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The Firemaster's Mistress
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Q: What drew you in the first place to a fictional representation of the origins of the Gunpowder Plot?

A: I had already written Francis Quoynt as a very minor character in my previous novel, *The Memory Palace*, when he was an older man, a retired soldier and friend of the main male character. And for some reason, I couldn't let go of him. It was a little like falling in love. I daydreamed about him, began to see him in more detail—the height, the pale hair, the wry humor—and his amiable, self-effacing intelligence linked to hidden strength. When I started to mull over a possible story, the Gunpowder Plot jumped out as an obvious historical event for him—an explosives expert - to get tangled up in. Right period, right subject. A done deal! Also, by chance (honestly), my next book was going to coincide,

more-or-less, with the anniversary of the plot.

Q: Your account of a small group of religious extremists bent on terrorizing a population has many contemporary resonances. To what extent did your awareness of modern terrorism inform your depiction of it in a historical context?

A: Funnily enough, I think the energy worked the other way round. Studying the historical event made me look more closely at the contemporary situation, to try to get behind the headlines. Obviously, the problems of a mixed society trying to deal with a violent threat were very much in my mind—and I think that issues around identifying and dealing with that threat still resonate between the centuries.

On the other hand, the parallel was an uneasy coincidence that may well have heightened my need to deal with that aspect of a story chosen for other reasons. I am also convinced that Guy Fawkes, who had military experience of gunpowder, knew that he could not possibly escape an explosion, on that scale, in time.

Also, to be totally honest, writers often don't know exactly why they choose to write what they do. If you analyze too much, you can lose the juice and freeze. You go with an impulse of what feels important and trust the readers to be in active partnership with you. If you do your job right, they feel the hum.

It's worth remembering that in England, before Henry VIII broke with Rome not that long before my story, almost everyone's grandparents or great-grandparents had been Catholics, now the 'enemy'. Many of the ruling class were still Catholics. Many other people were still secret Catholics. It was the extreme violence of the Gunpowder Plotters, more than their religious or political views that set them apart. Other huge complexities—too tangled to go into here - also surrounded this event, including the position of the Church in Rome, and the religious wars on the Continent.

Q: You have written: "[N]ovelists live in the gaps in the landscape where scholars' maps peter out or disagree." Can you describe more concretely how you inhabited that fictional gap in your account of the Gunpowder Plot?

A: By being hungry, hungry, hungry for the known details, and somehow getting them inside my head, mainly by research, and then beginning to imagine "what next?" For example, by visiting the houses, looking at details of daily life in museums, wearing the clothes*, reading what my characters would have read. By seeing the real documents, like the confessions of Guy Fawkes—and the awful, speaking difference in his signature before and after he was tortured. I try to build up a vivid, "felt" picture until I have a film that runs in my head. Then I describe it, plausibly. Informed plausibility is the key. Even imagined reality follows its own rules of logic.

In *The Firemaster's Mistress*, I invented three main fictional characters to give myself a little freedom to roam into the unknown and to speculate. I can put words into their mouths and give them emotions for us to care about more freely than I feel I can do with known historical characters. Through Francis, Kate, and Boomer, I can build tension and excitement in addition to the known events. After all, *the Gunpowder Plot* failed—which makes a bad newspaper headline but challenges a writer's imagination all the more.

But, please do ask me this question again when I've finished the book I'm writing now, about a real historical English princess, with a supporting cast of fairly well-documented real people. Reality can sometimes be unhelpful! At the moment, I'm wrestling with a documented order of events that is the wrong way round to the best way to build plot tension. I have my fingers crossed. I might still find a contradictory record, to raise doubt and give me one of my cracks. Otherwise, I'll have to invent a way around the problem.

P.S. In search of more "felt" detail, I've just scheduled a lesson in riding sidesaddle, which was the period norm for women. So far, in my books, I've wriggled around finding ways to justify having my women ride astride. In the future, it will be from the horse's mouth . . . Watch this space . . .

***What you wear affects the way you think. Can you imagine living your life in a steel-ribbed corset and three-foot farthingale? Or a dress that weighs 20 pounds?**

Q: Guy Fawkes is the ultimate scapegoat for the Gunpowder Plot, or at least its most infamous culprit. Is much known about his co-conspirators?

A: A few details can be found here and there, particularly about the leader of the conspiracy, Robert Catesby, though information changes depending on the source. But not that much is known about Fawkes either. As Antonia Fraser said in her book, *The Gunpowder Plot*, we have very few unambiguous facts about the whole event. You see them all by flashes of lightning. Ironically, Fawkes may have been brought in almost as "hired help", as their demolitions expert. I suspect that he may have been chosen as scapegoat by the government because he was not a gentleman, like most of the others, nor related to prominent aristocrats, like Thomas Percy.

Q: What historical accuracy issues did you experience in narrating a book in seventeenth-century English vernacular?

A: I always start with the idea that all my characters sound as normal to each other as we do to ourselves. And we should experience them in the same way. They certainly don't speak a quaint period pastiche. My problem, therefore, is to suggest the period flavour without self-conscious—and irritating—literal imitation. I was lucky enough to work for the Royal Shakespeare Company for almost four years, where I heard Shakespearean language spoken all day, every day, so that both the rhythms and vocabulary became second nature. In fact, the actors and crew even began to order Green Room bacon sandwiches and cups of tea in blank verse.

One of my special language techniques, funnily enough, is to "think American". Many of the older forms of English (including folk songs) survived in the States long after they died out in England, particularly in mountain regions, or parts of the Midwest where I did some of my growing up. "I ain't done nothing yet," is perfectly good 17th century speak. I'm always battling proofreaders to keep my double negatives.

That said, although I try to make my characters speak as naturally as possible, I also work very hard to avoid words that were coined after the period of my books. "Interface" is an obvious one, but "plan" (18th century) often sneaks past my guard. I know that some writers think it doesn't matter, but I'm convinced that readers feel a cumulative sense of "rightness" or "wrongness" even if they can't say why.

You can also have fun trying to show subtle differences of class, education, and nationality. Shakespeare leads the way there, particularly in the *History Plays*, even if a little caution is needed in following his example—the 17th century English made fun of all foreigners with uninhibited relish.