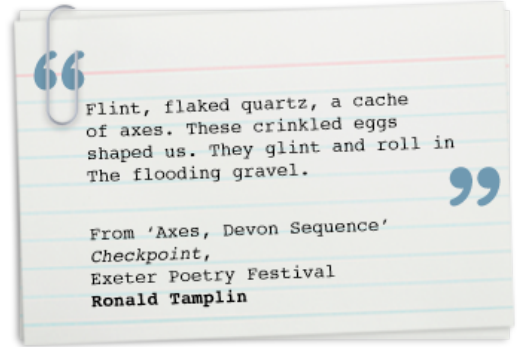




Good Afternoon! It's Wednesday on February 01, 2012.

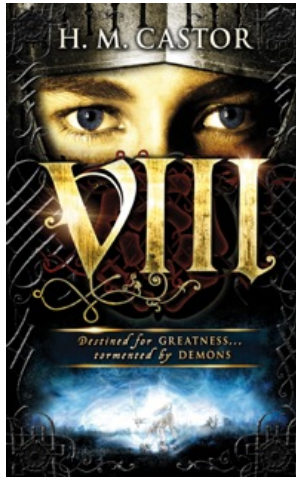
Literature for everyone in the South West



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H. M Castor



Since having her first book accepted for publication by Penguin at the age of twelve, H.M. (Harriet) Castor has written over forty fiction and non-fiction books for children and young adults. Between books, she has fitted in a History degree at Cambridge University and a variety of jobs, including teaching English in Prague and three years spent with The Royal Ballet as a dance notator. Now she lives in Bristol, and writes as close to full time as her family will tolerate. Harriet often visits schools to talk about writing, and in particular to discuss her numerous books on Tudor history, of which the latest is a novel for teenagers called *VIII*.

What is it about the Tudor era that holds such fascination for you?

Ooh, that's a good question. On the one hand it might seem quite obvious: the stories are so dramatic and so gut-wrenching, the personalities so intriguing, and as for the costumes – unbeatable! But my obsession with the sixteenth century goes beyond the reasonable – I find it quite mysterious myself. Many periods of history are fascinating, but the Tudors have had me hooked since I was at primary school, and my love of the period has never been trumped by anything else. Not so far, anyway. I suppose writing about it is, in a sense, one way of exploring why I love it so much.

With *VIII*, a central spur to writing was that, despite all that's been said and written about Henry VIII, I felt that I had something genuinely new to say. You see, no one had ever made me identify with him; no one had ever joined up the psychological dots, if you like... No one had made me understand why he did what he did, and what it might have felt like to be him. In writing *VIII*, I wanted to fill that gap.



Literature Clips

M.R. Hall *The Disappeared*



John Haynes and You (courtesy Seren Books)



Do you have any plans to write further books about this period?

Yes, certainly. Currently I am working on a novel about Henry's daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, who became the first two reigning queens of England. Here we have two very strong – and very different – personalities, each one forged in traumatic childhood experiences. Those experiences were curiously alike: each girl was born a princess, the fêted heir to the throne. Each then forfeited her title and her father's favour and – even worse – lost her mother in traumatic circumstances. But these two girls reacted very differently to their parallel experiences – and their stormy relationship as sisters is absolutely fascinating. How did they feel about one another? To have a sibling is a common thing, one many of us can relate to, but how does sibling rivalry feel when your sister has not only knocked you off your perch as an only child, but has also taken your title of princess? And how does sibling rivalry feel when your sister has the power to put you to death? Although it's not a sequel to *VIII* in a strict sense, it very much follows on from that book. And, as with *VIII*, there's a sense in which I'm digging behind what seems to be a well-known story and finding aspects to it that are not often considered.

Could you describe your approach to researching the specific era and details for *VIII*? How important is factual accuracy?

I am a trained historian (in the sense that my university degree was in history) and, for me, accuracy is immensely important. I did a huge amount of research for *VIII*, and tried to get every last detail as authentic as I could. My approach to research was to do as much of it as possible at every stage! I have been reading books about the Tudor period for 30 years, but I found that as soon as you begin to write a specific story, whole new areas of research open up. If a character is standing in a particular part of a palace that is no longer in existence, you need to go to the archaeological records to find out about the layout of that palace. What did he see as he looked out of the window? I needed to find out. I had a marvellous time reading: academic biographies, books about Henry's palaces, his military manoeuvres, his clothes, his possessions. Books about education, court manners, prophecies – you name it! And alongside the books I read a lot of original documents from the time, too. British History Online is a fantastic resource – thousands of original documents are available to read for free. I was lucky in my friends, too. By chance, my next-door neighbours are not only archers, but experts on the history of archery. And one of my sisters is the historian and broadcaster Helen Castor – she is a mine of information and expert opinion for me. I consulted psychoanalysts and costume experts, read detailed manuals on 16th century fighting, and even joined a martial arts class myself to get a bit of hands-on experience (eek!).

You've written a huge variety of books for children and young adults, have you ever considered writing anything for an adult audience?

I did write a novel for adults many years ago, but I feel most at home where I am now – writing for teenagers. Having said that, though, a lot of adult readers have told me they've enjoyed *VIII* – and I would like to think that my books could be read by teenagers and adults. I think the category division is a fine one – and sometimes best ignored. I've certainly never stopped reading 'teenage' fiction myself!

Are there any writers who you have found particularly inspiring or influential?

When I was a child, my favourite writer was Diana Wynne Jones, and I still love her books with an absolute passion. She was a brilliant, brilliant writer, with a seemingly unstoppable flow of original ideas; I think it was her books, above all, that inspired me to become a writer. Another book I must pick out is *The 13 Clocks* by James Thurber. It is, I would risk saying, almost a perfect piece of writing. Hilarious and dark, with every sentence fizzing with the joy of language, it's an eccentric fairytale, and Neil Gaiman has called it "probably the best book in the world". When I was a teenager, my sister introduced me to the historical novels of Dorothy Dunnett. They are wonderful: immaculately researched and totally gripping. They made me realise what historical fiction at its best can be. Nowadays, I would have to add Hilary Mantel as another of my heroines. *A Place of Greater Safety*, about the French Revolution, is a masterpiece, and it fills me with awe to think that it was her first book. But if it's possible, I think *Wolf Hall* (set at the court of Henry VIII) is an even greater achievement – it's hard to imagine how it could be equalled... but I am waiting for her next novel (due out in May 2012) with great excitement!

You were first published when you were twelve years old, which is quite incredible! Do you have any advice to offer young writers?

I was very, very lucky! I think giving advice is difficult, because every writer develops in his or her own way, but it's safe to say that reading as much as you can is a very good thing to do. And write. Keep writing. Even if you're not sure what type of writing you want to do yet, experiment – explore.

Can you describe your writing environment and practice – do you have a particular place where you write, or time of day, number of words for example?

I write at my desk, which happens to be in my bedroom, and I start as soon as I've dropped my daughters off at school, and work right through until I need to pick them up. I don't set myself a number of words for the day – though I know a lot of writers do. I just can't work that way. If I'm grappling with a particularly knotty problem, I may not get a lot of words written, but actually that day's progress may be huge. And at the opposite extreme, I could write lots of words, but unless I'm really happy with that passage, the numbers won't represent any achievement. Does that make sense? I know this is a very personal thing, however.

At Cyprus Well we are keeping an eye on developments in the digitizing of books, iPads, Kindles etc. As an author, how do you view these developments?

I must admit that I'm not super-competent, technologically speaking, and I don't own any of these things myself, though my husband has an iPad and the whole family uses that a lot. I can see that Kindles are very useful, too, as an alternative to dragging around a suitcase full of books! I'm interested, as an author, to know how trends are moving, and I think that having more formats in which books can be read is great. Personally, though, nothing beats an actual book for me. I love the feel of it, the look of it. I love to have an object with an artfully-designed cover. I love something I can keep on the shelf. I am running out of shelf-space though... (you should see how much of the floor space here is covered with stacks of books!)

Thank you Harriet!

Interview Archive

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