

Book reviews

Five minutes with Elizabeth Kostova

1. *It took you ten years to write your first book, The Historian. How did you stay motivated?*

It was a labour of love. I was doing a lot of teaching and odd jobs, but writing it was my escape. It was hard-work, but also a pleasure. I loved the research aspect of it; it was a way of focusing in on something I was interested in.

2. *I know that there are plenty of people in our profession who were a bit thrilled to find that Dracula was after a librarian, a keeper of knowledge. Where did that come from?*

I needed a reason for why Dracula was collecting librarians, and it came to me as I wrote the story.

3. *Did you start with the library story or the Dracula story?*

I started with the Dracula story, but I'm so obsessed with libraries and scholarship that it just keep creeping in.

4. *Do you plot ahead, or do you write as you go?*

I had the structure of *The Historian* when I started, and then plotted it from there. *The Swan Thieves* I did very differently. I had characters I love and the general arc of the story but I wrote in long bursts the parts that engrossed me. It was a great way to write a story, but it took a long time to edit. It took me a year just to edit and reorder the book.

5. *In The Swan Thieves you write from the male 1st person. Did you have a hard time getting into that head space?*

Yes, I did. I always have my male friends, male writer friends, read over the male parts. They often tweak parts: 'oh Marlowe wouldn't drink that wine'. I love the challenge of writing characters who are very much not me.

6. *Your books seem to explore the importance of the arts to our humanity. Would you like to expand on that?*

When I wrote *The Historian* I spent 10 years engrossed in some pretty dark history. When I began looking at paintings, it was a kind of relief. I started to think about the really beautiful things we created, the miracles of human life. It felt like an antidote. There is something so amazing about standing in front of a beautiful painting, the past it creates, the time it came out of or defied. It's a beautiful thing.

7. *How was following up The Historian after it was such a success?*

A lot of people have asked me that! I was lucky that my publisher was very supportive of letting me write the next book I wanted to write. There's something about the writing process that doesn't allow you to think about anything else. I've never been interested in writing to a market, and I'd been writing seriously for 20 years before I published my first novel. It's a habit and a way of life. Even if I hadn't published *The Historian* I would have kept writing.

8. *What are you working on now?*

I started a new novel in November. It's so new a project that I'm not talking about it because I'm afraid the energy will run out. But it does involve a lot of historical research.

The Swan Thieves



Elizabeth Kostova
Hachette, 2009
ISBN: 9781847442406
RRP: \$32.99

Elizabeth Kostova made history with her debut novel *The Historian*, which became the bestseller to knock Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* out of the number one spot. *The Swan Thieves* is her highly anticipated sophomore effort.

Robert Oliver, a painter of some renown, enters the National Gallery of Art with a knife, where he attempts to destroy a painting based on the myth of Leda and Zeus. He is stopped, and placed in psychiatric care. When asked why, he states "I did it for her", before ceasing to speak altogether. Enter Andrew Marlowe, psychiatrist and amateur artist, who is determined to understand Robert, even if to do so requires unconventional methods.

Kostova writes long, slow stories, so plan ahead when picking up this one. That's not to say they're boring – not in the least – but she does take the time to unfold the story in pieces, almost like the rolling hills of the painted landscapes that pop up frequently in the narrative. Some readers may be put off by this, but those that persevere will be rewarded with a journey of psychological twists, obsession, artistry, and love.

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Jimba Jackobean and the Bouncer-Bangerrings

Alexis Tapp, Omar Aranda, illustrator
Jackowisp Publishing, 2009
ISBN: 9780980690705
RRP: \$17.95

Jimba Jackobean and the Bouncer-Bangerrings is a great read aloud book that has been written for early to middle primary school age children. For the older child, there are many challenging words and sounds that will assist with reading development.

This picture book is the first in a series set in the town of Jack-o-Whisp and contains a map at the beginning of the book which is wonderful and will attract any child's attention, especially those who enjoy reading fantasy. Aranda's illustrations remind me of those in the Lemony Snicket books, or of Tim Burton films such as *Edward Scissorhands* or *Beetlejuice*.

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Solace & Grief



Foz Meadows
Ford Street Publishing, 2010
ISBN: 9781876462895
RRP: \$19.95

It was with a skeptical mindset that I first opened *Solace & Grief*. Here we go, yet another young adult vampire novel, written and published as a bit of a cash spinner, riding on the wave of success that is Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series.

I thought wrong. *Solace & Grief* is the first in a series called *The Rare* and here's hoping to at least a couple more titles to draw the series to conclusion. I read this book over a period of around 24 hours and found myself wanting more, and I eagerly await the second book in the series. The author gives us a taste test of the next novel, with the first chapter at the end of the book. *Solace & Grief* has so much packed into it: there's the search for identity and understanding of self that the protagonist goes through, there's betrayal, good versus evil, love, romance, lust, and elements of

the well-loved series *X-men* thrown into the mix. Even better, it's Australian and there recognisable landmarks throughout the text, making one wonder if perhaps it's possible, that there are walking among us, the Rare.

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U is for Undertow



Sue Grafton
Pan MacMillan, 2009
ISBN: 978023711372
RRP: \$32.99

U is for Undertow, the 21st Kinsey Millhone mystery, is a strong addition to the series. Kinsey is an ex-policewoman private investigator in 1980s Santa Teresa, California, and her current case concerns a child's kidnapping and death 20 years before. Michael Sutton, a child himself at the time, has suddenly recalled seeing two men digging in the woods – could they have been about to bury a body?

Grafton mixes flashbacks – not only in time but in points of view – with Kinsey's present day work. The consequences of family environment are the major theme, and both positive and negative parent-child interactions are presented.

Sufficient back-story is given to refresh the memory of long-term fans and to bring newcomers up to speed. As with the latter stories, this one includes more of Kinsey's personal life, and shows the maturing of her character: rigid loner Kinsey expresses emotion and contemplates getting a pet!

This book is well-structured and can be read in chapters or chunks. Other critics have reported the lack of surprise in the denouement; however I did not find that it reduced my reading pleasure. I did note the occasional use of noughties (not eighties) slang. Overall, *U is for Undertow* is a book treat.

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The Preposterous Frog

Beverley George
illustrated by Tumi K. Steyn
Kenilworth Tales, 2010
ISBN: 9780957883178
RRP: \$15.00

In our multicultural world, children (and teachers) often come across names that are unfamiliar and a challenge to pronounce. *The Preposterous Frog* takes this problem and engages with it in a gentle tone that is at once practical, imaginative, and wise.

The concepts of names, identities, and friendships are explored through characters that are both real and sympathetic, be they a frog, a goldfish, or an owl. George's characters live in a safe but not completely untroubled world, where there are challenges to be met, friends to meet, and solutions to be found to life's difficulties. Charming black and white drawings from emerging artist Tumi K. Steyn extend the characterisation and enhance the sense of calm that pervades the text. This collaboration between an Australian writer and a South African illustrator amply demonstrates the sense of goodwill and cooperation that underlies this deceptively simple, well-told tale. Attractively presented in a delicious froggy-green cover, this soft cover book is nevertheless sturdy enough to withstand many re-readings. Suitable to be read to preschoolers; independent readers to Year 3.

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Book of Souls



Glenn Cooper
Arrow Books, 2010
ISBN: 9780099547785
RRP: \$32.95

Glenn Cooper's race-against-time thriller *Book of Souls* is the sequel to his bestselling novel *Library of the Dead* about an ancient library protected by the US Government that holds a shocking and dangerous secret. Filled with historical intrigue and conspiracy theory, *Book of Souls* has been compared to *The Da Vinci Code*, however the novel lacks the sophistication and believability of Dan Brown's bestseller. This is not to say it is without merit, but it is fair to say that the comparison to the cult classic breeds unrealistic expectation in the reader.

Book of Souls is an enjoyable read with plenty of pace that uncovers a mystery hidden for centuries. Imaginative and interesting, the novel segues into different moments in time as each new clue is unravelled. Former FBI agent Will Piper is likable as the main protagonist, and his flawed struggle to overcome his personal demons and unlock the secrets of the library once and for all keeps the pages turning. It doesn't have the makings of a big budget Tom Hank's movie, but if you're looking for some intrigue and fast-paced action without getting bogged down in historical detail, *Book of Souls* will definitely appeal to you.

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