

Frequently asked Q & A's for The Lavender Garden/ The Light Behind the Window

- 1) Your novels are similar in that they are always set in two different time periods. How do you manage to stay on top of things and bring the two plot lines together with virtuosity in the end?**

I have no written plan. As with all my stories, I normally start with a location and a moment in time and from there the story slowly unravels, yet I never know from one day to the next where I'm headed. I simply let the characters lead me. Sometimes I truly feel – especially with the 'past' sections of the book – that I'm being told the story. I haven't had a problem so far with the plot. It all seems to come together holistically by the end.

- 2) 'The Lavender Garden' is mainly set in a château in Southern France. Had you been somewhere that inspired the location?**

I first came across the setting for 'Château de la Martinières', when my husband and I were driving back to England from our home in the South of France. We were booked in at a beautiful château and it was there, as I sat in the gorgeous lavender-filled courtyard, that I told my husband this was where I wanted to set the new book. I moved the location of the fictional château to the village of Gassin, which is very near to our house where we live in the summer.

- 3) 'The Lavender Garden' is set in two different periods, with the 'present' story set at the turn of the century, and the other set during WWII. How did you research the historical background?**

As with all my books, I research the past time period before I start writing. I do this by reading every book I can find on the particular place and period. However, I read very broadly at this point, because I never know where the actual story will head. Even though I'm manic about making sure my facts are correct, I'm a storyteller first, not a historian. When I'd finished 'The Lavender Garden' and whilst I was in France, I came across a wonderful elderly man - Monsieur Chapelle of the Domaine du Bourriane, whose surname, chateau and vineyard I'd written about before I knew such a family and their beautiful home actually existed in reality. I walked into my own fictional story and it was a humbling and magical experience. This has happened to me on other occasions to.

- 4) The underlying theme of your novels seem to be that the past must be revealed in order for your heroine to understand their history and move forward. Why do you think this is?**

Particularly in this book - which covers one of most recent and painful wars in human history - I suppose the underlying moral of all my stories is forgiveness and the understanding of one's past, in order to live happily in the present and also to embrace the future. I believe that redemption and some level of forgiveness is always a possibility.

- 5) Emilie, your present heroine in 'The Lavender Garden', has to overcome a number of emotional obstacles. Can you tell us a little about the character and the journey she must make in order to be set free?**

Emilie's mother wanted to produce a male heir to inherit the family estate, but as Emilie was a girl, Valérie was completely disinterested in her. Subsequently, she grew up with a complete lack of self-confidence and a self-effacing personality. Her reaction to her extravagant and attention-seeking mother was to live a life that was polar-opposite. The story follows Emilie's journey to understand and accept where her pain originated from, and how she eventually overcomes that.

6) War seems to be a recurring backdrop with your novels. Why do you think so many authors choose to set books during these difficult times?

Dramatic circumstances bring out the best and worst in everyone. Both the First and Second World Wars happened less than a hundred years ago, with most people today having past relatives that were affected in some way, be it losing someone they loved, or sharing a kiss with a soldier. We are also at a time where we can now delve deeper into what happened behind closed doors, and reading about the SOE, the Special Operations Executive, set up by Winston Churchill, was certainly an eye-opener. A lot of my readers have come back to me saying how inspirational the men and women who trained so hard and risked their lives to go to France were. During my research, I discovered that out of the forty women who left for France, only twenty six returned. Rather than being left behind knitting socks, these women were out there on the front line facing incredible danger. The life expectancy of an SOE agent was approximately six weeks.

7) All your novels have such wonderful characters, both loveable and frustrating. Do you take inspiration from anyone you know?

No, not as a whole. They are always a melting pot of a number of human beings I know – including myself. But most importantly, they are themselves.

8) Another important location is situated in the North of Yorkshire: a bleak gothic mansion. Is there a model for this residence as well?

Yes – 'Blackmoor Hall' is a combination of all the cold, gothic houses I've ever stayed at in Yorkshire!

9) Do you have a favourite character in 'The Lavender Garden'?

I lived vicariously through Emilie's ownership of the château and really enjoyed describing the renovation. I love Connie too – she is so stoic and strong.

10) Venetia is a character from 'The Orchid House' (Hothouse Flower). Why did you decide to bring her back?

In 'The Orchid House', Venetia mentions she is involved in a secret wartime operation, then disappears for the majority of the war. So it was perfect to have her being recruited for the SOE. And it was great for me to have her 'back' – I'd always loved her character and it felt as though I had an old friend with me during the writing of the novel.