



THE LADY'S SLIPPER

by Deborah Swift

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A Conversation with Deborah Swift

Could you tell us a little bit about your personal and professional background and when it was that you decided to lead a literary life?

I was brought up in the countryside in a small village, but as an adult I spent much of my time in cities, working in the theater as a set and costume designer. Working in the theater was a fantastic experience that gave me access to some of the literary giants of the world through their plays. How can you beat having to work with the language and imagery of Shakespeare or Tennessee Williams! I returned to country living again about ten years ago and now live in the English Lake District, a place immortalized by poets and artists such as Wordsworth and Ruskin.

In a way I feel I have always led a literary life, right from picking up my first book. When I was five years old I won a school painting competition and a prize of a copy of *Black Beauty*, gloriously illustrated. It was the first book that made me cry. I am an avid reader and will read anything and everything. As an older child I used to enjoy reading an ancient encyclopedia, and can still remember the old, musty smell of its pages and the yellowish glue of its binding.

Is there a book or an author that most inspired you to become a writer?

Apart from *Black Beauty*, I remember as a teenager being massively impressed by Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Anya Seton's *Katherine*, both of which probably sowed the seeds of my interest in historical fiction. And I love classics such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Little Women*, which have strong female voices despite being written in a time when literature was dominated by men. Later I was much more influenced by plays and poems. I love reading poets who observe nature in all its moods. Ted Hughes's work is timeless because of its precision, and Mary Oliver has a yearning inherent in her work that seems to be a part

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of my impulse to write. Initially *The Lady's Slipper* began as a poem—my attempt to convey the lone flower's strangeness and fragility.

You mentioned working as a costume designer. How has your work in theater influenced your writing, not just content-wise, but stylistically as well?

I tend to naturally think in terms of scenes, and let the dialogue drive the action. I am also very aware of making internal dilemmas “visible” to the reader, in the same way an actor makes his state of mind obvious to an audience through actions.

Stylistically, I have a love of the theatrical, which draws me toward a story that is plot driven. Twists and turns make for good drama. I love deceptions and intrigue. And very much as on stage, I like to allow each character a moment in the spotlight, so that we see the whole picture through several pairs of eyes. When writing, the action literally unfolds in front of me like a film. I write feverishly and then have to go back to refine and re-tune and add the internal dialogue—the soliloquies—later. I think of the end of the chapters as the blackout in the theater, a blank space for the mind to rest before a new scene.

Years of converting text into images as a designer means that I view the background or settings as integral to the characters. Alice's character at the outset is drawn as much by her summerhouse, for example, as by her conversation. The research process for a writer is very similar to that of a designer, and I have always enjoyed this aspect, as it gives me a great excuse to poke about in museums and old houses. I prefer to research through books or visits rather than online, and most of the settings for *The Lady's Slipper* are based on real places. Lingfell Hall is based on Swarthmoor Hall, the actual house at the hub of the Quaker movement in the seventeenth century.

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Do you scrupulously adhere to historical facts in your novels, or do you take liberties if the story can benefit from the change? To what extent did you stick to the facts in *The Lady's Slipper*?

I think it is important that I feel the novel is coherent, and that it has a sense of its own history, and for that reason I like to get in touch with genuine artifacts or writings of the period. My parents collected antiques, and sometimes one small object can convey the texture of a whole era. A pair of shoes can say so much.

When researching *The Lady's Slipper* I read the diary of George Fox to find a date on which my meeting on the hill at Lancaster could feasibly have taken place. While doing so, at the University of Lancaster, I discovered quite by accident that Fox himself had rewritten parts of his diary toward the end of his life and changed settings and events even within his lifetime—presumably aware of his future readership! So anything we regard as fact is only a story someone else has told us.

I do make creative decisions regarding the historical facts if it benefits the story; since I am not a historian, the story has to come first. For example, early Quaker meetings were often segregated by sex into male and female meetings. In my initial draft, the meetings at the Hall were written in this way until it became just too cumbersome for characters to keep tramping back and forth from room to room, and I decided to ignore this fact to strengthen the identity of the meeting room.

Creating a believable world is a kind of alchemy. With today's media, we are so used to a constant stream of images that I wanted to convey the freshness of vision itself during the seventeenth century—a time when everything was seen for the first time directly with the eyes, and the first encounter with something could

“Creating a believable world is a kind of alchemy.”



indeed be a wonder. News was spread mostly by hearing the tale of it from someone else, complete with the additions of the person's own imagination. I like to think that I am weaving tales from the people of the time with my own tale, and hope that the result is as seamless as possible.

Why do you think readers are so drawn to historical fiction?

Our own lives become history as we go forward from day to day, so I think it is natural to look back and learn from our experiences. We use history as a mirror that we can hold up to our own times for comparison as we ponder the perennial questions. It serves to remind us where we have been, what attitudes we have ditched in favor of more compassionate ones, for example. The character of Geoffrey is very much of his time, and this excites me as a writer—to develop a character who conveys seventeenth-century attitudes and not merely a modern man walking about in period clothes.

I think there is a degree of nostalgia too: people are looking to reconnect with the slower pace of the past, when we were not ruled by the clock and daily commutes. There is a resurgence of interest in craftsmanship, as it represents a visible sign of the time and patience we now seem to have so little of. The past can seem simpler, although I suspect this simplicity is an illusion, since we tend to gloss over the inevitable hardships of history.

Who are some of your favorite historical figures?

At the risk of being obvious, top of the list would have to be Shakespeare! Over the years I have seen many productions on stage and screen, yet I am always amazed by how fresh the words are to audiences today.

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I admire that there are so many layers to each play, and the more you study and analyze them, the more they reveal. Working on a Shakespeare play makes you realize how skillfully he managed to leave enough space within the text for new interpretations.

Many of my favorite historical figures are not kings and queens but artists or scientists, since they have left a permanent legacy through their work. I don't think you can ignore the cultural influences of, for example, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo, Darwin, or Van Gogh.

Are you currently working on another book? If so, who or what is your subject?

While working on *The Lady's Slipper*, Ella cheekily demanded her own book. And so the novel I am working on tells her story, after her flight from Netherbarrow.



“My First Slipper”: An Original Essay by the Author

One Sunday I was out for a walk with a friend in the countryside, and strolling down a leafy unmade track, we came across a white tent right in the middle of the path. It was blocking our way, so we peered inside. An official-looking man was sitting there; he told us he was from an organization called English Nature. His task was to guard the rare lady’s slipper orchid that was in flower a few yards farther on. Apparently, orchid enthusiasts were so desperate to get hold of the plant that in 2003 half of it had been dug up by a greedy collector, and since then it has been guarded while it is in flower.

A bit taken aback that a guard should be patrolling such a quiet country footpath, and full of curiosity, we followed him to view this rare orchid. Nestling against the green of the hedgerow, it was strikingly different from most other English flowers. I don’t know what I was expecting, but the sight of it took my breath away. I had never seen anything so exotic looking growing wild before—the creamy yellow “slipper,” surrounded by the twisted blood-colored ribbons. It struck me at that moment that every time anyone saw this, generation after generation, they must have experienced the same awe. The thought that it could be lost to future generations was sobering.

We stood and stared as our guide described a little of its history. The species was on the brink of extinction in Britain, but when a single plant was rediscovered, the *Cypripedium* Committee was formed—a sort of plant mafia—designed to protect the lady’s slipper orchid and develop a conservation strategy involving propagating or cloning the species.

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The Committee is obsessively protective of the plant. Once, on television, a member tried to explain its much-publicized and expensive conservation program. The interviewer asked, "Will people be allowed to see it?"

"No," the Committee member said. "And if I have my way it will live the rest of its days unseen and die in isolation."

This seemed an interesting paradox and whetted my imagination. It was strange that the Committee was able to effectively "own" the plant in its attempts to preserve it. Eventually this became one theme I wanted to explore in the novel. But I am jumping ahead.

So I did more research. I trawled Internet sites and orchid books and read scientific articles on plant cloning. This is the sort of thing I used to do when writing a poem—look for snippets of language, unusual words, or fragments that I might craft into poetry. After a few attempts at beginning a poem, I realized it just wasn't working. It seemed a bigger, more wordy idea than there was room for in a poem, more of a narrative. The plant on its own was nothing without characters to see it, so I drafted chapter one of what was to become *The Lady's Slipper*.

At the same time I went to a philosophy workshop in an old Quaker meetinghouse at Yealand, a short drive from my home. The old meetinghouse, built in 1692, is full of atmosphere, the silence of the meetings over so many hundreds of years seemingly concentrated into its very walls. What moved me most on that particular day was the graveyard. It is a typical Quaker burial ground where all the headstones are exactly the same—plain granite, thumbnail-shaped stones with a simple name and date inscription. It is the ultimate expression of death as a leveling process: whoever you were, however rich or poor, you shall have the same memorial and be returned to the land. This idea of equality is not so

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startling today, but how would it have been viewed in the class-ridden system of seventeenth-century England when the movement began?

I started to investigate Quaker history. I was fascinated by the Quakers' strict code of morality and the strength of their convictions for peace in those early times, particularly as the movement began when England was still recovering from the bloodshed of its Civil War and the subsequent Puritan repression. I began to visualize the character of Richard Wheeler as a Quaker.

Fortunately, I live near the birthplace of the Quaker movement, so visits to their first meeting grounds and houses, such as Swarthmoor Hall, where George Fox himself actually stood, played a large part in the background of the book. There is nothing like inhaling the smell of seventeenth-century paneling, or looking at a view of a garden from inside mullioned glass. George Fox kept a diary that provided me with not only a time frame but also a flavor of the particular language of the period.

As I was researching I found I was haunted by "what if" questions such as: What would happen if a Quaker had pledged not to take up arms but then was put in a position where he must defend the person he loves? I was interested also to explore the whole question of territory, and what it is that makes people defend their territory (Thomas's indignation when Ella encroaches on Alice's territory, for example).

For me, the lady's slipper represents the land. It rouses a patriotism in me, something that has become a somewhat unpopular idea. And I think many people are asking questions about soldiering, and the paradox of using conflict to bring about peace. So the character of Richard Wheeler enabled me to explore these questions without implying the answers.

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The Lady's Slipper grew in an organic sort of way. Although I was aware of the crafting process as it went on, in some respects I feel the story was already "out there," and I am just the person who happened to pen it down. So I feel immensely grateful to the characters for letting me tell their story.



King Charles I was executed for treason against his own country in 1649. This is probably the single most extraordinary event in English history. A king is a symbol as well as a person, and this meant that the country had literally lost its head. The stability of England was undermined with one stroke of the executioner's ax. If the king could be decapitated by his own people, anything was possible.

The country was then ruled as a commonwealth by a parliament, presided over by the religious zealot Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell believed that government should be "for the people's good, not what pleases them," and thus he set in place a puritan regime in which pleasures were curtailed—no maypole dancing, no merrymaking, and for the first time in English history, adultery became punishable by death. Spies for Cromwell were commonplace, there was a feeling that you were being watched, and betrayals and punishments were frequent. When Cromwell eventually died in 1658, there was dancing in the streets. John Evelyn, the diarist, wrote that it was "the joyfullest funeral that I ever saw, for there was none that cried but dogs." Parliament endured a short while, but it was with scarcely disguised relief that the country welcomed back the exiled royal son, Charles II.

As *The Lady's Slipper* begins, the new monarch has just been returned to the throne. So when Lady Emilia plans a lavish dinner and theatrical entertainment, it is probably the first time such an event would have happened in many years. But although there is a return to the old order on the surface, I can't help feeling that there must still have been undercurrents of residual unease. The culture of fear—in which children could be whipped for swearing and women cast into prison for dancing on a Sunday—was slow to dissipate, and it is obvious that this England must have been a place of many hidden tensions. I could also imagine that a certain pocket of the population might actually miss the

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drama of those times and wish to re-create it, hence the village's ready support of Ella's accusations. Added to this was the fact that people could still remember the bloodshed and brutality of the Civil War that had led to King Charles's execution, and old hurts from those days may perhaps have festered in people's minds.

It is estimated that in the English Civil War, fifty-five thousand people were made homeless and 4 percent of the population died, a higher proportion than in World War I. One in every five adult males was actively caught up in the fighting, and eleven thousand houses were burned down. The clash between King Charles and his followers and Parliament and its adherents tore families apart and divided long-standing friends. From this it was easy to imagine a world where childhood friends Geoffrey Fisk and Richard Wheeler found themselves on opposing sides in the war, and that Alice Ibbetson's Royalist family might have had to flee when their house burned to the ground.

In such a world of uncertainty, religious faith provided security and a backbone to life. During the seventeenth century, unorthodox religions began to flourish. The Quaker movement was founded by George Fox, the son of a weaver. There is no evidence to suggest that Fox was educated, but he nonetheless toured the towns and villages of Westmorland preaching his new ideas to whomever would listen. His idea was that God could speak to a person directly and inwardly without the need for the intercession of the clergy, as there is "that of God in every man." Predictably, his negative attitude toward regular church ministers and his speaking out against the customs of oaths, tithes, and military service led him and his followers into conflict with authority, particularly once Charles II returned.

"A writer has to tread a fine line when using period detail that might seem outlandish to today's reader."



In my book, the Quakers speak using the archaic “thee” and “thou.” They wanted to speak the truth even to the extent of refusing to use “you” (a plural form of address) to one person. Instead they used “thou” to address an individual. Initially, I thought writing this way would alienate the modern reader, but I found it helped to bring Richard Wheeler and his friends to life.

In many ways, the seventeenth century remains an unknown land. A writer has to tread a fine line when using period detail that might seem outlandish to today’s reader. Ideas about health and healing at the time were very different from ours. Laudanum (opium) and mercury were the usual medicines employed by physicians, supplemented by bloodletting, a regime that surely killed as many as it cured! Rich people were particularly at risk from these treatments, as they could afford to pay for them. The poor relied on collecting herbal medicine, hence the overcollection of plants such as the lady’s slipper. In the period in which the book is set there are few references to the lady’s slipper, but most cite it as being “uncommon,” and I was unable to ascertain just how rare it might have been in any particular year. But I hope you have been entertained by my idea of setting its modern-day scarcity against the sweeping canvas of the seventeenth-century, and will forgive any unwitting historical or botanical inaccuracies.

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Fun Facts

- The lady's slipper orchid is also known as American Valerian, Nerve Root, Camel's Foot, Steeple Cap, Noah's Ark, Two Lips, and Whippoorwill's Shoe.
- One of the most famous, endangered wildflowers in the United States is the pink lady's slipper, *Cypripedium acaule*. But it is officially endangered in only two states: Illinois and Tennessee. Georgia lists it as "unusual." New York lists it as "exploitably vulnerable." But in the other twelve states it is not listed at all! Even wildflowers like this one can be quite common in many places. The Endangered Species Act required that each state create its own list of plants (and animals) that need protection within its (state) borders. These lists are updated regularly. You can find out which plants are endangered in your state by visiting www.americanmeadows.com.
- One of the earliest books about North American plants is from Jacques Philippe Cornut's *Canadensium Plantarum*. Published in France in 1635, it features an illustration of a yellow lady slipper. Cornut himself never visited America, though he received imported New World seeds and plants for his botanical garden in Paris. *See illustration below.*





Recommended Reading



Restoration

Rose Tremain

I am a big fan of Tremain, and this is a masterful evocation of the period—not just the peripheral details, but the insight she provides into the spirit of the age through the mind and voice of Robert Merivel. In many ways it is the novel I wish I had written!

Orchid Fever

Eric Hansen

Subtitled *A Horticultural Tale of Love, Lust, and Lunacy*, this is a hugely entertaining read. If you ever wondered whether a flower could really evoke such passion, here is the answer in this nonfiction collection of orchid-obsessives through the ages. Hilarious and fascinating in equal measure, it proves truth really can be as strange as fiction.

Year of Wonders

Geraldine Brooks

Set in Eyam in England during the plague of 1666, this novel explores how a small community might cope in the wake of tragedy, and how in such a confined society neighbors can be both your scourge and your salvation.

Frenchman's Creek

Daphne du Maurier

Although penned in 1941 and much less famous than *Rebecca*, this tale of a bored socialite from the Restoration court heading for wild love on the Cornish coast is rich with the atmosphere of the sea. Romantic and escapist, but not mawkish or sentimental, it examines a woman's role in seventeenth-century England with more subtlety than you would expect.

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The Heretic's Daughter

Kathleen Kent

I was riveted by this novel, which is based on a true family history. Shocking and haunting, stories such as this are a sobering example of what happens when mass hysteria takes over a community. Although there have been other examples of “witch hunt” plots, this was very finely drawn and all the more gripping because of its basis in reality.

As Meat Loves Salt

Maria McCann

This book tells the reader about the English Civil War in close-up as we follow the brutal Jacob Cullen into battle, and later into the idealistic Diggers community. With the mud and gore of the battlefield, but also a love story between two unlikely men, this book defies conventions and easy description. Its presence gave me the confidence not to explain too closely the unpredictable and conflicted elements of Geoffrey's character.

Tulip Fever

Deborah Moggach

A novel of seventeenth-century Amsterdam as seen through the eyes of Dutch artists, this was going to be a massively visual read, but I loved it not just because of the pictures, but because Deborah Moggach conveys the sensuality and allure of the tulip in such a tangible way, something I was aiming for in *The Lady's Slipper*.



Dark Fire

C. J. Sansom

This was the first historical novel I had read by Sansom, but not the last. Although set in Tudor England, its style is something I wanted to emulate for *The Lady's Slipper*. The racing plots and larger-than-life characters in the Shardlake series give *Dark Fire* a sense of drama and momentum without departing too far from the constraints of history.

Virgin Earth

Philippa Gregory

The first of two novels about the famous plant collector, John Tradescant, who leaves England because of the English Civil War and travels to Virginia, where he falls in love with a Powhatan woman. I admire all of Philippa Gregory's novels for their readability and research, and this makes a good companion volume to *The Lady's Slipper* as it shows one possible view of what Richard and Alice might confront as they set foot in the New World.

An Instance of the Fingerpost

Iain Pears

A mystery that examines the nature of truth itself. Set in Oxford in 1663 at the height of the scientific resurgence of the Restoration, the novel uses several different points of view to illuminate an idea—that each person can only see the partial truth of a situation. I loved the idea of writing a multiple viewpoint novel, so that the reader is privy to the deceptions of the characters while they themselves are not.

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Reading Group Questions

1. In the novel, Richard says that it is not possible for him to pledge peace unless he were to live in a “golden age.” What sort of a golden age do you think he is imagining? And do you live in one now?
2. What does the lady’s slipper orchid represent to the various characters in the book? Why do you think that Alice’s slipper is such a potent symbol for Ella?
3. One of the reasons that Alice takes the lady’s slipper is because she wants to preserve it for future generations. Later she replaces it with an American orchid. In your view, was she preserving or violating the English countryside?
4. Both Richard and Hannah have a “religious experience” in the book. Which do you find the most convincing, and why? What makes an experience religious?
5. Stephen says of Ella Appleby: “She has given us lives we would never have anticipated.” Discuss Ella’s role and influence throughout the novel. To what extent do you think our lives are determined by the actions of other people?
6. Alice says that flowers have “a lost innocence, outside man-made time, the flower of a thousand years ago repeating itself over and over, reminding the world of nature’s order.” What do you think of this statement? How would you define “nature’s order”?



7. Geoffrey is in some respects the villain of the book. To what extent are his character traits a product of his upbringing and station in life? Some views that were acceptable in 1660 would be totally unacceptable today. Is our morality changing with the times? Or do you think there are aspects of our morality that are fixed?

8. Discuss Stephen's use of disguise in the novel. What does he learn about his true nature by being someone else? Have you ever pretended to be something you are not for a particular purpose? How do you recognize the real you?

9. Richard Wheeler embarks on a journey from being a Quaker pacifist to becoming a soldier ready to defend his homeland. What is the meaning of "home" to Richard? What does it mean to you—and would you be willing to defend it with your life?

10. Ella says that she was "beginning to believe she really had seen the body of an old woman in that ditch. After she had claimed to see it, six more of the villagers, including Audrey and Tom, had unaccountably confirmed that they too had seen the Mistress bending over the body." How does the "Rashomon effect," in which observers of one event are able to produce different but equally plausible accounts of it, play out both in the novel and in real life?

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