



THE BOOKBINDER'S SECRET

AUTHOR Q&A

What was your inspiration for *The Bookbinder's Secret*?

Several years ago, I came across a story about a fragment of a 12th century poem being found in the binding of another book published in the 16th century. This poem about Guillaume d'Orange was thought to be completely lost and yet there it was, preserved albeit unintentionally, in another book. Coincidentally, it was found in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The practise, known as binder's waste, was common at that time as paper and parchment were expensive and necessary to strengthen a book's binding so they often used scraps of old, discarded paper.

Several of these papers have been found to contain lost works, even a whole psalm thought gone forever. Most recently, a 700-year-old manuscript fragment was discovered in another book's binding containing a lost story of Merlin and King Arthur. For a writer who loves books both for the stories they contain and as objects themselves, this was pure gold. I knew at once I needed to write a story about a secret hidden within another book. It would be two more years before I found out what that story was and began to write it. After that, the whole process was a whirlwind and I've still not quite stopped spinning.

In doing your research for the novel, what did you learn that helped you shape the novel?

One of the wonderful things I've found writing historical fiction is discovering a piece of research that connects disparate elements into a narrative. There were a few of these in the writing of this novel, some I knew before embarking, some were complete surprises along the way.

My most valued source was an excellent book called *Women Bookbinders 1880–1920* by Marianne Tidcombe which informed a huge amount about the characters at the time, about being a woman in a man's profession, the differences in styles and duties for women at the time and so on. One such tidbit was the discovery of the short-lived Guild of Woman Bookbinders which gave me a framework for Lily's ambition and professional drive within the story. This book also gave me a huge amount of information on binding styles, female binders Lily would admire, and lead me to several other primary sources like auction catalogues from famous book collections.

Then there was the notion of young couples eloping to Gretna Green in Scotland to marry without needing their parent's permission. This is such a romantic notion, especially when one considers the logistics of getting from London to Scotland in a horse-drawn carriage and the dedication that would take. This pulled together the hidden story and heightened the stakes in such a perfect way.

Another of these moments was discovering the last duel on English soil took place exactly in the year I had set the back story and in the exact place I wanted the scene to happen. These are the magical moments I love about writing.

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Is Lily wholly your creation or is she based in part on a particular person or persons?

Lily is all mine though several of my favourite characters and historical figures helped shape her, both directly and subconsciously. Catherine Earnshaw from *Wuthering Heights* is one of my favourite characters of all time. She's fierce and smart and her (and her future daughter) use books and learning as a means of escape and betterment. Her tenacity and her temper feeds into Lily in a big way. Before writing this, I was researching a journalist named Emma Kelly for another story. She was a feminist before they had a name, was utterly fearless and conquered a man's world. She was also a beautiful writer dedicated to her profession. A constant inspiration are the novels of Sarah Waters. Her characters are so well-drawn they leap off the page, challenging societal norms and embracing their own passions. I wanted Lily to be a progressive character, a member of a new middle class of woman who had something of her own agency and was not afraid to forge her own path.

Why did you choose to write this novel under a pseudonym and why did you pick A. D. Bell?

It is a well-known practice that historically, several female authors had to give themselves male-sounding pseudonyms to be taken seriously as writers. George Eliot of course, George Sand, Cotton Mather Mill, even Louisa May Alcott had a male alter-ego. Probably the most famous of these are the Brontë sisters. They published their first novels under Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. I wanted to nod to that tradition so, in *The Bookbinder's Secret*, the series of books Lilian finds are by Abel Bell. Even this name becomes part of the puzzle to Lily. The reason behind bringing this pseudonym out of the story and onto the book itself was partly because I wanted to carry on that tradition and partly because it adds another hidden layer to the story. Nothing is quite what it seems, puzzles and wordplay fill the book, each character has a hidden part of their life which is slowly uncovered and it all revolves around books.

Why should readers pick up your book?

This is the kind of question that is the anathema of most writers. The dreaded selling question! All I can say by way of answer is this is a book about books and if you enjoy those, you are likely to enjoy this. It is a book-lovers book. A historical, literary mystery written with nothing but passion for the genre. This is a book written for you – the booksellers, librarians, writers, readers, collectors. It's packed with intrigue, romance, wordplay, danger, tragedy, and most of all, my deep and abiding love and respect for books and all who play a part in their story.

