



## SUSANNA KEARSLEY TALKS TO KATJA MENZEL ABOUT *THE WINTER SEA*

**KM:** On your web site you say that your answer to the question, if one of your books is your favourite, has always been “no” – until you wrote *The Winter Sea*. What makes this book so special to you?

**SK:** It’s difficult to say what makes *The Winter Sea* so special. Sometimes when you hear a song – I think of ‘Nessun Dorma’ by Puccini – it transports you, and a book can be like that for me. I remember certain days when I was writing *Mariana* when I’d barely stop to eat, I was so swept up in the story. And *The Winter Sea*, from start to finish, felt like that, as though it were a gift that I was being given. The story came so easily at times it seemed that all I had to do was place my fingers on the keyboard and the characters took over and I only had to follow where they led me and not fall behind. That’s magic, when it happens, and it hasn’t happened to me quite that way since *Mariana*. But I’m older now than I was then. I think this book reflects that. I have painted on a bigger canvas this time, and with surer strokes, and I can safely say that I have never been as proud before of anything I’ve written as I am now of *The Winter Sea*.

**KM:** What kind of research did you do before writing *The Winter Sea*?

**SK:** My research for *The Winter Sea* began some years ago, when I came across by chance a little book by John S. Gibson called *Playing the Scottish Card – The Franco-Jacobite Invasion of 1708* (Edinburgh University Press, 1988). Having never heard of the Franco-Jacobite invasion of 1708, I picked up the book and glanced through it and was struck at once by a quote Mr Gibson had used in his preface, from Lord Dacre: ‘History is not merely what happened: it is what happened in the context of what might have happened.’ Intrigued by that, I bought the book, which turned out to be fascinating, and which in turn led me to hunt down and buy a rare copy of an old account of that invasion, written by one of its leaders, Colonel Nathaniel Hooke, and published within living memory of the whole affair. (This book, with its soft half-calf binding and foxed heavy pages with all the “f”s looking like “s”s has now become one of my writing-room’s treasures). After reading Hooke’s book I became obsessed. This is the way I usually begin with all my books. Before I ever went to Cruden Bay, before I walked the castle ruins and the coast and talked to people living there, I’d spent months reading all that I could find and letting one source lead me to another, trying always to get back to the original accounts whenever possible. Since many of my characters in *The Winter Sea* are actual people from history, I had to take even more care this time sifting through sources and getting the facts straight. I studied King James’s court documents, read transcripts of the House of Lords, and letters sent to Harley, Queen Anne’s spymaster, by those he’d sent to watch the Scottish Jacobites. I put my own genealogy practices to work in reconstructing family lines and tracing the connections between characters I wrote about, and used first-hand accounts to make their movements and their dialogue as accurate as possible. Only I couldn’t trust anyone’s story – the ’08 invasion was wreathed in deceit from the start, and the people involved often had their own reasons for twisting the truth. Only those who were actually there would be able to know, in the end, just how close I was able to come to it.



**KM:** One of the many topics of *The Winter Sea* is inherited memory. Without being able to fully understand what happens Carrie, a writer, feels that there is a special genetic bond between her and Sophia, the protagonist of her novel, who lived a long time ago at Slains Castle in Scotland. Do you yourself feel this sort of particular connection to your ancestors, as well? And do you happen to have Scottish ancestors?

**SK:** My father, like Carrie's father in the story, is an avid genealogist, and since my early childhood I have come to know my ancestors as people – I have seen their portraits, read their letters, visited the places where they lived, and touched their tombstones in the graveyards where they lie. Some branches of our family we have traced back well beyond the sixteenth century, while others are elusive and we struggle to find even tiny details of their lives, but they are family to me nonetheless – all real and breathing people to whom I have always felt a strong connection. As for genetic memory, I admit the scientific possibility that such a thing exists in humans, as it seems to do in other animals. Our knowledge of genetics is still incomplete, and it would not surprise me to discover that my own love of the sea was passed down from my ancestors who captained ships more than two centuries ago for the East India Company, just as the shape of my nose was passed down from my grandmother. I find the idea intriguing, as does Carrie in *The Winter Sea*. And just as Carrie gives her heroine the name of one of her own ancestors, so I chose to give Carrie the last name McClelland – the name of one branch of my own Scottish ancestors who, just like Carrie's, left Scotland's west coast for a new life in Ulster, and found their way many years later to Canada.



**My great-great-great-great grandfather, Thomas Peter Marter**

**KM:** In your novel *Mariana, Julia*, the protagonist, discovers that her destiny is tied to that of a young woman who had lived three hundred years ago in Julia's house. And so does Carrie in *The Winter Sea* while she traces the parallel between her life and that of her ancestor Sophia. What fascinates you about these time-transcending encounters?

**SK:** I've always had a fascination with the theme of lives connecting across time, whether through some form of actual time travel or by some physical link such as letters or photographs. Reading the few letters that survive from my own ancestor who came across to Canada from England puts me there in the same room with him – I hear his voice, and feel the bond between us for that moment. If I were to have the chance to travel back in time to sit with him an hour, to ask him questions and to know his mind, I wouldn't hesitate. I think that many people feel the same, and you can see this in our stories and our legends as far back as Homer's 'Odyssey', in which Odysseus descends into the underworld to speak with those he's loved and lost, and meets

great heroes of a former time. A book I read and loved when I was young was Daphne duMaurier's *The House on the Strand*, which also brings together people from two different times, although they cannot touch. But I love best of all the lines penned by James Elroy Flecker 'To A Poet a Thousand Years Hence', which you can read yourself by using this link:

[http://www.englishverse.com/poems/to\\_a\\_poet\\_a\\_thousand\\_years\\_hence](http://www.englishverse.com/poems/to_a_poet_a_thousand_years_hence)

**KM: As a museum curator you once “worked” a lot with history and you still pursue this interest while writing your novels. Is our present not exciting enough to you?**

**SK:** My love of history began with my mother, who read us the tales of the Greeks and the Romans, the stories of Troy and of Hannibal crossing the alps. My parents loved history themselves, and they passed this love on to my sister and me, introducing us both to historical novels and Shakespeare’s plays, so when I first saw the Tower of London I already knew of the young princes murdered there, and Hampton Court was alive with the shadows of Henry VIII and his wives. As I grew, my interest in history expanded to take in the lives of the everyday people whose struggles and triumphs weren’t always recorded in schoolbooks, whose actions were affected by the laws of Kings but who, in their turn, could affect the lives of those who ruled them. I am fascinated by the past. That doesn’t mean that I would choose to live there. As a woman of opinions with a strongly independent mind, the present is without a doubt the safest place for me to be! But there is always something lost, whenever our society advances, as it must, and it is human to be always looking back at what has gone before. As Mrs Hutherson tells Julia, in my book *Mariana*: ‘The past is very seductive. People always talk about the mists of time, you know, but really it’s the present that’s in a mist, uncertain. The past is quite clear, and warm, and comforting. That’s why people often get stuck there.’

Just like Julia, and all the rest of my present-day heroines, I try to visit the past with my eyes fully open, and not become lost in it.

**KM: You have visited Cruden Bay, where *The Winter Sea* is set. Did you tell the local people that you are a writer? How do people usually react when they get to know that you are planning to write a novel set in their home town?**

**SK:** Yes, I always need to travel to the places that I write about, to find the details that will make the setting come alive. When I was writing *Mariana* I hadn’t yet been published, and I wasn’t brave enough to tell anyone what I was doing, but by the time I journeyed to the Scottish borders to research *The Shadowy Horses*, I’d grown confident enough to tell the owner of my bed and breakfast when I first arrived that I was there to write a book. She was on her way out at the time, and returned home with a list of people I should talk to, setting up appointments for me and even finding the house that became my ‘Rosehill’ and persuading the owner to give me a tour! My experience has always been that people are happy to help when they can with my research, and Cruden Bay was no exception. The Warrander family who run the St Olaf hotel, where I stayed, made sure I had a room with a view of both Slains and the sea, so that I could imagine what Carrie was seeing, and they and their staff were always pleased to give me details of the local way of living, and to set me on the right path when I headed out on foot in search of settings. Not only did the owner of the local taxi service see that I was driven anywhere I wanted, but she gave me guided tours along the way! When I stopped to ask a question at the home of local historian Mrs Margaret Aitken, she invited me in to have tea with herself and



***The St Olaf Hotel, Cruden Bay***

her husband, and sent me away with a wealth of information, as did the two wonderful librarians who helpfully hunted down the documents and photographs I needed. Even the customers in the public bar of my hotel gamely tried to identify every bit of unknown vegetation I brought back from my daily walks, and one man found the perfect spot for me to put the cottage Carrie stays in, so she’d have a good view of the castle and the beach. My problem when I travel isn’t finding people who will help me, it’s trying to do them all justice in my note of thanks at the end of the book!

**KM:** Just like *The Shadowy Horses*, *The Winter Sea* is set in Scotland. What do you find beautiful about this rough landscape?

**SK:** I fell in love with Scotland when I visited the country for the first time at the age of ten, though trying to describe what I find beautiful about it is as difficult as trying to describe a piece of music. It's hard for me to separate the landscape from the history, which is brutal and heroic, sad and splendid, filled with all the best and worst that men can do, and threaded through with tragedy that is distinctly



Scottish. I'm not certain if the people shaped the land, or if the land has shaped the people, but I'm fond of both, and being a Canadian it's easy to feel kinship with a country that has always had to fight for independence from its larger neighbour to the south. There are many parts of Scotland I find beautiful, but I admit I find a special beauty in the shoreline of the eastern coast, where I've set both those books, and I am always happy when I have a reason to return there, where the wind is always blowing and the sea is always changing, wrapped in mist one moment, full of waves and wild the next, the way I like it best.

*The Beach at Cruden Bay*

**KM:** Bram Stoker used Slains Castle at Cruden Bay as the inspiration for Dracula's castle. You, too, made use of this uncanny place for *The Winter Sea*. A lot of obscure and supernatural elements can already be found in *Mariana* and have been appreciated by countless readers. Do you have a special fondness for gothic fiction that by definition combines romance and horror?

**SK:** 'Dracula' was actually a favourite book of mine when I was younger. And I suppose I do like a certain type of horror – not the kind that terrifies you, but the kind that gives you shivers. For example, in the film 'The Changeling', the ghost haunting George C. Scott's house is the ghost of a child, who at first means no harm. It is not the ghost himself but the *idea* of the ghost, the realization that the ghost exists, that is so chilling. And I don't need to be frightened to feel shivers – I can feel them when I'm reading about things that science cannot yet explain: past lives, the gift of second sight, and premonitions. These intrigue me, and I like to use them in my books, but I'm not sure my books are really dark enough to be considered 'gothic'. I like my ghosts to walk in daylight, and not give me nightmares! But I *am* fond of those stories that combine the supernatural and romance, like the films 'The Ghost and Mrs Muir' and 'Ladyhawke'.



*Slains Castle, Aberdeenshire*

**KM:** All the female protagonists of your novels are educated, independent women – Julia in *Mariana* for instance works as an illustrator, Verity in *The Shadowy Horses* is an archeologist and Carrie in *The Winter Sea* is a writer –, how much do these characters resemble their creator Susanna Kearsley?

**SK:** All my heroines have a bit of myself in them. My family and the friends who know me best find it amusing when they read my books, because they see the pieces of the characters that are the same as me. All three of the women you mention share my sense of humour, my interest in history, my opinionated nature. They have families that they love. They like to read. They all like animals. But each of them is different in her own way, too, and each of them has talents I don't have. I think that Carrie is the most like me, perhaps, and this may be because she is, like me, a writer, with a writer's habits and a writer's way of looking at the world.

**KM:** Your next novel is said to be set in Cornwall. Can you tell us more about this book?

**SK:** The next Susanna Kearsley book will once again blend real events and people with imagined ones to tell a tale of intrigue and adventure and a love that spans the centuries – a kind of a ghost story set in a manor house much like the one where I stayed as a child on the south coast of Cornwall.

**KM:** Thank you so much for your detailed answers (and for the beautiful pictures!)

**SK:** You're very welcome. It's been a great pleasure.



*Myself, aged 10, at Polperro, Cornwall*