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Q&A with Michael Ford Author of *The Poisoned House*

Where/how did you come up with the idea for *The Poisoned House*?

The Poisoned House started with a character, Abigail, who is the lowest of the low in Victorian house: an orphaned girl servant and practically a slave. Originally, I saw the book as a straightforward adventure and triumph-over-adversity story, and I wrote the first chapter quickly—a foiled escape attempt. I had an idea of most of the book's characters as the archetypal servants who would be found in a well-off Victorian household—scullery maid, butler, footman, cook, parlour maid, housekeeper, etc. It was only later, after I saw Susan Hill's famous ghost story *The Woman in Black* on stage in London, that I introduced the next character—the ghostly presence. The ghost is an ally to Abigail, but a frightening one sometimes.

I've always loved ghost stories too, like Henry James' classic *The Turn of the Screw*, and short Victorian spine-tinglers by writers like MR James and JS Le Fanu. There's something about Victorian London, shrouded in smog, that just screams spookiness. The Victorian era played host to great advances in science and medicine, and where that met the Victorian obsession with death and spirituality, chilling stories emerged—like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. More recently, Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* and Michelle Paver's *Dead Matter* have shown there's a real vogue for historical ghostly tales.

How did you research your book?

Thankfully, at the time I was writing *The Poisoned House*, I lived in London, where the book is set. Reminders and resources about Victorian culture are everywhere in London. Above our heads, Victorian buildings tower, and below our feet, the system of sewers is one built by the Victorian engineer Joseph Bazalgette. I don't know anywhere else in the world where history is as messily layered as London. I did much of the writing of TPH in the Guildhall Library, which has a large reference section relating to the development of London since pre-Roman times. The Guildhall itself has been on its current site since Anglo-Saxon times, and parts of the current building date from the 15th century. It's built on the site of an old Roman amphitheatre.

I consulted numerous books on Victorian life. The journalist Henry Mayhew wrote an important series of studies called *London Labour and the London Poor*, in which he describes all of the different lowly characters one might come across in London, from mudlark (people who sifted through the filthy banks of the River Thames for any detritus of value), to chimney-sweeps and chestnut-sellers. There are also very helpful materials online, such as the *Dictionary of Victorian London*, which is full of primary sources about everyday life, from the make-up of household cleaning products to the cost of Hackney carriages. I visited Victorian buildings such as Carlyle House in the Chelsea district of London, where the eminent Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle lived. The National Trust has maintained the house in its original condition, with furniture and wallpaper as it was in the nineteenth century. I also read several fantastic books on life as a Victorian servant, including the famous *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*.

Who's your favorite character in *The Poisoned House*?

It has to be Mrs. Cotton, the sadistic housekeeper who hates the main character Abigail. It's always the baddies in books whom I like the most! They're the most fun to write, too—I wanted to create a character in the classic Dickensian mould of being genuinely wicked. Mrs. Cotton rules over the house with an iron fist—she's the sister to Lord Greave's dead wife and gradually she's trying to assume the role of lady of the house. While Lord Greave languishes upstairs, she hosts dinner parties and even wears her sister's old clothes and jewelry. In Victorian households, the staff structure was very rigid and hierarchical, but Mrs. Cotton abuses that. She's greedy and grasping, and while trying to improve her own position, she keeps the rest of the servants in place, terrorizing them into doing her will. Abi particularly, with no power or wealth of her own, is treated almost like a slave.

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How long did it take you to write *The Poisoned House*?

I wrote the book mainly on Wednesdays and Saturdays over a period of about six months. I tend to work best in the morning, and follow the maxim, “get it written, then get it right,” i.e. don’t try and polish the writing on the first draft. I try to plot my stories quite carefully in advance (that’s especially important when writing mysteries, otherwise one can get in a terrible tangle), so I’d have a fairly good idea what happens in each chapter—what Abigail has to discover, and what clues to lay for the reader.

Have you always wanted to be a writer?

Since I was about 16 years old. Before that I wanted to be an archaeologist (well, I wanted to be Indiana Jones!). I had one particularly great English teacher at school (thanks, Mr. Andrew!), who really encouraged me to read widely. I first realized I had a love of literature when we read John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Most of the books I enjoyed then were poetry: Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Simon Armitage. I wrote some poems at the time and showed them to Mr. Andrew. He was undeservedly kind.

Who are your favorite children’s authors?

I didn’t read so many children’s books when I was a boy, but I read all of Roald Dahl’s books at a young age. He’s still, for me, one of the greatest and most imaginative writers who ever lived. I also loved Willard Price’s adventure stories about two brothers, Hal and Roger, who travel around the world collecting animals. They haven’t really stood the test of time, though, because there wasn’t much of a conservation message—I seem to remember they occasionally snatched animals from their natural habitats for circuses!

Now that I write for young readers I read a lot more books for that age group. I think anything by Neil Gaiman is brilliant, and I thought Patrick Ness’s Chaos Walking trilogy was fantastic. I read quite a lot of books that are aimed at girls, too—as a boy I secretly loved Enid Blyton’s Mallory Towers, about a girls’ boarding school!

Do you believe in ghosts?

The rational part of me says no, of course not! But I think I’ve seen one. I was on holiday with friends, staying in a cliff-top villa in Sicily. We were eating dinner and suddenly a little girl of about seven or eight years old appeared behind my friends on the other side of the table. She skipped along behind them, then vanished! It wasn’t exactly scary, but it certainly made an impression - my friends all saw the blood drain out of my face. We were eating a lot of seafood though, so perhaps it wasn’t all that fresh!

As the variety of ghost stories shows, ghosts mean different things to different people. If a person or moment from the past “haunts” us or stays with us, that can have just as much effect psychologically as seeing a “real” ghost.

What are you writing next?

I’ve always got several ideas on the burner. As well as writing books in the Beast Quest series by Adam Blade with other writers. I’m working on a sci-fi series for younger readers and a sci-fi spy thriller for adults. I left Abigail’s story slightly open-ended, but I doubt there’ll be a sequel. One day I might revisit Victorian London from the perspective of another character—probably a girl from the other end of society’s spectrum.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

Write as often and as much as you can, read the writers you love, and try to get feedback not just from people who love you. All three things will help you improve. Writing is like playing a musical instrument—it takes a lot of practice.

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