

THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY: THEY DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY THERE

The Inspiration and Research Behind the Novel: The Disorder Of Longing

My grandfather was a missionary in Africa for fourteen years, and my mother was born there. The most vivid memories of my childhood are of my grandfather, sitting in front of a campfire wherever we happened to be camping that summer, telling us stories about Africa. I think my urge to tell stories is rooted in those early experiences.

Orchids came into my life much later at (of all places) Trader Joe's. I bought a burgundy and purple phalaenopsis, placed it in the center of my table, and looked at its flowers for weeks and weeks. The pulpy sepals and petals seemed so intricate and so unlike any other flower on earth. It seemed older than anything I had ever seen, as if it had survived for millennia. It seemed more creature than plant to me.

I soon read Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* and wasn't at all surprised to learn that some orchid collectors have obsessive personalities. Orlean's book inspired me to dive into orchid research, just for the fun of the journey. I found *Orchid Fever: A Horticultural Tale of Love, Lust, and Lunacy*, by Eric Hansen, and Merle A. Reinikka's *A History of the Orchid*, and by the time I was finished, I needed to tell a story about orchids and orchid people.

Orchids were wildly popular and very expensive during the late Victorian era, and I was fascinated to learn that the vast majority of orchid collectors at the time were men. What sort of man devotes himself to collecting these flowers, I wondered. Victorian Boston was also rich with strange beliefs about sexuality and a woman's place, as well as man's place, in the world. The fight for women's suffrage was at full steam in Boston, and a strong middle class African American population had developed in Beacon Hill. I was excited to have the opportunity to bring these realities into the novel.

During an internet search for Victorian dress – I was looking for pictures of corsets – I somehow stumbled on a passage from *Karezza, the Ethics of Marriage*, Alice Stockham's book. I found a copy,

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and it inspired me to add another layer to the complex lives of Ada and Edward Pryce. This same research thread led me to Rachel P. Maines' book, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*, about the Victorian-era medical use of the newly invented electric vibrator to bring women to orgasm in the doctor's office. At the time, it was believed that this treatment would prevent women from behaving immodestly or 'hysterically' at home or in public.

My research isn't done only in books or online, of course. I learn a lot from being in the physical spaces that contain echoes of the past. When I go to those spaces, I can sense the people from the time period as if they have just stepped out of the room I am in, or have crossed the road just ahead of me, or have left their warmth behind on the seat I am about to take. I enjoy resurrecting ghosts, turning them into flesh and blood in the same way my grandfather loved resurrecting the ghosts of his own past when he told us his stories.

As I wrote my story I went to Victorian houses that are now museums in Los Angeles and London. I looked at furniture and rooms and glassware at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. I went twice to the International Orchid Show in Santa Barbara, where I saw prize orchids displayed by orchid hobbyists and professional orchid growers alike, and where I heard people give talks on the care and special ways of orchids. In Boston I walked from Back Bay through the Common to the African Meeting House in historical Beacon Hill. I watched Brazilian-based religious ceremonies on the beach in Santa Monica —as close as I could get to Brazil. I read newspapers and ads from the 1890s — especially at the Boston Public Library. I find that newspapers, with their advertisements and want ads and event announcements, offer a special window into the zeitgeist of the people and culture of any given time. Newspapers are almost like still-living remnants of the past, in which a collective voice of the time comes to a kind of life.

All these kinds of research that focus on places, ideas, artifacts, and even symbols, evoke the concrete nature of the past as well as the things that might have been but never were. This novel is my way of reconstituting the past so that it tells the story I would want to hear, or even be a part of, could I only go to that unreachable place.

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