I am delighted to be the fourth stop on Wendy J. Dunn’s virtual blog tour for her book ‘The Light in the Labyrinth’. Today, Wendy joins us to talk about what she believes makes the Tudors so fascinating.

(Go into the draw to win a copy of Wendy’s wonderful novel here)

Publication Date: September 7, 2014
Metropolis Ink
Paperback: 338p
ISBN: 098072192X
Genre: YA Historical Fiction
A Queen fights for her life.
A King denies his heart and soul.
A girl faces her true identity.
All things must come to an end—all things but love.

The Light in the Labyrinth, a young adult novel, depicts the lives of women in the patriarchal society of the Tudors, a time when aristocratic families commonly traded them for favour and status. Told from the perspective of a teenage Katherine Carey, niece of Anne Boleyn, this is a story of a girl who becomes a woman in the court of Henry VIII, the bloody tyrant remembered so well by history.

Unhappy at home with her mother, who has remarried, Kate receives permission to go to court to attend her royal aunt. In the past, Kate idolized her aunt from a distance; now given a place amongst her aunt’s trusted women, she becomes an eyewitness to the intrigue and heartache of Anne Boleyn’s final months as queen.

Buy the Book

Please welcome Wendy!

Next year, Natalie and I will be on a panel with Barbara Gaskell Denvil and Lauren Mackay at the Historical Novel Society Australasia conference in Sydney, discussing one of our favourite subjects: The Tudors. Or — to be more specific, what is it about the Tudors that make them so fascinating to readers and writers alike. I thought I would share with you here my own personal journey to understanding why I am so fixated on the Tudors as a writer.

I’ve just completed a PhD. I emerged from that particular, very challenging labyrinth with a deeper understanding of myself as a writer, and also understanding how story births from chaos. In the words of Ursula Le Guin: “[Writers] force the world to be coherent — to tell us a story” (2004, p. 164). Stories are vitally part of human existence, and construct our very psyche. When they speak to us, it is because they connect to us in some way.

Surmounting my PhD helped me to appreciate that my own experience as a woman is what connects me to the story of Anne Boleyn and that of other Tudor women. While not to same degree as Tudor women, I too have known oppression and been deemed to have less value than the males in my
When I started my PhD I did not regard myself as a feminist. I am the mother of three adult sons, and I have long realised that the road to manhood involves its own pitfalls and heartbreaking struggles. Two years into my PhD I finally understood what being a feminist really meant: to achieve an equal and fairer world for all.

Writing The Light in the Labyrinth, my second Tudor novel and the artefact of my PhD, made me question how far the world had really travelled since Henry VIII enacted his particular form of domestic violence and murdered not only Anne Boleyn, but also Katherine Howard, a young woman who was perhaps no more than nineteen at her execution. And let us not forget Katherine of Aragon – a very good woman who had suffered the loss of at least five babies during her married life to Henry VIII, only to be discarded after over twenty years of marriage. Henry VIII also denied Katherine the presence of their only living child at her deathbed. That didn't stop her regarding Henry as her husband to her very last heartbeat. I would hate to think about the number of women today who are able to relate Katherine's story. Terrible things happened to Tudor women because they were not seen as equal to men; terrible things are happening to women all over the world because of the same reason.

In my PhD thesis (Dunn 2014), I asked myself: “Why is it so hard to rewrite the narratives of our world? Why is it so hard to make “men’s violence against women” a narrative of the past?” Is it simply because the societal narrative is so entrenched that a woman who seizes her voice and seeks agency of her own destiny somehow becomes a monstrous force, a force also seen as a threat to the status quo of society? (Booth 2007).

Anne Boleyn presents a powerful example of what I mean by this. In works like The Other Boleyn and Wolf Hall, Anne is constructed as the archetypical bitch, a woman who gets what she deserves because of her ambition and desire to direct her own destiny. Nailing down my thoughts about this in my thesis, I had an epiphany. I realised that I wrote Tudor fiction as a way to question these societal narratives, in an attempt to build a bridge of empathy that may lead to change.

I believe many women writers are drawn to the Tudors not only as a means to reclaim women’s history, but also to speak to our own time through the mirror of the past. In my own writing, the story of Anne Boleyn story operates as a mirror of feminist standpoint that demonstrates the oppression of patriarchy.

But all this thinking ensued through navigating the maze of a PhD. Once upon a time, I simply believed I became a writer of Tudor fiction because of this poem by Sir Thomas Wyatt, the elder:

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,
That now are wild and do not remember
That sometime they put themself in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range,
Busily seeking with a continual change.

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better; but once in special,
In thin array after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her arms long and small;
Therewithall sweetly did me kiss
And softly said, “Dear heart, how like you this?”

It was no dream: I lay broad waking.
But all is turned thorough my gentleness
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;
And I have leave to go of her goodness,
And she also, to use newfangledness.

But since that I so kindly am served
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

I was fifteen when I read Margaret Irwin’s Elizabeth and Prince of Spain and stumbled on a line from this poem. When I sought out the poem in its entirety, its message about unrequited love spoke to my inner core. An unhappy teenager, I was living in a very unhappy home. My relationship with my violent father almost destroyed me. Yet, I still craved for his love, yearning for it with my whole being. It broke my heart that my father did not seem to love me. By fifteen, unrequited love, yearning for love and the desire to prove myself by writing laid out the stones to my identity.

My love affair with the Tudors had started in childhood. I had been first introduced to Anne Boleyn via her daughter Elizabeth and then through the movie Anne of the Thousand Days. Elizabeth and her mother became the guiding figures of my growing up years. With my family home so often a battlefield, I longed to be strong and unafraid. Anne was an example of a woman who did not let fear rule her life; her daughter Elizabeth showed me victory was always possible.

While I try very hard to write believable historical fiction through being true to historical context, my eyes are now wide open to the fact that I use historical fiction as a way to filter my own story through the context and distance of history. This creates the necessary separation to tell my story, which the drafting process makes new through storytelling (Fishman 1981).

Stories speak to us through the use of archetypes. There is no doubt that the Tudors provide writers with so many of those. We only have to look at how Anne Boleyn is used in fiction to see that. With mostly female writers drawn to her story, she has been constructed in novels as a whore, the bitch, home wrecker, the reformer, the victim and the martyr.

There is no doubt in my mind that the marital adventures of Henry VIII offer female writers with vital subjects valid to their standpoints as women, which engage with the fact that ‘women’s reality is historically and contemporaneously one of oppression’ (Arnold 2008 p.7). By writing fiction about the lives of historical women, women writers, like myself, are said to be not only reclaiming stories left on the margins of history but also seizing the means of narrative empowerment (Heilmann & Llewellyn 2004).

I personally have experienced the truth of this in my own life. Writing about the Tudors has changed me forever. It has empowered me and allowed me to claim my writing identity.

Works cited:


Irwin, M 1999, Elizabeth and the Prince of Spain, Allison & Busby LTD, London.


About the Author
Wendy J. Dunn is an Australian writer who has been obsessed by Anne Boleyn and Tudor History since she was ten-years-old. She is the author of two Tudor novels: Dear Heart, How Like You This?, the winner of the 2003 Glyph Fiction Award and 2004 runner up in the Eric Hoffer Award for Commercial Fiction, and The Light in the Labyrinth, her first young adult novel.

While she continues to have a very close and spooky relationship with Sir Thomas Wyatt, the elder, serendipity of life now leaves her no longer wondering if she has been channeling Anne Boleyn and Sir Tom for years in her writing, but considering the possibility of ancestral memory. Her own
family tree reveals the intriguing fact that her ancestors – possibly over three generations – had purchased land from both the Boleyn and Wyatt families to build up their own holdings. It seems very likely Wendy’s ancestors knew the Wyatts and Boleyns personally.

Born in Melbourne, Australia, Wendy is married and the mother of three sons and one daughter–named after a certain Tudor queen, surprisingly, not Anne.

Wendy tutors at Swinburne University in their Master of Arts (Writing) program. She also works as a literature support teacher at a primary school.

For more information please visit Wendy J. Dunn’s website
You can also find her on Facebook, Twitter and Goodreads

Comments

Denise Hansen says:
December 4, 2014 at 11:05 pm

Great post! I love the inclusion of the Wyatt poem. I wonder if he talking about Anne? I am pleased that Wendy Dunn is bringing Anne’s story to a young audience.

Monique says:
December 5, 2014 at 4:16 am

Although the Tudors lived centuries ago, they were real people, with thoughts and feelings also. So fascinating to learn more about them.

Dawn says:
December 6, 2014 at 1:41 pm

It sounds like a wonderful read. And I will say it again (I always do when I see this book) I absolutely adore the portrait on the cover, it is beautiful.
Be the first of your friends to like this

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