

Flying Home

SUSANNA KEARSLEY'S *THE FIREBIRD* DELIVERS TWO LOVE STORIES IN ONE NOVEL

By Liz French

"I think when women write history, we pay more attention to forces of family," says author Susanna Kearsley. "Nobody operates as an island — we all have families."

That certainly is the case with Kearsley's latest, *The Firebird* (Jun., Sourcebooks), which tells two romantic stories, one set in modern times and one in 1700s Scotland and Russia.

The families they choose affect the actions of characters in *The Firebird*. In the present, Nicola Marter and Rob McMorran each have extrasensory powers. Nicola can "read" the history of an object when she touches it; Rob's powers are stronger and more accepted by his friends and family. Nicola, whose grandparents are Russian, has been schooled to hide her talents. But when she touches a small carving purported to be a gift from Russia's Empress Catherine, wife of Peter the Great, she knows she must help its owner prove its provenance. Uncertain of her own abilities, she enlists

Rob, with whom she was involved several years ago when they both attended Edinburgh's Emerson Institute of Parapsychology. Soon they are following the 300-year-old trail of the mysterious Anna, original recipient of the figurine. It is a search that takes them from Scotland's coast to Belgium and then to St. Petersburg, Russia.

Though Anna is a mystery to Rob and Nicola, she will be familiar to Kearsley's fans as the young daughter of Sophia and John Moray, who appeared in *The Winter Sea*, the author's 2010 novel. In *The Firebird*, she is sheltered by a foster family when her Jacobite parents must flee their enemies and keep her identity a secret. But soon she's wrenched from them and placed in danger once again, until she makes a daring escape to Russia and finds peace with an admiral and his family. This being a Kearsley novel, she also finds love.

Modern-day hero Rob is another familiar face from Kearsley's pantheon: He was 8 years old and went by "Robbie" in her 1999 novel, *The Shadowy Horses*, which Sourcebooks reissued last year.

"A reader from Florida liked Robbie and asked me if he would ever get his own story," says the Ontario, Canada-based author. "I began to see how his psychic abilities would give me a bridge to the past and also create an interesting character arc for my heroine."

Giving both her modern protagonists "the sight" also allowed her to research "something I liked, for a year," Kearsley says, adding that she had help from the Rhine Research Center for parapsychology in North Carolina. "They read over the bits in Edinburgh to make sure it was right."



Kearsley shares that Rob was inspired by a Canadian carpenter who used his gifts to help local archeologists identify where to dig. "He never advertised himself as a psychic," she says. When asked if she believes in psychic phenomena, Kearsley replies with a qualified yes, citing studies, personal experiences and the general acceptance in other cultures, such as Gaelic cultures and Russian society. It doesn't faze her that science hasn't explained it fully, either. "I like things that are not explained, it doesn't bother me," she says.

Kearsley, whose writing has been compared to gothic masters such as Daphne du Maurier, Anya Seton and Mary Stewart, says that the two-tiered stories have "sort of become my trademark."

"I write dual timeline stories because I like them," she continues. "I'm interested in history but also like contemporary stories." She notes that the contemporary stories give her stories "a nice anchor" and

a chance to explain things that historical characters wouldn't necessarily talk about. "You can dive in and out of the story," she says, "and strengthen the theme."

It's also a way for Kearsley to show off her meticulous and extensive historical research. She immerses herself in letters and accounts from the historical period she's selected. "I fill my mind up with as much as I can, then see what comes out," she says. She also visits every location mentioned in the books. It's essential, she says, to her writing process. "It's the only way I can get all the sensory details, what kind of trees grow there, how it smells," she notes. "A lot of the scenes don't start till I get on location; the book wouldn't be the same without my going there."

The Firebird uses real historical characters interwoven with fictional ones, Kearsley says. She did "a lot of genealogical work" researching the characters in *The Winter Sea* and "some of the characters were so interesting that their lives went beyond that book." Chief among them was a Moray kinsman, Colonel Graeme, who Kearsley claims "wouldn't get off the page," and Captain Gordon (Vice Admiral Gordon in *The Firebird*). Scotsman Gordon served in the Russian Navy in the 1700s, and he left behind a wealth of correspondence. Kearsley especially treasures two letters to him from female relatives. "It gives me a woman's view of him," she says. "Women's voices are overlooked so often in history."

She delights in giving a voice to "the ordinary people, who were the soldiers on the field, carrying out the orders of the kings and queens," she says. "It's so neat to read what they've left behind

and put them back on the page where they belong.”

Even her fictional characters stand in for the little folk. “Anna sort of represents all the women who were displaced by the Jacobite troubles, who had to follow their men from Scotland to France and beyond,” she notes.

Kearsley says her writing process is “very visual” and “subconscious-driven,” adding that “I ‘see’ the story playing in my mind, just like a movie, and when a character steps onto the page I see them, too. I don’t know everything about them to begin with. I get to know them gradually — at first you just see the outward things, the superficial things, but as time goes on they reveal themselves more and more, usually through conversation.”

Such a thing happened with Edmund O’Connor, Anna’s love interest, who’s based on a real historical figure. “He has a scar on his left hand, and when he came into the story I ‘saw’ this scar, but I just assumed it was from a fistfight or something,” Kearsley says. But later in the story he tells Anna how he got the scar. “The answer he gave her was something I honestly hadn’t seen coming,” she marvels. “It gave me a new insight on his character.”

Calling Edmund “probably one of the most bad-boy characters I’ve ever written,” the author meditates on the appeal of the rogue in romance. “We all like to think bad boys are redeemable.”

Kearsley loves layering love stories into her books, from the redemption love stories, like Anna and Edmund’s, to the second-chance love stories, like Rob and Nicola’s. “It’s such an important part of most of our lives, really — looking for love, finding it, sharing it, remembering it. I don’t think you can write realistically about people without showing their love story, and that moment when people are meeting and falling in love is such a great moment, because there can be so much conflict, so much growth of character. My books may have other things in them, but romance is always the anchoring thread running through the whole story. Take out the romance, and the book falls apart.”

Currently Kearsley is working on another dual-timeline novel, due out next year. *A Desperate Fortune* has a code-breaker deciphering a journal left behind by a young woman living near Paris in the 1730s. “As the journal is decoded, what emerges is a more intriguing tale than anybody had expected, told by someone at the center of a dangerous adventure,” she says. “The modern-day characters are all new, but there may be a few familiar historical faces, and Anna from *The Firebird* makes a cameo appearance early on.” Kearsley was able to make a research trip to Paris recently for the upcoming book, and she will be traveling to the RT convention in May, as well. (Look for her in an 18th-century dress.) She says husband Ken, her “rock,” and two kids, age 13 and 10, make this all possible. “My parents and family are supportive of what I do. It takes a whole family to cope when you’re away doing research and promo,” she adds. “I’m lucky; I know that things will operate like clockwork when I’m away for a week or more.”

The other “family” she appreciates is Sourcebooks. “I’m so grateful to them for taking a chance on my books when a lot of American publishers wouldn’t,” she says. “That whole company, top to bottom, functions like a big supportive family, and it’s their hard work that’s getting my books into readers’ hands in the States. I’m really fortunate.” ✧

For more from the author, go to Kearsley’s website at SusannaKearsley.com.

EXCERPT FROM *The Firebird*

Anna stepped carefully onto the wooden stairs set at the waterline, lifting the hem of her petticoat clear of the river as Edmund, who’d climbed up first out of the boat, bent to help her, his hand strongly holding her own.

“I am not like to fall,” she assured him. “I’ve spent half my life getting on and off ships and small boats.”

“‘Tis your blood,” Edmund said, “same as mine.”

Anna let go of his hand as she stepped to his level and, smoothing her skirts, asked him, “What do you mean, sir?”

“You Scots and we Irish, and even the English, we’re islanders all.” Edmund looked to the river, alive with its traffic, and narrowed his eyes to the sun. “We’re surrounded by seas, and we’d seek to know what lies beyond them, and where those wide waters might carry us.”

Anna could not but agree with him, for from her earliest memories she’d looked to the sea and the distant horizon. She’d always loved the sound of creaking timbers and of sails that snapped and fluttered as they rose and filled with wind, the ropes that strained and stretched as though the whole ship were a living thing impatient to be free upon the waves.

She looked at Edmund now, his face still turned into the wind, and wondered if he felt the same. “And where would you be carried, if you had a ship that you could steer?” she asked.

He answered without hesitation. “Home,” he said. “To Ireland.”

And then, as if he felt that showed a weakness, he looked down at her and found his old sardonic smile. “But I cannot attempt it. I’d be hanged before I left the beach, or else transported off to the Americas, for having served King James.”

She said, “I’m sorry.”

“Why should you be like to pity me?” he asked. “You are as homeless as myself, and have no true kin I can see to give you comfort.”

Anna bristled at his bluntness. “Aye, I have a home. And family, though they may not be my own by blood.”

“I did not mean—”

“There is a strength, Mr. O’Connor, in a family that is chosen, and not merely thrust upon us. From my birth I’ve lived with others not my kin, but not by sufferance, by their choice and invitation, while Vice Admiral Gordon’s late wife’s daughter, Jane, had family who were hers by blood and high of rank, yet were most cruel to her, and treated her with nothing but neglect, and it was not their arms that held her when she breathed her last. Vice Admiral Gordon,” Anna said, “would do the same for me as he did do for Jane, and well I know it, so you will forgive me, sir, if I do not agree that I’ve no family.”

Edmund stood beneath her speech with all the dutiful attention of a schoolboy being lectured, but his eyes took a keen interest in her features, and when she had finished speaking, his reply was only, “Do you know that, when you’re in a temper, your Scotch accent grows more strong?”

She gave a feeling sigh. “I should have stayed at General Lacy’s house.”

The brown eyes danced. “But then you would have missed the peaceful pleasure of my company.”

