

Interview with Deborah Harkness, conducted by Matt Staggs/published 25 May 26, 2015

[Deborah Harkness](#) is the author of the *All Souls Trilogy*, of which the third book, [The Book of Life](#), will be available in paperback Tuesday of this week. In the following interview, we talk about the spirituality and science, mixing historical and fictional characters together, and the upcoming All Souls Con!

I've been enthralled by the amount of scholarship that you've put into your books. There's a ton of characters from history. How did you choose them for inclusion?

In my work as a professor, I'm always tripping across fascinating characters who seem larger than life, or were always in the perfect place at the perfect time, or seemed to appear at the right moment and disappear quickly thereafter. I often talk about them with my students in class, and the *All Souls Trilogy* gave me the opportunity to share them with a wider audience in print. So really it's just been an extension of my life as a teacher.

Despite there being centuries of stories about witches, vampires, and daemons, you've managed to make these things your own. It's going to be a hard question to answer, but how did you do this? I know that there are probably a lot of authors out there wondering the same thing.

I'm a historian of science, which is a fancy way of saying that I study the "worldviews" of people who lived a long time ago and saw the cosmos and their place in it very differently than we do. We aren't smarter than they were, or less superstitious—we're just different. Given the historical record, my prediction is that in a thousand years humans will look back on what we believe today and think that much of it was fairly limited! So when it came to vampires and witches and daemons, I approached the question as though I were trying to build a logical worldview where such creatures really existed alongside humans. This is what my research subjects believed in the 16th century, so I imagined those beliefs forward into our present moment with cell phones and automobiles. Once I did that, it became relatively straight-forward to toss out the parts of the legends and myths that didn't make logical sense and expand upon the rest.

Equally fascinating to me is the inclusion of a great bit of "real" magical tradition: kabbalism (or your preferred spelling here), the Enochian magic of John Dee, alchemy. This isn't generally the kind of stuff people just happen to run across. How did you get started researching these topics?

I started studying what historians call "the occult sciences" in college when I was an undergraduate. My favorite professor offered a course on "Magic and the Pursuit of Power in Renaissance Europe." The rest, as they say, is history. I became intellectually consumed by trying to explain why there was such a strong belief in these approaches to the natural world at the same time that Copernicus and Galileo lived. What I discovered is that there is nothing incompatible between religious faith, a belief in the supernatural, and science. Copernicus was brilliant, a monk, a practicing astrologer, and revolutionized a view of the

cosmos that had held strong since Classical times. It's hard not to be fascinated by someone like that!

You put a lot of time into giving your characters a life of their own. Not every writer has [song lists](#) for their characters' favorite songs!

Perhaps not—but my characters are all three dimensional to me, and I hope to my readers, too. I find myself shopping and thinking “Sarah would love these canning jars!” or listening to a song on the radio and imagining that Baldwin would like it.

Do you do any conventions, and if so, have you seen any people cosplaying as your characters?

Fans have organized the first ever All Souls Con for September 2015. I understand there will be cosplay—which I had to look up because I had no idea what it was. Have I mentioned I'm a historian and spend most of my time in libraries??

What's the best thing that you've seen or heard about to come out of your books as far as their impact on readers goes?

This is the hardest question to answer, because I can't choose just one. I know of people who have gone back to school or decided to go to college. I know of people who have taken up rowing, or riding, or decided to learn French. Lots of readers tell me they love history now, and they hated it in high school. My readers are great visitors of historic libraries and houses. Readers have banded together on social media and organized tours of Oxford. There is a fan-run All Souls Wiki that is terrific. Crafty readers have made scarves, spun and dyed yarn, made scented candles. Veterans and soldiers listen to the books and tell me that it helps them deal with the stress of combat, and that they like how I present the challenges of being a warrior. But I think what makes me happiest is when people who think they are invisible—because they are different in some way, or LGBT, or anxious—find that the books have provided them with a way to talk about their situation with friends and loved ones.

What's next for you?

I would like to fall asleep for a month. That's not going to happen, though! Right now I'm focused on meeting readers on the US paperback tour. When I get back, I will be devoting most of my time to lending support to the BBC efforts to develop the *All Souls Trilogy* into a television show. In my free time—I'll be writing, of course. As to what I'll be writing, for the moment my lips are sealed.

Interview link: <http://suvudu.com/2015/05/interview-with-book-of-life-author-deborah-harkness.html>