
Joanne Harris

Sleep, Pale Sister
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British literary critic Kevin Patrick Mahoney was born in Slough, England in 1972, but now spends a great deal of time in London. An aspiring author himself, he likes nothing better than pulling apart modern novels to see how they work. In March 2000 he sat down with Joanne Harris to discuss *Sleep, Pale Sister*.

How much did the figure of John Ruskin influence *Sleep, Pale Sister*? Like Henry Chester, he married an Effie too, didn't he?

I did have Ruskin quite strongly in mind when I wrote *Sleep, Pale Sister*, as well as a number of other Victorian writers and artists. I'm fascinated by the amazing dual standards of Victorian morality — and endlessly amused when well-meaning politicians talk about "returning to good old Victorian values". Certainly a whole culture of institutionalized pedophilia (disguised as idealism) amongst the Victorians has been modestly glossed over by historians, as has their rather special attitude to sex, reflected now in the enduring passion of the fashion industry for childlike, waif-thin models. I wanted to talk about that to some extent, and to explore what might happen if that ideal were actually to take an identity of its own.

There seems to be quite a bit of the carnivalesque in your work. What attracts you and appalls you about carnival?

Carnivals are transient. It's their appeal and also their sinister aspect. The carnival in Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (great movie, fabulous book) is a typical example of that: lurid, fascinating, eternal. It is bright lights and loud noises, tricks and con artists, fantasy and horror. Carnivals make us uneasy because of what they represent: the residual memory of blood sacrifice (it is after all from the word "carne" that the term arises), of pagan celebration. And they represent a loss of inhibition; carnival time is a time at which almost anything is possible; reality is suspended. Many of the images of the carnival are sinister; the huge papier-mâché heads and the masks, the giant floats, the larger-than-life characters, the comic-scary carnivals of Halloween. And carnival people are always on the move, they are gypsies, aliens, attractive perhaps but not, on the whole, to be trusted. Carnival food — the candy floss, the fried chicken, the hot dogs — has a different taste to other food, but in the end it often proves indigestible. This is true of the entire show; the laughter is never far removed from hysteria; the children on the big wheel scream in terror as well as excitement; behind the lights and the colors lies a constant awareness of the dark.

Tarot plays a large role in *Sleep, Pale Sister*, and Vianne Rocher [from Joanne's best-selling novel *Chocolat*] never seems quite able to leave the cards behind. What do you see in the cards?

I think people see what they want to see. Jung would have said that people who scry are really tapping their own subconscious to free the images which they see there. I'm with him on that one ;-)

In *Chocolat* and *Sleep, Pale Sister* the main battle seems to be that between the masculine and the feminine, whether it's the break-up of the Muscats' marriage, or the contrast between the masculine church, embodied by Reynaud, or the feminine Pagan beliefs represented by Vianne. How much drama do you see in the division between the sexes?

It depends. There again, I never intended either book to be perceived as a treatise on feminism. The division depends on the individuals and their circumstances. *Sleep, Pale Sister* is more clear-cut in that it deals with a society in which women are treated fundamentally differently to men, but any division between the sexes in *Chocolat* is I think purely coincidental. I was thinking very much about my French family when I wrote it, which seems mostly comprised of strong women; I think that quite a few of them must have crept into the book somehow...

For the entire interview, please visit Kevin Patrick Mahoney's website, Authortrek, at <http://www.authortrek.com>.