

Interview de Iona Grey pour son roman *Lettres à Stella (Letters to the lost)*

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1. Letters to the lost is your first novel and is now published in 12 countries. How do you feel about it?

A mixture of astonishment, excitement and huge gratitude. It feels slightly surreal to think of people reading it in so many different countries and languages, but in the best possible way.

2. Tell us about your habits of writing.

I write full time, around looking after my family. My children are all older now so in some ways it's easier to find the time to write, though I do find that teenagers take up more headspace than little ones. I might not have to get them dressed in the morning or put them to bed, but it's surprising what an effect exam stress and arguments about piercing/going out/hair dye can have on my ability to focus!

3. What inspired the writing of this novel?

A combination of several things, I think. For a long time I'd had an idea in my head about an ordinary house on an ordinary street that had stood empty for a long time, and why that might be. Then one day when I was passing my daughter's bedroom I saw a letter lying open on the desk, and the phrase 'Letters to the Lost' came into my head. This gave me a title (for the English edition, anyway!) and an idea to work with, and the story grew from there.

4. You mixed the novel with the epistolary. Why did you chose this plan? It was not too difficult to find a good balance?

I knew from the start that letters would play a key part in the story because they were going to provide the link between the present and the past. I wrote the 1940s section first, and so I was writing Dan's letters to Stella as I went along, filling in the times when they were separated, which felt quite natural. I made sure I stuck accurately to the timeframe of the war, so the bombing raids Dan takes part in gave me a rigid structure to work around which actually made it much easier. It wasn't until after I'd finished the 1940s story that I went back to the beginning of the book and wrote the present day, including the first heartfelt letter that Dan sends to try to find Stella. By that time his voice was very clear in my head, and I loved writing that bit.

5. Your book takes place in London. You describe regularly the town and its streets. Is it a place which you know well and which inspires you?

I live in a small farming town in the North West of England, a long way from London (in every way!) but I do visit very regularly and over the years I've come to know the city well. As a visitor I keep a particular look out for details I can put into a book and often plan trips around walking a particular part of the city or going to see a specific building, and I find it endlessly inspiring. Even though it was battered so badly in the Blitz, it's amazing how similar it is today to the city that so many troops from all over the world passed through during those extraordinary wartime years.

6. Your story raises the question of women in society. It was important for you to put them in the honor?

I wanted to write about ordinary women, because I think that often they are (understandably) left out of historical fiction. For many women, the Second World War provided independence and opportunity as they were encouraged to take an active role, but I was interested in exploring what it was like to be left at home, and to be quite disconnected from the great advances that were being made towards equality; to live in fear, not just of a foreign enemy, but one much closer to home. At this time women often had no means of escape from an abusive husband, and no support from the law or their community. I wanted to examine how that might have felt, and also look at how attitudes to many issues affecting women have changed in the intervening years.

7. The house of Greenfields Lane has an important place. Like Daphne du Maurier, do you think that a house can be a full character? It is what you wanted?

I'm fascinated by houses, and find myself constantly drawn to stories that have houses at their centre. For me the theme of 'home' is immensely powerful. I love the idea that houses retain an imprint of the people who have lived in them and the events that have taken place there. I enjoy descriptive writing and scene setting, and if that evokes a house strongly enough to make it feel like a character in its own right I'd be very happy!

8. Jess is lost and at a crossroads. Find Stella gives her a purpose and a meaning in her life. How did you think of this character who makes the connection between the past and the present?

When I had the idea of the empty, abandoned house I imagined that it would be discovered by someone breaking in and finding something unexpected. Jess was a

lovely character to write because she combines extreme vulnerability with a certain toughness. She's also from the North of England, which I liked (because I am too!)

9. On Instagram, I understood that you were working on a new project. Can you tell us more about it?

It's a book with another house at its heart, but a far bigger and grander one this time! I'm really enjoying imagining its huge, elegant rooms, and the effects that time will have on its grandeur. The story begins right at the start of the war, in September 1939, when no one could really foresee what hardships lay ahead. It's an unsettled time of upheaval and uncertainty, when the old order is threatened and circumstances bring the most unlikely people together. And, of course, it's a love story!

10. Question important for every lovers of literature. Which are your favourite novels and which you often advise?

*Just as I began writing *Lettres a Stella* a friend sent me a copy of Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*, which I loved and found hugely inspiring. Her first book, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, remains one of my favourites. I've always found books where the past is viewed from the vantage point of the present completely irresistible, and I remember the shiver I got when I read the first line of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* as a teenager ('The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.') A book I return to time and time again, and recommend at every opportunity, is *The Shooting Party* by Isabel Colegate, which is beautifully written, evocative and poignant. And *Suite Francaise*, by Irene Nemirovsky, which is one of those rare and precious books that makes you feel breathless while reading and bereft at the end.*

Thank you again and have a good weekend,

Thank you!