

For Guardian Book Club – *Fingersmith* (June 2006)

SPOILER ALERT – This article features key plot details from *Fingersmith*.

Often, when I'm asked about the writing of *Fingersmith*, I say that I used the book as a way of mopping-up the various juicy nineteenth-century titbits I hadn't been able to fit into my first two novels; and I'm only half joking. Working on *Tipping the Velvet* had given me a sense of the sort of lush lesbian stories it might be possible to tease out of the Victorian setting, and *Affinity*, with its prison cells and séances, had only drawn me further into the darker, queerer institutions of nineteenth-century life. By the time I'd finished writing that book, I was hooked on the 'sensation' novels of writers like Wilkie Collins, Sheridan LeFanu and Mary Elizabeth Braddon: novels whose preoccupation with sex, crime and family scandals had once made them runaway bestsellers. Tentatively, I began to piece together a melodramatic plot of my own, drawing on all those aspects of Victorian culture which still fascinated and intrigued me: asylums, pornography, bibliophilia, the world of servants, the world of thieves.

I started, in fact, with a little theft of my own. The moment at the madhouse door when Sue discovers the true, dreadful nature of the swindle she's caught up in was based on a similar twist in *The Woman in White* (which was itself inspired by an actual eighteenth-century French criminal case). For me, this was always *Fingersmith's* narrative heart, the engine both of the text and of my own excitement at constructing it. I could see in hazy fashion, early on, the cast of characters such a moment would require; the tricky part came in bringing them all into focus, and in working out the particular involvement and investment of each. Obviously—and this would help my lesbian romance, too—I needed two young heroines; and for the dastardly swindle to work, one of them ought to be rich but trapped and desperate, the other poor and wily and prepared to do a very dark deed. All the better, I thought, if the girls were the products of radically different worlds, each unable to read the subtle workings of the other's *milieu*. So, for upper-class Maud I looked to the classics of sensation fiction itself, to novels like LeFanu's *Uncle Silas* and *The Rose and the Key* (both of which feature unhappy heroines named Maud), and to Braddon's insanity blockbuster *Lady Audley's Secret*. Sue, however, came to me from Victorian journalism: her voice was inspired by those worldly, plangent, poignant voices captured by social investigators such as Henry Mayhew, author of the mammoth *London Labour and the London Poor*.

The Victorians' documentary interest in their own underworlds, in fact, gave me all sorts of details. Dickens and *Oliver Twist*, of course, inspired the Lant Street kitchen on which *Fingersmith* opens. (Dickens himself had lived in Lant Street as a boy.) And Charles Manby Smith's *Curiosities of London Life* provided other grotesqueries—including the 'dog-making' scam from which John Vroom gets his peculiar fur coat. Mrs Sucksby emerged only slowly as a sort of female Magwitch, her part at the centre of the whole dark project almost the last the thing to fall into place. I imagined her simply, at first, as another jolly Borough thief. Then, one day while walking up the Queensbridge Road, east London, I saw an elderly woman minding a child in a pushchair, and thought of Victorian baby-farmers. After that—well, not for nothing was I was once in the chorus of a school production of *HMS Pinafore*: it seemed like a shocking waste of a baby-farmer not to have her, Little Buttercup-style, swap infants . . .

Indeed, if I'd been in the habit of giving my novels epigraphs, I'd have been tempted, with *Fingersmith*, to use Little Buttercup's dark hint that 'Things are seldom what they seem, Skim milk masquerades as cream . . .' For it became clear to me that, where *Tipping the Velvet* had featured cross-dressing, *Fingersmith* was interested in transvestism of a different sort, as its characters swapped the trappings of class, passed themselves off as things they weren't—or, more disturbingly, were passed off as them by other people without being aware of it. This led to complications of plot and theme which at times even I found dizzying, and produced what seemed to me to be rather wonderful confusions—confusions, for example, around who in the novel is genuinely genteel and who's only 'snide', who's barmy and who's sane, who is innocent and who corrupt. And though I opted, ultimately, for a thoroughly Victorian meting out of rewards and punishments, the rewards are surely qualified ones, the happy ending tempered by sadness and by loss. But that's all in the nature of sensation fiction, which was at its best when tugging at the seams of certainties and easy solutions. I hope that Collins, Braddon and LeFanu would have approved.

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