

A Trollopian chapter closes

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Catherine Fox has just published the third and final volume of the Lindchester Chronicles. She talks to *Sarah Meyrick*



Barchester updated but not Mrs Proudie: Catherine Fox, author of the Lindchester Chronicles

STOP all the clocks! With the publication of *Realms of Glory*, the final volume of her trilogy about the Church of England, the author Catherine Fox has finally pulled the plug on the good people of the diocese of Lindchester.

Realms of Glory follows the successful *Acts and Omissions* (published in 2014), and *Unseen Things Above* (2015), in which the author tells a sharply observed, multi-layered story set in a fictional diocese under the guise of an all-seeing Victorian novelist.

For any author, there is always a gap between the writing and publication, but this is more obvious when the novel in question is based on a weekly blog, and directly tied into national and international events.

“My experience of editing the blog into a novel has made me realise just how much was crammed into 2016,” Fox says. “Blow after blow of atrocities and shocks and horrible wrangling within church politics, and then the referendum and the American election. [The book] provides a snapshot of one very pivotal year that I think we will always look back on. It was the end of innocence for us privileged metropolitans.”

The risk, she says, is that the material may date. “It’s almost like it’s white-hot contemporary. Pressed between the pages of a novel is the experience of 2016. It’s a slice of time, specific to being English in 2016. But I think it works as a novel.”

She wondered if she would have to make changes in the editing, but that turned out not to be the case. “You always have to iron out some stuff that becomes repetitive. In a blog, people can’t flick back; so they need reminding of things. And you can also have running gags that might become tedious in a novel.”

ONE consideration that gave her pause for thought in this third volume was the part played by the narrator. “One of the biggest changes in this book is that I have broken cover as the narrative voice. Before, if I wanted to explore some idea, or muse theologically about something, I tended to give it to a character, and divvy up theological musing between

different characters. But there were times in 2016 when things were so serious that the narrative voice was where this had to be.”

The narrative voice is something that people either love or hate, she says, because it is intrusive. “It stands in a tradition where it is a totally normal device. It would be difficult to do a pastiche of a Victorian novel without leaning in, saying ‘Dear reader’ from time to time.”

But the choice to make more serious comment through the narrator in *Realms of Glory* meant that her head was above the parapet. “It’s not that it’s autobiographical, but that felt much more exposed. But it seemed to work in the blog. People were stunned, and [the device] captured that. I wondered, in the editing, if I would divvy this up among the characters; but, when it came to it, it would have felt like a cop-out, even if it ironed out the risk. So I didn’t.”

THE series definitely marks the end of the story, she says. She has no intention of “cranking out a soap opera” about the Church of England. This is partly, she says, because her experience of church life is increasingly remote from most people’s experience. Her husband, Peter Wilcox, formerly Dean of Liverpool, was recently appointed Bishop of Sheffield.

It is time, therefore, to go and write something different. She admits that she will miss certain characters (she mentions Jane and Matt). She also wanted to get the story to a point where she “could safely let Freddie go”: Freddie is a young tenor lay clerk with a deeply ingrained habit of self-sabotage. (To avoid spoilers, it is safest to say simply that the ending is bittersweet.)

The books were written before her husband was consecrated bishop. Does his new office bring any constraints to her writing? “I don’t know,” she says. (When we speak, he is yet to be installed.) “What I write is highly edited; I’m quite used to that. I have my rules of engagement on Twitter, and it’s what your mother taught you: ‘If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.’ If I can’t think of anything quirky or funny or positive to say, I will be silent. I can’t bear wrangling on Twitter. So it’s probably more of the same.”

THERE is an extra twist, in that his nomination came about under unusual circumstances, involving the withdrawal of the Rt Revd Philip North — just the sort of thing that might happen in the diocese of Lindchester. She knows that readers are always looking for clues in her books: “There’s always a tendency or temptation when a writer is writing about a recognisable world that there are flutters of excitement about particular characters.

“In a way, I’ve set myself up for that, because it’s tied to the real contours of 2016. Sometimes, I use anecdotes that are funny, but I would really not want to be ransacking personal stories. I would be appalled.”

Her detractors, she says, tend to focus on some of the strong language that she uses. “It affects people’s eyesight,” she says. “They think they see it everywhere. So they say, ‘All the characters, lay and ordained, swear all the time’ — and they really don’t. Some of them do. The other thing they say is that I take cheap shots at Evangelicals. That is hard. I’d say I take them at everybody.”

REALMS OF GLORY is the darkest of the three volumes, and contains much handwringing about the state of the Church. Is she optimistic about the Church of England? “Yes, because I’m optimistic about God. I think: who knows how the next 25 years will unfold? We may not have the C of E in the form we currently cherish and loathe.

“But I don’t think the figures in church decline are the end of the story. A recent survey said that one in six young people self-identify as Christians. And that might be because the vicar came into assembly, or we went on a visit to church. But some people [in the Church] set

their faces against that narrative. It's as if we know what to do with death and decline because it fits with crucifixion."

She continues, "I think I am optimistic, even if everything crumbled, that it wouldn't mean the end of the Kingdom of God in this world, in this country. The Spirit would still be breaking in, in unexpected ways, working through the wrong people in the wrong ways."

The Lindchester Chronicles are intended to offer a more optimistic vision of faith than the BBC TV series *Rev*, for example. "*Rev* was heartbreaking. He [the Revd Adam Smallbone] tried to be inclusive, but he was a bit hopeless, and it ends with the church closing. That wasn't an optimistic vision. My vision is more that, far on in the night, dawn is at hand. I don't think we're dead in the water yet."

SHE would love, she says, to see a TV adaptation of the Lindchester Chronicles, but the call has not come yet. Meanwhile, she continues as a lecturer in creative writing at Manchester Metropolitan University, travelling to her workplace from Sheffield on the same Liverpool-to-Norwich train line that she used before.

If there is to be no more Lindchester, what next?

"A few years ago, I wrote a young adult book, *Wolf Tide*, and I'm two-thirds of the way through a sequel to that. I like to think it's a complete escape from the Church of England, but it's all the same themes, the same set of bees in my bonnet."