

**“Ladies in Peril”:  
Sarah Waters on neo-Victorian narrative celebrations and  
why she stopped writing about the Victorian era**

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**Abstract:**

Sarah Waters has become widely known and critically acclaimed as the author of three provocative neo-Victorian novels focusing on the romantic and sexual adventures of their lesbian protagonists: *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002). In this interview, Waters talks to Abigail Dennis about how her academic training informs her fiction, the neo-Victorian phenomenon, and her decision, with her latest novel *The Night Watch* (2006), to suspend her creative relationship with the nineteenth century.

**Keywords:** Peter Ackroyd, Angela Carter, contemporary fiction, feminism, history, London, pornography, neo-Victorian novel, Sarah Waters.

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Since her debut novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, appeared in 1998, Sarah Waters has become arguably the best-known and most widely read of the various contemporary purveyors of literary neo-Victorianism. While retaining its notable popular appeal, her work is also increasingly of interest to scholars intrigued by the skilful appropriation of Victorian plotting and stylistic techniques, combined with embedded references to twentieth-century literary, cultural, and queer theory – hardly surprising from an author who holds a PhD in English Literature from Queen Mary, University of London. Waters soon followed the success of *Tipping the Velvet*, winner of the Betty Trask Award, with two further acclaimed neo-Victorian novels. *Affinity* (1999) won the Stonewall Book Award, the Somerset Maugham Award, and the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award, as well as being shortlisted for the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. *Fingersmith* (2002) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Orange Prize, as well as gaining Waters the British Book Awards Author of the Year and the Crime Writers’ Association Ellis Peters Historical Dagger.

All of these novels feature lesbian protagonists finding various ways to engage with their sexuality in Victorian England, a culture in which the concept of lesbianism supposedly did not exist. While the novels have

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proven consistently popular, the ostensible similarity of their subject matter led to Waters being somewhat reductively tagged as ‘the lesbian neo-Victorian author’. With her latest novel, *The Night Watch* (2006), however, Waters moves forward to look at the London of the Second World War. During the following interview, conducted in London in September 2007, I asked Waters about her fascination with the nineteenth century and why she has chosen to leave it behind; her relationship with the academic community; and her engagement with other authors of neo-Victorian fictions.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** You’ve said that Angela Carter’s an influence. I’m interested to know what it is that you like about Carter, what you get out of her writing, and what you find particularly interesting or rich about her work.

**SARAH WATERS:** It’s funny, because I recently wrote an introduction for *Nights at the Circus* [1984],<sup>1</sup> and of course I had to reread it.... I loved it all over again, but also, I could see all the kind of stuff that had seeped through into my own writing: the interest in performance, in a sort of musical burlesque; there’s even a women’s prison in there – in my second book [*Affinity*] there’s a women’s prison. All sorts of things – London, obviously, late nineteenth century London – and it was really weird to see that. I first read that as an undergraduate, when it first came out ... I’d previously read *The Bloody Chamber* [1979], which I absolutely adored, and still like – I like what she did with fairy tales. What I loved about her was that she was very literary, in the sense that she was very aware of the canon and literary tradition, and was a very ambitious writer herself, with this wonderful linguistic kind of verve. But she was also a feminist, utterly feminist, and was using all her literary stuff to push an explicitly feminist agenda, which you didn’t see, especially in the 80s, very often.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Do you think that one of the things you share with Carter is perhaps an overtly political agenda?

**SARAH WATERS:** Well, she had an overtly political agenda, and I always think the politics in my novels are far more submerged, and poorly thought out, really, compared to hers. [For me] it’s just an instinctive thing, mainly ... about gender, and about sexuality and class I suppose – but in a very unformalised kind of way. She was definitely much better informed than I was. I mean, a novel like *Nights at the Circus* really does draw on Bakhtin

[for instance].... I think she herself talked about the novel at times as being like an eighteenth century novel, politics turned into fiction. And my project has never been as overtly political as that, I don't think. But I certainly admire the politics in her books.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Would you then tend to avoid calling your fiction overtly politicised?

**SARAH WATERS:** Well, only because I'm wary of taking on a term that I feel belongs to better writers, really. Because for me, it's always been more of a mish-mash of things with my writing, it's always come from somewhere more instinctive, or somewhere that feels a bit more like an area of my brain that operates slightly below the surface. So obviously the things that I look for when I'm starting a book or writing a book, when I'm looking to the past, for example, I'm looking for sites of interest or possibility around sexuality or around gender, and thinking about how class impacts on that. So as far as I'm concerned all those things are very political things, but I'm just wary of making grand claims.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** In another interview, you said that you wanted to write about pornography, “not in a censorious or prudish way, and to suggest some ways in which women might appropriate it for their own ends”.<sup>2</sup> Have you read Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*?

**SARAH WATERS:** Yes.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Were you thinking of that, or has that been an influence?

**SARAH WATERS:** I read that again recently, when I was doing this Carter introduction, and again was blown away by it. [It] seemed to me, when I first read it, which again would have been in the late 80s, [that] no other feminist writers were taking that line. Feminist writers were just anti-porn, it seemed to me, and she was alone in that whole moral pornography thing she does in *The Sadeian Woman*, and I just thought it was amazing really.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** She sort of anticipated the debate [within feminism regarding pornography], didn't she?

**SARAH WATERS:** Totally. So it was very much there in the background with a novel like *Tipping the Velvet*, but I suppose it came back to the fore when I was writing *Fingersmith*, which deals with pornography and ultimately tries to at least gesture towards the possibility that women could write their own porn themselves, even if I don't sort of show it. But certainly with *Tipping the Velvet* I read a lot of Victorian pornography, and I

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was interested in thinking about what that might offer me, as a modern lesbian feminist writer; but also thinking about [it] historically, how pornography might have worked for the women who read it or the women who wrote it, the women who were involved in the business side of it, women in the sex industry. Rather than taking a very clear anti-porn line, which seemed to me to be another story.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Just out of interest, is there much Victorian pornography written by women?

**SARAH WATERS:** Not really, no, nothing explicitly written by women that I've come across. You can only speculate about some of the stuff, most of it seems to be written for a male audience, as much as you can extract that from a text. But for me, one of the interesting things was to take a piece of pornography in which lesbian desire was staged, apparently for male pleasure. Usually a man steps in and takes over, and it's sort of a prelude.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Which continues to be a theme.

**SARAH WATERS:** Exactly, yeah, nothing's changed. [The interesting thing] was for me to try and take that out of its context and use it in a different way, or to look to the lesbian bits and to put them in *Tipping the Velvet*, which in the middle section has that sort of lurch into pornographic bits and pieces – to put that in a completely different context, which actually, in a sense, rescues the lesbian content. But certainly Carter, with *Sadeian Woman*, she opens up possibilities for doing that kind of thing.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Do you have any theories on why the Victorian and the neo-Victorian have taken off to such an extent, in popular, academic, and critical circles in the last ten or twenty years?

**SARAH WATERS:** I don't actually, which is weird because you'd think I would, and it's something that I've been asked for years – even actually [in terms of] *my* interest, everyone says to me, why the Victorians, and even that I can only put in very loose kinds of ways. For me, when I wanted to write a lesbian historical novel, the 1890s just seemed kind of perfect for it, really, in the sense that things were changing, but they were foreign enough to be interesting. And people were identifying themselves as homosexual or whatever, and organising.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Angela Carter said a very similar thing when she was talking about why she set *Nights at the Circus* at the end of the nineteenth century, that there was this consciousness coming to the fore, particularly

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class consciousness and feminist consciousness.<sup>3</sup> But you’ve gone right back into the Victorian period as well.

**SARAH WATERS:** I have, I have. I mean, my own attractions have been, I think, ultimately to do with how ... the nineteenth century as we’ve understood it has often presented itself as a sort of psychological landscape. I grew up watching Hammer horror films, lots of which have a kind of pseudo-Victorian setting, and lots of which actually use stories that were first written in the nineteenth century, like *Dracula*, like *Frankenstein*, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. So it seems to me that there is something about those nineteenth-century novels and their social contexts that lends itself to a Gothic landscape, a Gothic interpretation, which for me has been really fruitful. But why other writers? I mean, some writers respond to the Gothic, what they perceive of as the Gothic in the nineteenth century. The institutions, the prisons and the workhouses, and the social divides, and even the corsets and things like that, there’s a kind of kinkiness to it, which has really appealed to me. But more generally, I don’t know. I’ve sometimes thought that it’s a way of addressing issues that are still very, very current in British culture, like class and gender, and submerged sexuality or sexual underworlds. Things that we think we’re pretty cool with, and actually we’re not at all, and we keep on wanting to go back to the nineteenth century to play these out on a bigger scale, precisely because they’re still very current for us.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** And as if to prove to ourselves that we’ve moved on.

**SARAH WATERS:** Yeah. But our very fascination with it suggests that it’s speaking to us. And of course, we’ve constructed it in a very particular way, actually, to do that.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Can you think of any particular reason why the last ten years in particular should have seen such a huge flowering of interest?

**SARAH WATERS:** Well, I’d like to be able to make some really neat links between things happening in society and in contemporary culture, [but] I don’t know really. Maybe in another fifty years it will become completely clear. I know that there were some influential novels that paved the way – there was [John Fowles’s] *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* which did a lot to make us rethink the Victorians, and then there was [A. S. Byatt’s] *Possession*. There was a rash of books I think around *Possession*, like [Peter Carey’s] *Oscar and Lucinda*, and some Peter Ackroyd stuff maybe.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** And there was Foucault as well, in between, I guess.

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**SARAH WATERS:** Yes, of course. But it's true, I don't know why it's got this big.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** I wanted to ask you which Ackroyd you'd read, and in particular if you'd read *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*?

**SARAH WATERS:** Yes, that came out as I was writing *Tipping the Velvet*, and I thought, oh my God, here's a [neo-Victorian] novel with music hall, London's underworld; so I was quite nervous about that. And of course, when you're writing a novel ... well, I don't know, because I haven't got a baby, but if you have a baby all you see in the world is babies. So I felt like it was a bit close to home, but of course, I didn't realise that there would be room for a thousand novels about music hall in the late Victorian period.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** And they're very different.

**SARAH WATERS:** And they're very different. Anyway, basically I read it, anxiously, while I was writing *Tipping*. And you know, I like his stuff. I find him a rather snobby writer, I don't like that side of him at all. But he's a brilliant writer in other ways, imaginatively. That was one of the ones I did like, others I didn't like at all.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** It's interesting, I think, that when you read Nancy and [Ackroyd's] Lizzie alongside each other, there are some similarities in the narrative tone – there's a kind of delight and a teasing, in keeping back the thrills and plot twists and all that kind of thing.

**SARAH WATERS:** That's something that actually we haven't talked about, that I think is one of the tremendous appeals of the nineteenth century – its fictions are so thrilling and so exciting, and they do allow you both as a writer and a reader to indulge all that basic human pleasure in plot. Maybe that's the thing, actually. Because I think what happened with mainstream literary fiction in this country, maybe in the 90s, was that it got very sort of arid. And then suddenly, here was this form that allowed [it] ... not that you have to write about the nineteenth century in a nineteenth-century style, but lots of authors have tended to do that, like a celebration of the Victorian novel itself. And certainly that was something that I enjoyed doing in all of those Victorian novels of mine. And I think maybe it's that as much as anything, that it allows for this ... celebration of narrativity, that other sorts of literature just weren't allowing.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** And that wasn't fashionable, for a long time, was it?

**SARAH WATERS:** Yeah, it's interesting, the last novel I wrote was set in the 40s and the one I'm writing now is set in the 40s, so I've been doing a

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lot of reading from that mid-century [period], and actually Dickens was terribly unfashionable in that period. The Victorians themselves were seen as a bit of a joke .... [I]t was the eighteenth century that was seen as more – well, it was obviously an age that was very appealing at that time, partly because it was seen as an age of reason, compared to the 40s which was a time of chaos. Not that there wasn't a chaotic side to the eighteenth century, but certainly the Victorians weren't in fashion at all. And Victorian houses – you know that whole thing for buying a period home with a Victorian fireplace, which I'm doing at the moment, I'm just about to put an offer in on a house – in the 70s, Victorian houses, people were just ripping things out.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Really?

**SARAH WATERS:** I know, it's amazing, isn't it. You could buy them for about 50p; I mean it was *so* unfashionable. It's easy to forget that, but it is a very recent thing actually, this fascination with the Victorians.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Do you feel that you write for an academic community, that you identify with?

**SARAH WATERS:** Well, inevitably, I've identified less and less with an academic community as time's gone on, purely because I'm not part of it anymore. I have friends still who are academics, but it's [been] years since I wrote anything you could call academic. And I'm interested, but not desperately interested, when my own books are taken up and written about by academics. So I don't write for an academic audience, but there is still a part of me that I think of as an academic aspect, even if ... it's a sort of nerdy aspect. I mean, it's a bookish aspect. A lot of my research for the period will be to read the books of the period, and I'm very interested in all the novels. I think there's always an element of pastiche in my novels, in the sense that I want to write in a form, in an idiom, that seems to me to belong to the period, whether it's a first person or even a third person voice, like my last book. And it's also bookish in the sense that I feel like I've still got my academic interests, when I look at the past, at issues around gender, what was going on here, what does this cultural or social change signify or how does it impact on women or on gay people or whatever. So, I think of that as my academic background, but really it's just me being interested in the world, and in how history works, and that sort of thing. So that's what I bring to my books, but it's more me bringing it than me sending it out to somebody else.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** What's the attraction or importance for you of creating that idiom, or adopting a historical voice?

**SARAH WATERS:** Well, it's quite fun, for one thing. It's a fantastic, pleasurable thing to do. And of course with the neo-Victorian books, it was about finding a voice for my characters that felt authentic, that belonged to the period I was writing about, that sort of rang true. But even with *The Night Watch*, my last book, which is set in the 40s and has a third person voice, even then I still kept the tone of the 40s novels and films that I was reading and watching, because I wanted to write from a perspective that felt like it belonged to my characters, rather than something of my own. I know it's an illusion, obviously, but I think the whole point of writing a historical novel is to make the leap into a slightly different mentality and a different cultural landscape.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** So creating that sense of authenticity is very important.

**SARAH WATERS:** Yes, it is actually, even though I know it's all an illusion, and we're all recreating the past in a different way, and it's always a process ... it still feels important to, well, in a sense almost to give a reader that experience, because I think it's so important to remember that culture and society are such provisional, such temporary things, because we get attached to cultural and social systems in a very negative kind of way. And if you take a longer view, and just remind people that these things are always in process, they're not fixed, and gender's never fixed, and how we feel about women changes all the time, and how we feel about sex and sexuality and class, these things change all the time ... historical fiction can dramatically enact that. Not that I feel like I've got an agenda with my writing in that kind of way, but it's a fundamental thing of mine that history is a process, and in a sense a good historical novel is a celebration of that.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Do you have any thoughts on how the reception of your books, both critical and popular, might have been influenced by the fact that people were aware of your background as a scholar?

**SARAH WATERS:** Not at all. Well, actually, I say that, it does often get mentioned in reviews, as if it gives me this extra credibility or something: 'She knows what she's talking about.' 'Waters, who spent three years ...', you know. And everybody always gets it wrong and says I spent three years writing a thesis on the Victorian [novel] ... maybe it does give me this sort of a doctor's cap or something.

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**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** That’s the impression I’ve got, particularly from reading reviews. I mean, it’s very difficult to gauge what the popular response is outside of sales figures, but the reviews I’ve read always seem to mention your academic credentials.

**SARAH WATERS:** It’s funny, I hadn’t thought about that before.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** I wonder if that’s contributed to a fast-tracking into the literary club.

**SARAH WATERS:** Maybe. Maybe. I think it’s amazing too, how much we do want our historical fiction to be authentic, even though it’s fiction. I know that myself. And you feel cheated if you then discover that they didn’t get it right, or they were manipulating things, even though it’s *all* a manipulation. We do have this tremendous investment in authenticity. So it’s probably a slight seal of approval, isn’t it?

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Your use of topography, and in particular London’s topography, to create that sense of historical authenticity, to create a sense of living history – I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit? Was it a conscious decision to foreground – I’m thinking particularly of *Tipping the Velvet* – all those scenes where Nancy is walking the streets?

**SARAH WATERS:** Yeah it was, it was, but only inasmuch as ... it felt natural, you know. I live in London, I love London, and I feel very attached to London’s topography, and my characters tend to as well. I had been doing some reading and some thinking about how London in its geography, like anywhere, enacts various kinds of social realities of the time, how the streets were laid out in a certain way, and the East End in relation to the West End. Judith Walkowitz talks about that sort of thing,<sup>4</sup> and I’d read that while I was writing my thesis, so I definitely had all that information and stuff bubbling away. And obviously ... I’m very conscious of that, of my relationship with the city, other people’s relationship with the city, other communities, other ethnic groups, how we all use the city, how we’ve all got our own version of the city. I find that very interesting. So it just felt natural to have that in *Tipping the Velvet*, where she is often at street level, in all sorts of ways, and actually because she’s cross-dressing has a freedom to wander the streets that none of my other female characters have ever had. It’s really weird, I’ve missed that, in a way. Except my last book [*The Night Watch*] has this butch woman who’s an ambulance driver, and she has that sort of relationship with the city. Whereas my other, Victorian characters were all in peril, ladies in peril.

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**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** I think London in particular, for Ackroyd as well, almost functions as a way into the past, somehow. I find London and history such an interesting interconnection. It maintains such a grasp on the historical imagination.

**SARAH WATERS:** It does, doesn't it? You can't walk down a city street without being conscious of the layers of history. Although of course, if you go somewhere like Rome, where the layers go much further back, it actually puts it into perspective a bit. It is a relatively recent history but it's very, very complex, London's history, and that's very visible.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** You say that the pleasure of creating the historical idiom is very real, but the pleasure of reading it is very important too. Do you think that might also be part of the reason for the popularity of novels like yours, the thrill that the reader gets from the vicarious consumption of history?

**SARAH WATERS:** I'm sure it must be, yes. Certainly lots of people say exactly those things about 'Oh, I can smell it, I can see the prison.' I get that a lot actually, which is lovely, although ... I would hate it if my books were only a period drama.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** Like Dickens World.

**SARAH WATERS:** Yes, Waters World. [*Laughs*] But yes, of course, that's one of the pleasures for me, really trying to inhabit my characters and my characters' lives, you know, what are they surrounded by, and how do they feel, and so yes, of course, that's what readers are picking up.

**ABIGAIL DENNIS:** I want to ask you ... why you switched periods. It seems like an enormous challenge, trying to inhabit a historical period, and a whole different psychology, a different way of being in the world, a different sense of surrounding. Were you finding by the end of three novels that you were tiring of the Victorian period?

**SARAH WATERS:** No, actually, because in a way, moving to the 40s was just having to do that all over again, really, having to start from scratch and do the same stuff but with new material. I wasn't tiring of the process at all ... I wasn't exactly tiring of the nineteenth century, but I was worried that I *would* tire of it, it was more that. I felt like *Fingersmith* was just crazy, was just like pantomime Victorian. I mean they all are really, but with *Fingersmith* I felt that I'd just pushed it about as far as I could go for a while, before I was carted off to the asylum. And I felt like I was in danger of pastiching myself really, as well as pastiching Wilkie Collins and

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Dickens and stuff. And it was like, the longer I leave it to make a change, the harder it will be, so I thought now might be a good time. I've written these three, a nice neat number. It was things like that as much as anything, wanting to move in a slightly different direction, and wanting to see if I *could* move in a slightly different direction. But now I do find it hard to think about going back to the Victorians. Because I do have this novel floating around that would have a late nineteenth century setting, that I've had in my head for ages and I've always thought, I will go back and do that one day. But having left them, I think it would be quite hard to go back in a new way. I mean, I'm very happy where I am, in the mid-twentieth century at the moment, but ... maybe more time needs to elapse and I can go back with fresh eyes. Maybe by then the Victorians will have been reinvented slightly, and I'll be seeing different things.

### **Notes**

1. Waters refers to the 2006 Vintage edition of *Nights at the Circus*. Carter's novel is set at the fin de siècle.
2. The Bookseller, 'Her Thieving Hands' [Interview with Sarah Waters], reproduced by Virago Press, 2005, viewed 1 May 2007, [http://www.virago.co.uk/author\\_results.asp?SF1=data&ST1=feature&REF=e2006111617063697&SORT=author\\_id&TAG=&CID=&PGE=&LANG=en](http://www.virago.co.uk/author_results.asp?SF1=data&ST1=feature&REF=e2006111617063697&SORT=author_id&TAG=&CID=&PGE=&LANG=en).
3. See Carter's comments on Fevvers as representative of the 'New Woman' (Katsavos 1994: 13), cited in Aidan Day's *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Day 1998: 172), extracted in Sarah Gamble's *The Fiction of Angela Carter: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Gamble 2001: 144).
4. See Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

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