

‘Isn’t that how life is for you?’

In his recent review of Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith*, writer and critic Matt Thorne describes her as “not simply one of our best historical novelists, but one of our best novelists.” When I met her recently, Waters offered a slightly wryer perspective on such critical acclaim: “I do feel like a writer now because that’s how I make my living and that’s how I spend my days. But this whole Orange business is quite scary – the thought that people are taking me seriously as a writer. It’s great in lots of ways, but it’s also terrifying because you have to live up to it.” The “Orange business” to which Waters refers to is her latest literary coup – this spring she was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2002, the UK’s largest literary award. Although she was finally pipped at the post by Ann Patchett, Waters’ success in reaching the much-coveted shortlist is just one of a host of accolades which she has collected over the last few years. She has won a Betty Trask Award, the Somerset Maugham Award, the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award and has been shortlisted for numerous prestigious prizes including the Arts Council of Wales Book of the Year Award in 2000 for her second novel, *Affinity*. In just four short years Waters has acquired a formidable literary reputation – not bad for a slightly built, thirty something from Neyland who wrote her first book *Tipping The Velvet* during a year spent on the dole.

Waters retains a huge affection for *Tipping the Velvet*, not least because “the people that like it *really* like it”. The novel grew out of a PhD thesis on lesbian and gay history, and it was her first attempt at writing fiction. It’s a hugely enjoyable gallop through the escapades of Nancy Astley, oyster girl turned cross-dressing music hall star turned rent boy turned East End tom, who finally finds true love with a

socialist, Florence Banner. The story developed from Waters' profound interest in contemporary perceptions of lesbian and gay histories and in how those histories have been constructed differently at different times according to prevailing notions of homosexuality. "I began to think," says Waters, "that there was room for some sort of novel which could explore not just what the lesbian past might be, but which could also play around with it. The book *is* quite playful: it takes on a nineteenth-century form, but it also alludes to other sorts of literature – it was lot's of fun to write". She began by planning the book in detail, knowing that she wanted to tell a story about a character who moves through different lesbian worlds, thus creating a picaresque story in which the heroine travels from innocence to experience. She began writing from the middle out, as it were, because the middle section needed the least research – she had already read Oscar Wilde and knew a great deal about the gay world of the late nineteenth Century which is precisely the world in which her heroine finds herself. While she worked on the writing of this middle section, Waters began researching her material for the beginning of the novel, in which she re-traces Nancy's life as an oyster girl in Whitstable. Waters herself lived in Whitstable for two years while she read English at Kent, and, she says, "it's where I had my first relationship with a woman; so, in a way, it all went into the book."

Waters grew up in Neyland, "a small town, a very small town" in Pembrokeshire, and she lived there until she was eight. After her father got a job in Middlesborough, the family spent the next four years living there during term time and returning to Neyland for the school holidays. Waters describes this period in her life as "weird and complicated": "Neyland was always home, so it made the time in Middlesborough feel odd because my home was elsewhere. I was seen as something of a foreigner and it made me aware for the first time that I was Welsh." She

acknowledges the influence of her home town on her writing – the ‘Borough’ in *Fingersmith* is “a bit like Neyland”, and she freely admits that her mother’s stories of growing up there feed directly into her novels. “It seems strange to be using stuff from the 40’s and 50’s in a Victorian context, but it works very easily and I’m sure that it comes down to that thing about small towns”. She is ambivalent, however, about calling herself a Welsh writer, although she remembers her schoolteacher, fiction writer Robert Nisbet, and is proud of her following in Neyland. “My parents and sister are always ringing me up saying, ‘Jenny the Bread’s read your book!’ But I feel a fraud calling myself a ‘Welsh writer’. I don’t feel part of the Welsh literary scene, I don’t even know about the Welsh literary scene.” It’s not, she says that she wants to distance herself, but she has lived in London for many years now and it feels like home, partly because London is full of people who weren’t born there, people who’ve moved there for a reason. She likes the experience of living in London but of having grown up in a radically different place.

The concept of a smalltown girl making her way in the big city is very much Nancy’s story in *Tipping the Velvet*. Waters asserts that Nancy remains one of her favourite characters and that she “feels very close to me in terms of her voice”. She describes the process of writing the book as similar to jumping a series of hurdles. “It was really a case of, can I write a paragraph? Can I write a scene? Can I string scenes together? Oh, here’s a chapter - can I write a book?” She could, and, after several attempts, secured an agent. Eventually, after ten or so rejections, Virago bought it for an advance of £5,000. It garnered a round of rave reviews. The Daily Telegraph, no less, heralded it as ‘the most important debut of its kind since that of Jeanette Winterson’.

Tipping the Velvet was optioned almost immediately by television producer Sally Head, who, after hiring Andrew Davies to adapt it for the small screen, set about the long and hard business of trying to sell it to television. Filming began in the spring of this year, and Waters has found the whole process fascinating. She was happy to hand over all artistic control to the producers when it became clear that they intended to create a series which was very much in keeping with the spirit of the novel. Nonetheless, she found the experience of attending the first ‘read-through’ somewhat peculiar. “I thought, all these people have got work because of my book! The screenplay is half mine, half Andrew’s. I remembered writing the original bits for the novel in my bedroom in Dalston, and suddenly here they were being spoken by Anna Chancellor. Even the phrase ‘tipping the velvet’ (Victorian slang for cunnilingus) – suddenly this phrase will be propelled into people’s living rooms.” Waters herself is an extra in one of the music hall scenes and although she had no say in the casting, is particularly thrilled that Anna Chancellor is playing the role of Diana. Rachel Stirling (Diana Rigg’s daughter) plays Nancy, Keeley Hawes is Kitty and Jodhi May plays the part of Florence. “Interesting, and I have to say far too beautiful to be Florence. It’s weird – somehow this whole television thing is like a process of translation. It’s not my world, but a different world.”

Andrew Davies was so impressed by Waters work that he promptly optioned *Affinity* for his own production company, and Sally Head is already discussing *Fingersmith* with the BBC. It is a mark of Waters’ ability that she appeals to the broadest audience – you care deeply about her characters and their fates whatever their sexual proclivities. Julie Myerson observes in her review of *Fingersmith*, for example, that ‘it’s also a love story – a sexy, passionate and startling one. I hesitate to call it lesbian, because that seems to marginalize it far more than it deserves. Suffice

to say it is erotic and unnerving in all the right ways'. Waters, acutely sensitive to her increasingly wide readership, was nevertheless horrified when someone recently asked whether she had been pressurised by her publisher to put less sex in the novels. But she admits that she does have to think about such issues. "I clearly appeal to lesbian readers and I've somehow got this mainstream appeal too. It's a bit of a juggling act to get it right." *Tipping the Velvet*, she explains, had more sex in it because the basic plot revolved around a character who is actually discovering her own lesbian identity for the first time. In *Affinity*, by contrast, there is no sex at all, which ultimately pleased Waters because it enabled her to deal with sex by means of subtle suggestion. In *Fingersmith* it didn't feel right she says, mainly because the central characters are very young and the novel focuses on them entering a world for the first time rather than travelling through different parts of it. The novel she is currently working on, her fourth, will have more sex in it as it's a story about adult lesbians in adult relationships. "But it does cross my mind, even as I'm writing it: will this book be too lesbian for a mainstream audience?" She is dismissive of the now familiar question as to whether she will always write lesbian stories. "Of course I understand the question, but nobody would ever say to a straight writer, 'Will you always write straight stories?' and, funnily enough, I don't think they'd say it to a black writer. I think there would be more of an assumption that they would, or that they can do what they want."

Paradoxically, Waters is also conscious of a potential clash between writing about certain characters and their situations because she finds them interesting, and meeting the demands of the lesbian reading community. She used to feel passionately about the fictional representation of lesbians and was deeply angered

by stereotypical films such as *Basic Instinct*. But now, as a writer, she feels that if she wanted to write a story about a lesbian who was an axe murderer, it would be because she was interested in exploring that one particular incident and its ramifications rather than from any deep-seated need to create a representative character.

Published a year or so after *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* is a spooky, gothic chiller. The two novels are strikingly different. In *Tipping the Velvet*, every experience is seized upon, explored (and exploited) to its limit. *Affinity*, by contrast, is all about suppression – the suppression of desire, of freedom, and of life itself. Waters describes it as a ‘closed’ book, with characters who have been disempowered and forced into passivity. She acknowledges the reactive nature of her main characters: “People are always saying to me, ‘These characters are incredibly passive,’ and I think, well, isn’t that how life is for you?”

She describes the experience of writing *Affinity* as “horrible”. Not only did the burden of expectation following the success of *Tipping the Velvet* weigh heavily upon her, but she was also confronted by the bleakness of the world she was writing about, and had to wrestle with the arduous complexity of the structure she had chosen for her second novel. Although she aims to write a thousand words a day and feels content if she has written one really good sentence, there were times with *Affinity*, she says, where she would write for days and days, and “it all felt rubbish”. Setting out from the desire to explore the different textures of two experiences which are seemingly poles apart - spiritualism and incarceration, Waters found a way of bringing them together in the characters of Margaret Prior and Selina Dawes – a prison visitor and a disgraced spiritualist. The story is told in the form of a diary written from the dual narrative viewpoints of these characters. For Waters,

characterisation comes last: “I know that writers work in different ways. When we read the world from within, as it were, character is the thing we don’t have access to. We don’t have an insight into people’s motivation – all we can see is their actions, and we have to extrapolate or interpret from that.” It does, however, remain the most exciting part of the creative process for her. “You have this cast of characters, and you need them to undertake certain actions, but it’s only when you really start fleshing them out that you realise *why* they’re doing these things. You think about their motivations and often then they begin to get complex. It becomes a creative writing process involving issues of motivation and conflict. Once that begins to happen it’s really exciting.” She wrote Margaret’s story first, from start to finish, while jotting down ideas for Selina’s narrative. She then turned to Selina’s story, interpolating it with the main text. Writing is a continual process of revision for Waters. Each day is spent revising what was written the previous day. She estimates that she wrote about five drafts of *Affinity*, not from scratch, but by playing around with the different narratives, trying out various ideas and returning again and again to key areas. It’s a book that she regards as “more profound” than *Tipping the Velvet*: “It has more levels to it”.

Despite the three novels which she now has to her name, Waters is still unsure of where she fits into the contemporary literary scene, “It really is like a Venn diagram”, she says, “sometimes the books can put it in a different context and it can make sense in each of those contexts – that’s quite exciting.” But she’s clear about the writers she admires. She read Phillipa Gregory’s *Wideacre* trilogy just before starting her PhD and it opened her eyes to the possibilities of writing within a historical genre, and of how a writer could make that genre accountable to political issues. Gregory is another academic turned novelist, and it was her work that inspired Waters make the

transition herself. Waters describes herself as “slightly overwhelmed by contemporary fiction” and is nostalgic for the passion she used to feel for certain books. “I remember being bowled over by Angela Carter’s novels, that marvellous lushness. And I also love Toni Morrison and Iris Murdoch. I’m a big Iris Murdoch fan, especially of the complexity of her narrative. Nowadays, paradoxically, I don’t read much historical fiction because I find I get too squeamish about it, especially anything set in the nineteenth-century. I think ‘Oh God, not another one!’”

Fingersmith looks like being Waters last foray into the nineteenth-century for the time being. Published in February this year to a wave of critical approbation, it is a celebration of Waters’ passion for Victorian sensationalist literature. The story of a foundling who is drawn into a complex scheme to defraud an heiress, it borrows the opening twist from Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, and then proceeds to appropriate all the things Waters loves most about nineteenth-century fiction for the purposes of a deliberately lesbian agenda. It was a daunting prospect, both in terms of narrative complexity and length, and while Waters admits that it must have helped that she had already written two novels, she says that it is difficult for her to get a sense of her own development as a writer. “My experience of writing is that I’ve been doing it in exactly the same way for seven years. My relationship with the page, that’s the thing, and that doesn’t seem to have changed. But I suppose, of course, it must have - I must have got more confidence and more of a sense of how to do certain things – but it doesn’t feel like that. I suppose it’s like any sort of learning process, you don’t really feel the process; it just happens.”

Hard on the heels of the rave reviews for *Fingersmith* came the Orange Prize shortlist, and, with *Tipping the Velvet* due to be broadcast later this year, 2002 is

turning out to be a great year for Waters. But in the midst of the ‘business’ of being a successful writer, she is hard at work on her next novel, which is set in the 1940’s. She’s finding it a liberating experience. “A completely new period, a completely new idiom, but with enough of a historical edge!” She began the research for the novel last September and, on the fateful day of the 11th, had been reading about the Blitz. She was shocked that it took the events of that day to bring home to her the reality of the Blitz itself- the sense of exhaustion and the extent of the damage done. “Imagine if our city was being bombed around our ears! I can’t believe that our parents and grandparents generation lived through that trauma – I’d like to write something that does justice to that in some way.”

Despite the achievements of the last few years, Waters still writes in her bedroom. She would like a study of some sort - a room of her own - but accepts that she can write anywhere as long as it’s quiet and she can close the door. “It’s hard in the bedroom because everything gets muddled up and you find your knickers end up on the keyboard, but one day I’ll have a study – and then my writing career will collapse!” Fortunately for Sarah Waters’ growing and enthusiastic readership, that prospect seems highly unlikely.

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