

Inca Author Information Page

Lesley Hayes

Currently living in: Oxford – in the city of dreaming spires. It has crept into a few of my books, you might just notice – most obviously in ‘Oxford Marmalade’. Bit of a clue there in the title.

Main works: My springboard into kindle publishing was ‘The Drowned Phoenician Sailor’, and I retain a special fondness for it. It’s the one you are showcasing here. ‘A Field Beyond Time’ and ‘Round Robin’ are the two subsequent novels I’ve published so far, and they both have more serious, and in parts darker, themes. I also have four short story collections on Kindle. There’s another novel in the pipeline, which will be out in the autumn.

I started writing because: I think I was just getting the hang of standing upright when I first saw a pen and thought: “That looks like fun!” Seriously, though... I was writing almost as soon as I could talk, which clearly didn’t provide quite enough communication opportunities. When I was 13 I submitted one of my many short stories to a National Newspaper competition and won it. I think the incredible feedback I got about that story (later published by the competition organizers in a book demonstrating how to write) set the seal on my future aspirations as a writer. At 14 I wrote my first novel, ‘Not here but in another place’, and it was damned with faint praise by my English teacher who said it was good, but not as good as Elizabeth Bowen’s ‘Death of the Heart’. I really wish now I hadn’t destroyed that manuscript. You know how it is when you’re a teenager. All or nothing. I wrote several after that which went the same way, bypassing the English teacher’s scrutiny as I learned to be my own best critic and editor and be ruthless about binning failed efforts at the Magnum Opus. Time passed, and I honed my craft. The rest, as they say, is history.

My main writing interests: They’re pretty eclectic, and always have been. I started reading science fiction when I was about 10, but I was also reading books by authors like Aldous Huxley, James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence by the age of 14. Since becoming part of a community of indie authors and discovering the joys of writing reviews, I’ve read a whole mix of genres I never would have thought possible, including horror, zombie, YA, urban, murder mystery and dystopian – as well as literary fiction, of course. A new world of imagination has opened up to me, and it’s wonderful.

My sources of research and information: I was always fascinated by human psychology, from a very early age, long before it occurred to me to train to be a psychotherapist. My family was an interminable source of material when I was young and I think I began writing as a way of escaping into an alternate reality. I suppose if I do research at all it’s in studying people’s behaviour, their interactions with one another, the incredibly powerful dynamics that guide us, and the emotional and energetic undercurrents that flow between us.

My inspiration comes from: It can be something as random as an overheard conversation, or as in the case of ‘The Drowned Phoenician Sailor’, two separate and quite unrelated news reports that intrigued me enough to want to follow through and find out more. One was to do with someone inventing a false identity, which started a whole chain of speculative imagining. The other was to do with ghosts and the afterlife – another subject that has interested me for most of my life. Those two topics caught my attention when I was on the very cusp of readiness to write something new. It’s a strange process that follows, every time, which I can only describe as alchemical. What comes out at the end is very different from what inspires it in the first place.

My stories are planned like this: I could more easily answer this question if I move briefly to talking about my second novel to be published, 'A Field Beyond Time'. This was in fact over ten years in gestation, because the 'story within the story', which describes events that took place in India almost 40 years ago, was originally written a while back. I had no idea what I was going to do with it. I knew it was an important kind of 'confession' by the character speaking it – who had jumped into my head without any invitation – and that somehow I needed to weave a story in present time around it, to make some sense of it. But I was still primarily committed to my role as a psychotherapist then, so 'Daniel's story' sat on my computer, occasionally nagging at me, and reminding me my work as a writer was not yet done. Eventually, the larger story had some space in my head to coalesce, but it still needed at least 6 drafts before I'd crafted all the subplots to mesh satisfactorily. It was like creating a jigsaw, and each time I thought I was done I would read through it again and see that one of the characters hadn't been given enough of a voice, so more work was required. That really was one of the hardest, most demanding books to write, but also, I must say, one of the most fulfilling, in terms of the depths it took me to and the sense of achievement at the finishing line.

I have written a series of books based on: I haven't written a series of books, as such, but I have published 4 collections of short stories, 2 of which are recognisably based in Oxford – Oxford Marmalade and The Oscar Dossier. People who have read and loved these stories are always begging me to write more. Give me a break! Some people are never satisfied. Maybe when I've finished writing my current novel...

My future plans: I will be completing my current work in progress by the autumn. This, much like The Drowned Phoenician Sailor, starts seemingly as a comedy of manners – once again set in Oxford. The characters soon reveal themselves to be emotionally complex and the dynamics between them increasingly highly charged and dangerous, hence the title 'Dangerous People'. That's as much as I'm prepared to reveal for now! I find myself difficult to pin to any genre – although if there were such a genre, then Psychological Drama might fit the bill. My novels are literary fiction, and although in my books I might refer back to a previous era, as I do in 'A Field Beyond Time', my stories tend to be placed in the here and now. But I'm not averse to the idea of writing something historical or futuristic. Who knows where the muse might direct me next? It's always been something of a mystery to me where the wellspring of ideas and the energy to bring them into being originates.

My own favourite character: Oh, that's really a hard one to answer... It changes, depending on which book I'm writing. The character I most easily identified with at the time was the recently deceased psychotherapist in 'The Drowned Phoenician Sailor'. You wouldn't need to be a psychologist to figure out why. Writing that book coincided with my decision to retire from practice, and perhaps I wanted Paul in some way to represent my legacy. He often said things that surprised me, and then I'd smile wryly to myself and think: "Yes, I knew that." He was so wise and witty and warm, as well as enjoying a final freedom from the restraining boundaries that shackle psychotherapists. I think that's an aspect of me most of my clients and friends would recognise.

I sometimes find myself thinking like: Well, I just answered that to an extent, but the truth is there is a lot of 'me' in all the characters, and I think that's inevitably how it is for a writer. You channel different personalities locked away inside your psyche, whether or not you do that with awareness. The ones I least identify with are the really dark, unkind or just plain nasty characters – there's usually at least one in all my novels. The obnoxious father in 'Round Robin', for example, and Lisa's narcissistic mother in 'The Drowned Phoenician Sailor'. I'm sure I'm not alone in discovering as I go along, often, just how much I 'know' my characters on a deep, intuitive level. I think we tap into the universal unconscious when we write, and that's why readers often tell me they find themselves thinking: "But you're writing about me!" They generally don't say that about the unpleasant characters, though. Strange, that.

I also have a few other books I'd like to highlight as follows: I've already mentioned the 3 novels currently available on kindle and in paperback via Amazon, and the 4 collections of short stories. My

short stories are quite different from my novels, although people tell me they can still recognise my distinct voice in them. It's a very different process to write a short story, and an art in itself. I've never been taught how to write. It was an instinct I must have been born with. I've been told by another writer recently that there is a specific 'formula' for writing short stories. There may be, but I've no idea or intention of finding out what that is. Stories come to me much like my poems, fully formed. That's really the only way I can describe it. I see it in my mind, and then I write it. I usually have the first sentence and then an idea of how it will end before I begin the story, and it's a matter of following the thread I start with back to the source... the source being the end point. I think I write much as I speak... a bit of a rambler through the byways at times, but ultimately knowing where I'm going. Some of my short stories are humorous – in a witty rather than a laugh out loud way – and some are serious, the kind that make you think. They are character driven as much as plot driven. It's important to me that I know my characters from the inside, right to the bone, and even in a short story that usually comes across.

My advice to new writers: That's simple, though it may not be so easy to act on. Write. Write even when you don't feel like it, even when you have a hundred other things on your to-do list. Develop a mindfulness practice of writing – sit with your pen or your keyboard at a certain time each day. Think of it as a meditation... because in a way that's exactly what it is. Keep a journal. Write about your feelings, not simply the events that happen. And when you are writing a short story or a novel, polish it till it shines. Don't be satisfied with your first draft. Be pragmatic about destroying it if necessary. Think of it as a sculpture that has its own intrinsic form that you are simply facilitating coming into being. Don't even consider publishing it until you have honed it to perfection. You'll know when that is. Six drafts will usually do it, but if it needs more, or if you suddenly realise it needs radical restructuring, then so be it. Pay attention to grammar, syntax and spelling. If you are no expert at these then learn – find a teacher if necessary. And every bit as important – read. Read well-written books by good authors. Join or create a book group where you can learn among other readers to understand just what makes a book better than simply a 'good read'.

Writing has its ups and downs: The best aspect is that wonderful feeling you have when you are in the zone, when you are flying and free, in your invented alternative universe that is your novel or short story. It's like being in love, and everything you do, say or think returns you to the beloved. The worst is that it can be a lonely mission, that there is just you and the blank page and when you hit a brick wall in your inspiration it feels like a minor death and you deflate into the writer's pit of despair, knowing you are useless and you'll never write anything worth reading ever, ever, ever... (A good tip here is to write about that. Everything is grist to the mill.) Another bad thing is that it can make you utterly selfish and self-obsessed (see above: it's the down side of 'being in love') and you can lose friends that way. Take note of the glazed expression in their eyes as you tell them for the zillionth time about your plot and how much you love your characters. You have to get a life beyond writing, even though the muse would have you chained to your writing desk if she had her way.

When I'm not writing: I hang out with friends a lot. I make sure I connect meaningfully with a real live person every day. I'm not really into fitness, so the most activity I do is to walk. I'm lucky to live in such a beautiful city, where there are beautiful places to wander everywhere. My favourite is in the grounds of Magdalen College, which is very close to where I live. I used to do 5 Rhythms dance every week – an amazing experience I miss, since I gave it up last year when my life got too busy. I read a lot, and go to the theatre, and watch movies. I'm something of a cryptic crossword fiend. I love to give my brain a good workout. And then there is my lovely family. I'll spend whatever time they can spare with them. I've been blessed with two wonderful children, who between them now have 4 teenage boys of their own. We aren't in each other's pockets, and we all have very busy lives, but there is a strong connection between us, and always has been, and I love it on those occasions when all of us get together. The high octane level of banter can be overwhelming at times.

For copy editing and proofreading: I edit and quality control my own books. I've been at it for so many years now I know what I'm doing when it comes to producing a well-written, well-structured, well-formatted book. I choose the illustrations for my covers carefully. They need to express some element of the book that will give the potential reader a clue as to what to expect. I also have a dear friend who has taken on the unenviable task of putting my books on to kindle, and now into paperback using CreateSpace – a real labour of love for which I am deeply grateful.

I accept criticism from: Constructive criticism is always useful, and I never reject or ignore it. I don't always necessarily agree with what someone has written in a review, as I know when I'm writing reviews myself that I have a subjective take on the book I'm reading. I don't expect everyone to 'get' my books, although I feel richly rewarded when they do. But I do examine my writing to see where any criticism might be valid. It's a strange feeling when I see that someone has clearly missed the point of what I've written, or focused on less important aspects of it in order to have a personal rant. It taps into a very young place in me that still feels the hot shame of being unfairly misunderstood or misinterpreted. But I learned to take rejection on the chin as a writer many years ago (I wrote a number of novels back in the day that 'almost made it' with publishers.) I learned then not to take it personally, although of course in that vulnerable place inside us all, we do.

My experiences with self-publishing: I wrote a whole blog about this last year called 'The Conundrum of invisibility'. <http://blog.lesleyhayes.co.uk/blog/2014/06/05/511/> I leapt over the fence in January 2014 and landed full of optimism, discovering it was a whole new ball-game beyond all ball-games I might have imagined. I went through the hell of floundering my way through the twittersphere and the heaven of actually finding like-minded souls (and some excellent indie authors) along the way. I spent a couple of months desperately trying to find new and interesting ways of promoting my books, whilst also writing. I almost crashed and burned in the process. And then I had one of those flashes of insight that reminded me I was primarily a writer and that was the joy... that was my bliss (as Joseph Campbell once put it) I needed to follow. Since then I've been happily engaged with reading and reviewing other authors as well as continuing to write. If people buy my books, that's wonderful. It's the icing on the cake. But I'm not going to put too much energy into making it happen. I trust in the interesting process of osmosis that means sooner or later readers will find my books, and my task is to keep writing them.

I promote my books via: I assign a certain amount of time every day to promoting and networking, primarily on facebook. I've found networking is actually the most reliable and authentic way of reaching potential readers, as well as being the most enjoyable. Since I'm now retired from practice I can spend as long as I need to every day focusing on writing my work in progress. It varies from day to day, and I can be like a terrier with a bone when I'm on a roll with writing, and forget to stop for breaks if I'm not careful. I also need to factor into every day some time away from the computer and out in the fresh air, even if it's only on my way to a coffee shop to meet a friend.

My favourite mainstream authors are: That changes. I've always been a voracious reader. But there are some I return to again and again and get every one of their books, if I can. I'll name just a few: Sarah Waters; Jeanette Winterson; Sebastian Faulkes; Lionel Shriver; Patrick Gale; Haruki Murakami; Alice Hoffman... I could go on.

I am currently reading: Since I became a convert to reading on Kindle, I've become rather an evangelist. It's like carrying a library around in your pocket. I love it. I'd hate to see the end of hardbacks and paperbacks, though. There is a whole tactile experience to be had when reading one, with which e-books can't compete. On the other hand, they're a lot less wieldy for propping up while you're eating, or for shoving in your hand luggage on a long journey, when you might want at least a couple of books to keep you going. At the moment I'm working my way through a long list of indie authors whose books I'm reviewing, and I've just started reading 'The Healer' by Christoph Fischer, one of the talented authors I've recently met through facebook. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Healer->

Christoph-Fischer-ebook/dp/B00QIJ4DJ6 I'm just two pages in and already I can tell I'm going to love it. It's a joy to review a book that really makes my heart sing, one way or another.

I prefer to read books in: Kindle of course!

A bit about my other interests: Now I'd have to know you a whole lot better before I disclose that sort of thing. We could be here all night, once you get me started.

My most unattainable ambition is: Winning the Booker Prize. It seems quite a humble ambition when I could ask for the moon. Other than that it would be to live to 150 even if it took an entire body part replacement to get me there. I'm sure that will be possible in not too long, by the way. Not for my generation though. And anyway, we need to focus on saving the planet first. Just saying.

Last thoughts before we go down the pub/club/library/boot-sale/exercise yard: Who's buying? It must be your turn after all that thirsty work.

Author Links

Website:<http://www.lesleyhayes.co.uk>

Amazon Author page: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Lesley-Hayes/e/B00HR65DES/>

Twitter: @hayes_lesley

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/lesley.hayes.author> and [lesley.sky](https://www.facebook.com/lesley.sky)

Any other links: Blog: <http://www.blog.lesleyhayes.co.uk>