



Elizabeth Hand

Mortal Love
ISBN13: 9780060755348

An Interview with Elizabeth Hand

How did you come to write about this subject matter? Can you talk about how you decided to combine the three different stories and how you worked with each of them?

I've always loved the Pre-Raphaelites. Even if they're not in the same class as, say, Picasso or the major Impressionists, their lives were eventful and, for their time, they embodied some unusual and even modernist impulses: the urge to capture a vision of the natural world, a preoccupation with the sensual and erotic, as well as a fascination with mythology and folklore that dovetailed with my own interests.

I wanted to ground the story in the Victorian Era, but I also wanted to make it edgier, and to acknowledge that the creative impulse doesn't change; thus the contemporary setting. And I wanted to give the tale a sense of timelessness. Having three interlocking storylines that reflect each other and build upon each other seemed as though it would be a good way to do that. Daniel is a character very dear to my heart, and in a lot of ways his reactions are what I imagine my own might be in a similar circumstance. Valentine and Radborne are more similar to each other, as well they should be (Valentine is Radborne's grandson), and they capture more of the artist's consciousness, rather than that of the outsider, Daniel. I wanted to create a sort of metaphor for the creative process, but to do that I needed both the artist's and the more casual observer's points of view. Thus my three protagonists.

Were there any books you looked to as models of the kind of novel you were trying to write?

A:S. Byatt's *Possession*; John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; John Crowley's *Ægypt* sequence. All of Dickens, and a bit of Peter Ackroyd's work, as well.

In the acknowledgements, you call the book "an imaginary tree with roots in the real world." Can you explain some of the excitement and difficulty of working with fictional characters as well as real historical figures?

I loved working with historical figures! These people were so vibrant, they pretty much came shouting into the room, demanding to take center stage. Swinburne, especially — I had never really been a fan of his poetry, but he was a fascinating man, loyal to his friends, extremely devoted to poor Lizzie Siddall (Rossetti's wife). Some biographers speculate that Swinburne had Tourette's Syndrome, and that doesn't seem too far off the mark to me. Lady Wilde, Oscar's mother, was another larger-than-life figure; a proponent of women's rights, a champion of Irish culture and lore, and also very funny — you can see where her son came by his wit.

The book is rich with influences and sources like British folktales, Pre-Raphaelite artists like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward C. Burne-Jones, and the myth of Tristan and Iseult. Did you do much research before writing and what were some of your research goals?

I did more research on this book than anything I've ever written, about five years' worth. The PRB material I was already quite familiar with, so it was more an issue of tracking down primary sources — i.e., diaries and letters and first-hand accounts from contemporaries — and then incorporating that information into the novel. I had more fun learning about the history of madhouses and asylums in the UK and US, and it was fascinating (and often depressing) to read about the various treatments accorded to women who didn't fit a Victorian model of feminine behavior, and were thus deemed mad or otherwise in need of "treatment," much of which would today be considered abusive treatment. A lot of this information didn't make it into the final draft of the novel, but I think it helped in creating the general mise-en-scene.

I also read various versions of the Tristan and Isolde legend, as well as other medieval lays; and also numerous Celtic legends and tales, most particularly versions of an Irish story known as "The Wooing of Etain," about a fairy bride. There is obviously a huge amount of material relating to folklore from the British Isles, and so much of it has been mined, particularly as regards the Arthurian legends. But I was excited to find a fairly obscure and quite haunting tale in Katherine Briggs' four-volume compendium of folk and fairy tales, a story called "King Orfeo" which I adapted into the tale that ends "The dog has not jumped down yet."

My goals with this novel were to create something like a contemporary version of a real myth, with ancient overtones but a modern frame. I find that many modern fantasies explain things away far too easily, which makes a lot of it overly familiar (to me, anyway). Real myths are often strange and startlingly unfamiliar, and don't always give up their meanings easily; you have to tease them out, and for me, that's one of the pleasures of reading older collections of lore. American readers often like to have things explained to them — this is part of the appeal of something like *The Da Vinci Code*—but for me, a mystery isn't a genuine mystery if it can be completely explained away. The writer Hugh Nissenson told me that in *Mortal Love* I had created a genuinely new myth about the mystery of the creative process, and to me was the highest praise the novel could have received.

The asylum owners and art patrons in the book are all questionable characters. Is this a comment on the art world?

No. I was just trying to create a metaphor for the creative process, and I liked the notion of a sinister art patron who deliberately torments his artists to get them to create. Thomas Learmont takes his name (and his immortality, for those readers who discern it) from Thomas Leamont, better known as Thomas of Erceldoune or Thomas the Rhymer, who famously encountered the Queen of Faerie and had a rather sinister sojourn in Faerie with her before returning to our own world. Learmont also gives a nod to the ominous scissor-man in

Heinrich Hoffmann's Struwwelpeter (1844). Hoffmann himself is the writer of the letter at the beginning of my novel—in addition to penning one of the more outrageous children's books ever written, he was a doctor who specialized in the treatment of mentally ill children and adolescents.

The genre of *Mortal Love* is not easily pinpointed. It has been called a fantasy novel, as well as literature. Do you think about genre when writing?

I never think about genre when I work. I've written fantasy, science fiction, supernatural fiction, and am now working on a suspense novel. Genres are mostly useful as a marketing tool, and to help booksellers know where to shelve a book. The rise of internet services like Amazon, which enable readers to choose from a vast number of books regardless of genre, are helping to erase these boundaries, as is the proliferation of books that cross genres lines.

Some say that writers write what they want to read. Is this true for you?

Yes, in a sense. I mostly read biographies and history for pleasure, also folklore, but I do try to write an idealized form of what I've loved reading in the past. The writers I most admire — John Crowley, James Salter — are exceptional stylists. They've raised the bar pretty high in that regard, so I have to really strive with each book to do better than my previous one.

What is your next project?

I'm working on a mainstream suspense novel titled **Generation Lost**. It deals with photography, an abduction, and the fallout from the vibrant punk and post-punk art and music scene of New York's Lower East Side in the 1970s. It's set in both Manhattan and on an island off the coast of Maine, where I live and where there exists, not coincidentally, a burgeoning photography scene that's been around for more years than I have. I've also recently completed a new, thematically-linked story sequence (the stories are all appearing in different publications) that combines both mainstream and fantastic work, titled *The Lost Domain*.