

A discovery of fantasy: Author Deborah Harkness by Jennifer Levin – published 5 June 2015

In Deborah Harkness' bestselling All Souls trilogy, witches, demons, vampires, and other fantastical creatures live among us as friends and neighbors. In the first book, *A Discovery of Witches*, Diana, an academic historian, encounters an alchemical manuscript that ushers magic into her life. In *Shadow of Night*, Diana travels through time with a scientist vampire named Matthew. And in the final installment, *The Book of Life* (published last year by Penguin) Diana and Matthew return to the present, their relationship now far more serious, just as their quest for the truth about the past becomes more urgent.

Before the trilogy, Harkness wrote two scholarly books, *John Dee's Conversations With Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* and *The Jewel House: Elizabethan London and the Scientific Revolution*. She has done research in numerous scholarly libraries, including Oxford's Bodleian Library, the All Souls College Library at Oxford, and Washington, D.C.'s Folger Shakespeare Library. She also wrote a wine blog for a while, before the success of her fiction made her too busy to maintain it. She currently teaches European history and the history of science at the University of Southern California. Harkness reads from *The Book of Life* at the Jean Cocteau Cinema on Monday, June 8.

Pasatiempo: Which came first, your interest in fantasy or your interest in history and science?

Deborah Harkness: I read a lot of fantasy when I was a teenager and in college, but I certainly never expected to be writing any of it myself. I was training to be a historian in college and graduate school, and have been a professor since 1994. It wasn't until 2008, kind of out of nowhere, that I started writing fiction.

Pasa: How long was the trilogy brewing?

Harkness: Probably my whole life, but I didn't know it. It pulls on a lot of things that I study as a historian, and things that I love, like travel, horseback riding, wine, and yoga, and it weaves them all together.

Pasa: Did you expect to write three such lengthy books to complete this story?

Harkness: No. I expected to write one book that had a beginning, a middle, and an end. When I got to page 422 of the "beginning," I realized it was probably not all going to fit in one book, and I was probably going to end up writing three books. I'd never done this before; I didn't have a publisher. As far as I knew, I was just writing and thought maybe my mother would read it.

Pasa: How did you wind up selling the first book?

Harkness: I have an agent for my academic, nonfiction work. He asked what I was working on, and I said I seemed to be writing a book about a vampire and a witch. I asked him if he wanted to read it and he agreed. He told me later he was sure it wasn't going to be very good, because I'd never done this before. But he did think it was pretty good, and told me to keep working on it. When it was finished, he sent it around.

Pasa: If fantasy is an otherworldly way to address issues of concern in our world, what do vampires represent?

Harkness: I think the key thing for all of these mythical beings is that they don't address just one thing. They're flexible enough that they can represent different things at different times. The vampire came into Western European thought in the 18th century, and was different then than it was for Stoker, and different from how it was from the early vampire movies, and different than it was for Anne Rice. These creatures are monsters to think with. They're creatures upon whom we can project our current anxieties. I can really only speak for my vampire, but my vampire is about the tension between magic and science. Can you fit these two things together? My vampire says absolutely, yes. He also represents how we face up to who we are and what we've done. We've all done things, said things, treated people in ways we're not proud of. Can you imagine the scale on which this would be true if you'd lived for 1,500 years? What would happen to you if you were still carrying around all that emotional baggage?

Pasa: What about witches?

Harkness: Legends about witches go back way longer than vampires. Vampires are really pretty late to the party. I think what's interesting about witches, and is something that would have fascinated people in a lot of different time periods, is this issue of women and power. What do you think of a powerful woman? A powerful woman must get her power from somewhere, so where did she get it? Is she using it for good or evil? I think we still ask those questions, and we ask them about powerful women who have nothing to do with witches.

Pasa: What real-life history did you weave into the All Souls trilogy?

Harkness: There's lots of history in the books. One of the three main characters in the book is a book, Ashmole 782. It's a real manuscript, and it's really missing. It was a manuscript that I tried to look at when I was doing my dissertation research. It was a real scholarly frustration when I couldn't look at it.

Pasa: You mix the fantastic with the mundane, with monsters and demons living among us in contemporary society. What led you to anchor your stories in this kind of reality?

Harkness: In the 15th and 16th centuries, which are my research specialty, people believed that the natural and supernatural worlds existed side by side. Perfectly ordinary people could have all these amazing powers. My research subjects were smart, they went to university, and this just

happens to be the way they viewed the world around them. There were manuals written about how you could discover whether your neighbor had powers. So I wanted to try to imagine that world in the present. If there really were these creatures, like my research subjects believed — what if it's not fiction? What if it's fact? I wanted to make it feel like if you were standing on line at the grocery store, you could look at the person in front of you and realize it would explain a lot if this person were a demon.

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