

Q & A's for 'The Shadow Sister'

1) How does the third sister, Star, relate to her mythological counterpart?

In Greek mythology, Asterope is the sister we know the least about. She is outshone by the other stars in the Pleiades cluster, and, as Star discovers when she looks through Pa Salt's telescope, Asterope is in fact made up of two weakly shining stars that sit closely together. This forms the basis of her character: a young woman always in the shadows, closed off from others, but with another side to her that is yet to be discovered.

In legend, she is always accompanied by her sister Celaeno, who is stronger and louder than her. Their close relationship really fascinated me as, squashed into the middle of their six-sister family, Star and CeCe are forced into co-dependency and develop their own special relationship.

In the entanglement of myths, it is said that Asterope either became the wife *or* the mother of Oenomaus, who was later the King of Pisa. The many contradictions in Greek myth have been tricky for me to manoeuvre, but I decided to fully embrace these two stories. My Oenomaus – Mouse – is surly and complex, but has a deep heart. He struggles to embrace his role as father to Rory, and as Lord of High Weald. Star takes on the role of both romantic partner to him, as well as mother to Rory ... their fate is truly written in the stars (or, well... by me!) The moment when Star discovers Mouse's true name is perhaps my favourite in the book.

2) You probably see something of yourself in each of the sisters. In which ways are you similar to Star?

Definitely my love for books – all the novels that Star mentions in 'The Shadow Sister' are ones that I have read and adored. And I also feel shy and uncertain in large social situations – and I dread speaking in public. Given the fact it's something I now have to do often, like Star, I have had to try to overcome my fears, and I am definitely getting better.

3) Star doesn't have much of a voice of her own. Did you find it a challenge to write dialogue for her?

I did at first. Because I dictate the first draft of each novel, dialogue is usually something that flows very easily. In this case, it took me a while before I got a 'feel' for Star's voice. Her inner world was very clear to me, but her interactions with others were very difficult to write as she is rather monosyllabic! Yet, as the book continues, Star begins to come out of her shell and makes deeper connections with others. It felt like second nature to write from her perspective. Her internal monologue is rich and vibrant, and her ability to listen is one of her greatest strengths – which is what made scenes between her and Rory a pleasure to write – they understand each other on a fundamental level that doesn't require spoken words.

4) In the book, Orlando manages a rare bookshop. You obviously have a love for rare books – which are the favourites in your collection and why?

Having Orlando manage a rare bookshop was an excuse to live vicariously through him. Rare books, to me, are the ultimate luxury. Like Star, give me a rare bookshop over a statement handbag or pair of shoes any day! Every year, I treat myself to special 'rare book' or set of them. I also buy a rare book for my eldest son for Christmas and birthdays. The favourites in my collection are my Penguin classics, and my leather-bound Brontes and Dickens special editions.

5) Characters in 'The Shadow Sister' talk openly about depression, most notably Mouse. Do you believe it's important to talk about mental health?

Yes, most definitely. According to the WHO (World Health Organisation) 350 million people of all ages are currently suffering from depression around the world. We are slowly beginning to talk about depression without fear of stigma, treating it as an illness rather than something to be ashamed of. Mouse suffered extreme emotional trauma when he lost his wife, which can be a trigger for depression. Eventually, with the support of his family and Star's kindness, he is able to have a relationship with her and his son and move on from the past. It is never too late to ask for help, and talking about it is the first step. It's one of the bravest things you can do.

6) Your books are known for their exotic and foreign locations – what made you choose England as the setting for this book, and did you find it easier than normal to write?

England has such a varied and fascinating landscape; I was savouring the chance to write about it. There are moments when you are standing at the top of a fell in the Lake District, overlooking the

wild and untouched valleys and rivers, that you can hardly believe that the bustling and beautiful city of London are within the same borders. It was both easy and difficult for me to write about my own country – easy in the sense that I could work from the comfort of my own home, but difficult in the sense that when you know a place so well, you have to put on a set of fresh eyes in order to convey its magic to the reader. To me, ‘exotic’ doesn’t always mean far away beaches and palm trees; it signifies what is exciting and unknown – and there is so much of England that I have yet to discover.

7) In the book you feature the beautiful scenery of the Lake District and the gardens of Kent in England. Which of the two locations inspired you the most when writing?

Sissinghurst Gardens in Kent are magical, designed in the 1930s by the writer Vita Sackville-West and her husband, the author and diplomat Harold Nicholson, they are romantic, whimsical and so quintessential of that literary and artistic period of England. Designed as a series of ‘rooms’, each one tells a different story, and I thought it was the perfect model for High Weald. I believe homes really reflect their owners, and the chance to describe High Weald across generations gave the garden-lover inside me a wonderful canvas to play with.

In the Lake District, the view from the top of Scafell Pike is absolutely breathtaking. I have vivid memories of my father taking me up there when I was seven or eight, and hanging on to the side of the mountain when we were caught in a squall, just as Flora and Archie are.

8) Do you have a particular fascination with the British monarchy?

Great Britain has such a rich history, and has one of the longest reigning monarchies in modern history. In the 1900s, the Empire shaped the world, and the royal family still defines the country for many.

What interested me was the changing relationship between the public and the royal family. In King Edward VII’s time, the national media would never have dared print salacious rumours about the king – despite the fact that Bertie had various mistresses and made no attempt to keep them secret. One of these, Lady Susan Vane-Tempest, is alleged to have given birth to his illegitimate child in 1871. Alice Keppel was, alongside Lillie Langtry, his most well known mistress. Her youngest daughter Sonia would go on to become the great-grandmother of Camilla Parker-Bowles, the wife of

Prince Charles. Given everything I have read about Alice's life and motivations, I am sure she would have been thrilled that her direct descendant is now married to the Prince of Wales.

9) Alice Keppel was clearly a remarkable woman. As a result of your research do you see her as a fundamentally positive, well meaning character, or misguided and manipulative?

I don't think she is as black or white as that. She was a woman of her time, who used her talents and charisma to further her own and her family's standing. It is admirable how far she came, a girl from Scotland, married to a Norfolk gentleman, who rose to the unofficial level of a queen. She was a sociable, happy and illuminating person to be around, but of course, not without her flaws. She was regularly conversing with Kings and Kaisers over supper, active in politics as well as running one of the most sought after salons in London. That kind of influence does not come without a knack for manipulation.

I do believe that she genuinely loved the King in her own way, but equally, that her heartbreak over his death was also heartbreak at her own changing circumstances. She is a truly complex character who shaped British history behind the scenes and it was a challenge to depict her fall from grace on the eve of the King's death. The events and Mrs Keppel's reaction to them are taken directly from first-hand accounts of the night the King died and the following day.

10) Why do you think the relationship between Violet Trefusis and Vita Sackville-West has been so notorious for over 90 years?

Violet and Vita, as well as others in the literary Bloomsbury group, were forerunners in breaking gender boundaries. They were bohemian, creative, and – yes, also privileged: born into wealthy families and with the freedom to break societal norms. Their refusal to submit to these rules is what makes them such interesting characters. Vita inspired one of the greatest writers of British modernism, Virginia Woolf, to write *Orlando*, immortalising Vita and the freedom that she stood for. Despite the odds, Violet and Vita continued to run away together, to the point where their husbands, Harold and Dennis, had to trek to France in 1920 and try to convince their wives to come home. Their love was intense, all-consuming, and notorious.

11) Another of your 'real life' characters in 'The Shadow Sister' is the children's author and illustrator, Beatrix Potter. Why do you think her work's popularity has been so enduring – and did you read the tales to your children?

I so admire Beatrix's devotion to nature and to England, and the fact that she left an enduring legacy of landscape and of wildlife to be enjoyed by generations after her, in the form of the National Trust. Her animal tales are innocent and imaginative, capturing a pastoral England that I think we all long for in the modern age. I did read her books myself and to my children, and in fact, my character Tiggy's nickname comes from Beatrix's 'The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle'. All of her characters, most notably Peter Rabbit, have become staples of British childhood and iconic figures worldwide.

Beatrix was a woman of many talents in an age where this was still so uncommon – she was a writer, illustrator, canny businesswoman, farmer, campaigner, botanist, wife, friend and conservationist. She lived her life to the fullest and it was a joy to write about her.

12) In the first two books of the series, you focus primarily on a single sister, whereas in this story, CeCe plays an important role. Is this simply because of their particularly close relationship or are you planning to involve more of sisters in each book from now on?

In 'The Seven Sisters', 'The Storm Sister', and at the start of 'The Shadow Sister', CeCe and Star come as a 'pair'. Star's story is about her breaking away from her sister's protectiveness. How CeCe feels about this won't be revealed until her own story, 'The Pearl Sister'. What is especially interesting to me is how people will perceive her differently once they have more insight into her thoughts and emotions. For a lot of 'The Shadow Sister', we see two sisters who are outgrowing their mutual bond and learning to become independent. And as with all close family relationships, it isn't always easy.

13) Can you tell us what you are working on next and where CeCe's journey will take the reader?

CeCe's story, 'The Pearl Sister', will take us into the turbulent history of Australia, as well as to South East Asia. CeCe is a wanderer; always restless, always curious. Being apart from Star initially breaks her heart, but will subsequently give her the chance to truly discover who she is too, and what art she is capable of creating. Perhaps she may even open her heart to someone new...

14) And lastly, do you have a favourite character in 'The Shadow Sister'?

Definitely the two brothers, Orlando and Mouse. I want Orlando as my brother and Mouse as my lover...!