

Q & A with Laura Amy Schlitz

You have a remarkable ability to create an atmosphere that really transports readers into the world of your stories, and Victorian England as you have painted it in Splendors and Glooms is no exception. What kind of research did you do for this novel that helped you create such a true portrait of life at that time? The detail is reminiscent in some ways to the marvelous descriptions in Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!

In one way this was an easy book to research, because I developed a passion for Victorian novels early in life. When I was in fourth or fifth grade, my father bought me a slim volume containing abridged versions of several of Dickens's novels: *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations*. I read and reread these stories. I found them haunting and terrifying and triumphant. They satisfied a peculiar hunger in me—and still do. *Splendors and Glooms* is my *homage* to Dickens.

I still read and reread Dickens. I love the Victorians: the Brontës, Eliot, Trollope, Collins, and Gaskell. Decades of pleasure reading have taught me the difference between a hansom cab and a hackney coach; I know about Lucifer matches, pattens, hartshorn, and pounce. Which is not to say that when I embarked upon *Splendors* I didn't buy another forty or fifty books for research purposes. . . .

During the years I was working on the novel, I traveled to London and the Lake District. I visited Dickens's house (a true pilgrimage) and explored a glorious museum called the Dennis Severs' House, where I was able to smell the smoke from coal fires and see an honest-to-goodness Victorian scullery, complete with dirty dishes in the sink. (They had dish mops back then!) I half-hypnotized myself staring into fire opals in the Natural History Museum. On a day when it was eleven degrees Fahrenheit, I went outdoors in a light dress and reclined on a sheet of ice, taking notes about which bits of me got cold first. Research is great fun. It beats writing any day of the week.

The lives of Lizzie Rose and Parsefall are brutal and grim—in stark contrast to Clara’s privileged upbringing. Do you think kids today will be surprised to read about the harsh conditions for many children during this time, and the fates of orphans especially?

Possibly. But children’s lives are never quite as carefree or simple as adults like to imagine. My hope is that my readers will be able to identify with one of my three heroic protagonists.

Life in Victorian England was hard for the children of the poor. They were often underfed, overworked, abused, and exploited. One of the ironies of the story is that even though Parsefall lives in terror of Grisini, he is aware that his life might be much worse. Before he fell into Grisini’s hands, Parsefall lived in a workhouse—one of the most dreaded institutions of the day. When Grisini first took him away from it, Parsefall remarked, “I thought I was in ‘eaven.” Since Parsefall was small and skinny, he might have become a chimney sweep, subject to singeing and suffocation. He could have been a factory hand, working eighteen hours a day and destroying his lungs in the process. Grisini is a monster, but he provides Parsefall with a roof over his head, some hours of leisure, and fuel for his burning imagination.

Can you describe the inspiration for weaving the art of puppetry into the story as a main plot point?

The puppets were there from the beginning. I first conceived this story when I was falling asleep, and my first visual image was of a marionette in a white dress. I knew I wanted to exploit the macabre half-life of puppets—that eerie quality that puppets have of being humanlike but not human, animated but not fully alive.

Marionettes are actually an old obsession with me, and *Splendors and Glooms* is my third stab at writing about them. (The first book was never published; the second book was never completed.) In the process of researching the first book, I realized I needed to create some marionettes in order to understand how they worked. So I made some very simple ones. It was fascinating, because the puppets began to display character traits long before they had heads or faces. Each figure fit together a little differently, and as I worked on them the weighted limbs would flop into attitudes that suggested what kind of person the puppet wanted to be. I made the heads based on what the bodies told me.

The names of the characters in this book are truly superb. How do you name characters in your books, and how did these particular ones come to you?

I'm fanatical about names and spend hours combing through books to find the perfect ones. I could name characters all day long and never get tired of it.

When I first begin to imagine a character, I usually have an instinctive feel for the first letter of the name. The almost closed curve of a *C* seems both opulent and secretive to me, so I knew that Clara would have a *C* name. I wanted a wintery last name to suggest that Clara's life had been frozen or suspended in some way. *Winter* seemed too common, so I picked up the telephone book and looked for variations. When I found *Wintermute*, I almost danced a jig. Not only wintery, but mute!

Fawr is Welsh for "great," which I thought was appropriate for Lizzie Rose, because she is chivalrous and trustworthy. Parsefall is like the fool-knight Parsifal in German legend. He is a healer, the asker of important questions.

I took a special joy in christening the Pinchbecks: Arabella; her late husband, Titus; and her repulsive stepson, Fitzmorris. (Fitzmorris Pinchbeck! How I smack my lips over that one!)

Could you tell us briefly about your truly despicable and spot-on villains in the book, and why you decided to redeem the witch at the end?

I never have trouble writing about villains. I suppose it's because there are so many wicked people locked up inside me. I try to keep them caged and muzzled, but they spend a fair amount of time rattling the bars. When the time comes for me to write about villains, my inner demons are only too happy to assist. I take off their muzzles and let them talk.

I don't recall making the decision to redeem Cassandra at the end. It just happened. When I wrote about Cassandra, I realized that I was writing about someone with an eighty-four-year-old body and the volatile emotions of an adolescent girl. I came to see that when Cassandra stole the fire opal, her ability to grow and change was arrested. That was part of the stone's curse. Once the stone was destroyed, Cassandra was able to change. Feelings of compassion and remorse, repressed for more than seventy years, reclaimed her.

Can you describe Splendors and Glooms in ten words or less for people who have not read it?

No, I can't. I don't think that means that *Splendors* is a bad book, only that some books don't condense well. You can condense *Romeo and Juliet* in ten words: "Two young people from feuding families fall fatally in love." But you can't condense *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the same way, because it's a three-ring circus. It has three plots that intersect like the circles of a Venn diagram.

Splendors is a little like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in that it's structurally complex. It is based on two triangles, one in the past (Cassandra-Grisini-Marguerite) and one in the present (Clara-Parsefall-Lizzie Rose.) There are five main characters and constant shifts in point of view. This complexity made the book extraordinarily difficult to write—but I hope the permutations of the plot contribute to something rich, strange, and suspenseful.

If you still hanker after a brief summary, here's one from a third-grade Park School student who read one of my early drafts. When a classmate asked him "what's it about?" he answered without batting an eye: "It's about a boy with nine fingers and a girl who gets kidnapped." That's thirteen words, not ten, and it leaves out Lizzie Rose and Cassandra and Grisini. But as summaries go, it's masterful.

What are you most proud of about this book?

I'm proud that I didn't give up. This book took me six and a half years to write, and I almost never knew what I was doing. I sometimes feel that I wrote this book by process of elimination. I'd kill off a character in chapter 11, write nine more chapters, and realize that I needed the dead man alive again. So I'd throw out the nine chapters—not one of which had been easy to write—and go back to the beginning.

I got horribly stuck. Writers have to deal with getting stuck; it's part of the job. But a couple of times I was so stuck that I couldn't sleep for weeks and was desperately prone to rage and weepiness. At one point I convinced myself that the problem was spatial and that I needed to stimulate my brain by doing spatial puzzles. I played Sudoku and built castles out of Magna-Tiles. I walked labyrinths. I color-coded each character's actions and made huge charts with graph paper and Post-It notes. None of it helped. I felt as if I were going mad.

It's hard to keep going back to work that makes you feel profoundly stupid. I kept hoping the book would get easier, but it never did. Part of the trouble was that the story came to me through intuition rather than logic. I'd have visions, or flashes of insight—but when I tried to put them together, they wouldn't fit. For example, I'd have a visual picture of Grisini chasing someone across the ice on a moonlit night. That was dandy, that was fun—that belonged in the story. But I had no idea whom he was chasing, or why. And why was it the middle of the night? There were so many gaps in this story, secrets I didn't know, problems I couldn't solve. People who wanted to help me would ask me questions about the plot, and I would glare at them and shriek, "I don't know! I don't know! It doesn't make sense!"

One of my fellow teachers at the Park School was a lifesaver. He read the book and said, "Look, this thing has tremendous vitality, and it wouldn't have that vitality if you weren't bringing it from very deep inside yourself. And deep inside you, *it all makes sense*. So you just have to keep digging. It's all in there." That was a huge help to me. I didn't have to screw my brain into corkscrews, to invent ways to connect things that didn't belong. I just had to find the connections that lurked in the shadows of my mind.

You've done a lot of complaining about this book during this interview. Was it worth it?

Yes.



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