

Tracy Chevalier has found her greatest pleasure in writing about the past, she tells Sarah Meyrick

IN TRACY CHEVALIER'S latest novel, *A Single Thread*, Britain is mourning the losses of the First World War. Violet Speedwell, who lost both a fiancé and a brother in the fighting, is one of the nation's "surplus women". Rather than stay at home with her suffocating mother, as society expects, Violet strikes a blow for independence and moves to Winchester, where she scrapes a lonely living. Then, through a chance encounter with the "broderers" of Winchester Cathedral, she joins a group of women who are making a set of intricate kneelers for the cathedral, and her life begins to change.

The starting-point for the novel came from England's cathedrals, Chevalier says, rather than the story of surplus women. "I didn't grow up practising the [Anglican] faith, but, whenever I go into a cathedral, I feel something of the largeness of the space, the sense of something much bigger than me. So I knew I wanted to set a book in an English cathedral."

She visited "Ely and Wells and Lincoln and Canterbury" in her quest for a story. "But Winchester kept coming up in my mind. I went there on a research trip, and I came across the cushions and kneelers. There was a small display that explained they were mostly made by women in the 1930s. And it suddenly struck me what this group of women were like. I wasn't planning to write about surplus women, but it became really fascinating. It began to build in my mind."

Chevalier's practice of religion is "a bit of a mishmash", she says. "I'm a Quaker, and my husband is Jewish; so I go to Quaker meetings on a Sunday. And, last Wednesday, it was Yom Kippur, and we were in the synagogue; so there's a bit of everything that all balances out. The synagogue is noisy, and Quaker meetings are totally the opposite."

She has no problem with this. "It's not about what you believe in, but what you feel. For me, a cathedral is a place of stepping outside the river of your life, which is going fast."

She believes that there is value for everybody in stepping out of that river. She enjoys the glories of choral evensong, mentioning how much she enjoyed attending the service in Winchester Cathedral immediately before her book launch. "That was good, because it really calmed me. Evensong is the most beautiful of services."

ALONGSIDE embroidery, the book explores another most Anglican of activities: bell-ringing. "I looked up one day and heard it," she says. "So I contacted the tower captain, and I really fell for bell-ringing. It's so deeply English and eccentric. Bell-ringers don't play a melody, but a mathematical pattern. It's kind of crazy. But I loved watching and listening, and I got a sense of how hard it is. You really have to pay attention to each other."

She is fascinated by rope-sight. "You're standing in a circle, and watching out of your peripheral vision, working out how your pulling on the rope fits in. That's a great



JONATHAN DRORI

Tracy Chevalier, author of ten novels, including the bestseller *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and her latest, *A Single Thread*

Distance's enchantment

metaphor for communal life: how you work in harmony." (She even wanted to call the novel *Rope-sight*, but her editor thought that it made the book sound like a crime novel.) "But I often think about it as a concept."

The bell-ringers provide an important counterpoint to the embroiderers in the novel. "I wanted a male presence. Now, in Winchester and other places, there are plenty of women bell-ringers, but, in the 1930s, it was exclusively male. The bell-ringers are a kind of balance to the embroiderers. Bell-ringers ring for themselves — most people don't understand the patterns, and it doesn't matter. But the embroiderers do it for the comfort of others."

She sees this as a division along gender lines. "The male bell-ringers do it for the intellectual challenge, but the women embroiderers to bring comfort. I needed Violet to learn a little of the male traits, and that balances out what she learns from the embroiderers."

ASINGLE THREAD is Chevalier's tenth novel, and, like its predecessors, is set at a particular point in history. She says that she turns to history to escape her own world. "There's nothing wrong with my life, but I don't want to write about it. My first novel [*The Virgin Blue*] was half in the past and half in the present, and I realised I really enjoyed the historical bit. It got me outside myself. And nobody asks if my historical characters are me; so it offers a little distance and a little privacy."

She loves the research, possibly more than the writing. "I'm fascinated by learning something new and discovering interesting possible stories and characters. I'm like a magpie. I do lots more research than I use, but that way I get a sense of the time, and feel comfortable and con-

fidant about writing it. For example, for this book I interviewed a man in his nineties who told me all about the dance bands and cafés in Winchester in the 1930s, the colourful details."

About three-quarters of the research takes place before writing. The writing process then throws up more questions that require more specific investigation. "For instance, I needed to know where [in Winchester] Violet lives, the sort of area where there would have been a boarding house."

On average, a novel takes her between two and three years to write. She sometimes feels the pressure to produce her next book, but admits that this comes from herself rather than her publishers. "I really admire someone like Donna Tartt, who took ten years to write her first novel, and then another ten for the next. But I do wonder how you maintain the interest for all that time. Four years is the longest for me."

WAS she always going to be a writer? "I used to say I would be a writer or a librarian, because I read a lot," she says. She moved to the UK from her native United States in the 1980s to work in publishing, but soon found that she wanted to work on her own books rather than other people's. She is a graduate of the famous school of creative writing at the University of East Anglia, where her tutors included the novelists Malcom Bradbury and Rose Tremain.

The book that she is most famous for, of course, is *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which has sold five million copies worldwide and was made into a film starring Colin Firth and Scarlett Johansson. "It's 20 years since it came out; so I try not to let it affect me too much," she says now. "It makes you more self-conscious. I'm grateful to have an audience; but I've written enough since then, and a

lot of very different books, that it's easier now. I try not to let it go to my head, or I could spend the rest of my life trying to repeat it."

What was its secret? "I think it is two things. It brought attention to a painting that is beloved because it is so masterful and so mysterious, and the book takes part in that speculation. Second, I think it's what all writers are chasing, when the subject of the book and the style of the telling are intertwined. I thought, I'm going to write in the style of a Vermeer painting, where less is more. So the writing informs the story."

She observes that many writers have a good idea, but the execution is a let-down, and others are "in love with prose" but don't have a strong enough story. That she managed to bring it together in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* was "dumb luck", she says. "The killer is the consciousness."

She continues to try to write in a simple, unflashy way. "I edit a lot. I ask, 'What word could I cut out in that sentence, or do I need that sentence?'" She is aiming for something that is tightly written, because that gives readers confidence.

A writer whom she greatly admires is Ann Patchett. "I've just read [Patchett's latest novel] *The Dutch House*, and it's so well written, I just thought 'I can relax, I'm in good hands.' That kind of not having to second-guess the writer takes a lot of editing."

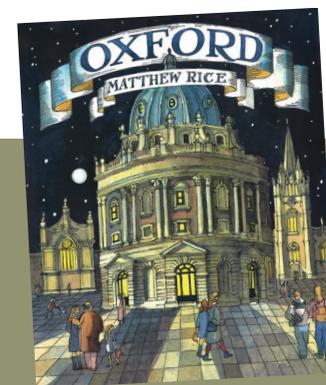
SO FAR, she says, the reviews of *A Single Thread* have been gratifying. "I'm astonished — I'm too close to it all — but everybody loves Violet." She pays attention to serious reviews, she says, because she believes that she might learn something useful, but now tends to avoid Amazon ratings. "I could have 500 five-star reviews and

a single one-star and I'd read that one."

Her next book is about the Venetian glass beads that were made in Murano in the 15th century. (The necessity of research in Venice she describes as a "tough gig".) She will probably have a go at making the beads, just as she tried her hand at bell-ringing and embroidery in her research for *A Single Thread*. "I like to get involved," she says.

Sarah Meyrick is a freelance writer and novelist.

A Single Thread by Tracy Chevalier is published by The Borough Press. It is reviewed on page IV.



Our cover illustration is one of Matthew Rice's watercolours collected in *Oxford*, a hardback that celebrates the city, its history, and its wealth of fine architecture (White Lion, £30 (£27); 978-0-7112-3932-6)