your own thinking.

KL: Do you have any tips for writers of historical fiction or budding writers of historical fiction about things to do or things to avoid?

DS: I think the main thing is that you obviously need to do your research, but what you are not is a historian. There are plenty of excellent historians who could do it much better than we can do it, and our job is to entertain people and to make the best and the most gripping story out of the research that we have available. So, for me, making the story – the story is paramount because people pick up fiction in order to be entertained and to be taken to another place and time. They want to feel that the time and place is real, but they also want to have an emotional connection with the characters, and they want to be able to feel that they're being swept along on a journey and so the plot needs to move along. So find something to write about that's not too obscure, because I think readers like a little bit of knowledge about what they're reading. So with Pepys there was a degree of interest in him, but I think there was also a degree of interest in women's lives in the 17th century as well, so I was able to use that. I think that's the same with all historical fiction, that you need to find a way in, a common entrance point for people to get in and enjoy the book.

KL: It's been great to talk to you and thank you very much. I have learned quite a bit and I'm sure that people who are listening have also enjoyed hearing us.

DS: Thank you very much, Kate.