

## **The Tenderness of Wolves**

Penguin Book Club author Q&A questions

December 18, 2007

Kristin Zita

*The Tenderness of Wolves is a truly masterful epic. Are people often surprised when they learn that it is your first novel?*

Thank you! I don't know that people are surprised, although I was asked recently if I had a drawerful of unpublished novels (I don't). I have written several screenplays though, so I suppose that gives you a lot of practice, particularly in structuring a story.

*The Tenderness of Wolves spins together what at first appear to be disconnected stories and events, into a web of drama and intrigue. Can you explain how you manage these literary complexities during the writing process?*

The multiple story strands evolved as I started writing – it wasn't meant to be that complex initially. The more I researched, the more elements I came across that I wanted to put in – and that sort of multi-layered story is something I very much enjoy reading. It didn't seem a difficult process to keep the threads going, although latterly I drew up a colour-coded diagram of chapters so that I could keep track of where everyone was, and how long since they had made an appearance – that sort of thing.

*How were you able to write about a remote place and distant time with such authority and authenticity? How is it possible that you can describe a winter's night in a lean-to or a paralyzing case of snow blindness and make the reader feel as though she has experienced both?*

If that is true, I can only say it's down to research – a lot of it – and then imagining myself in that situation, or that harsh environment. I think you layer up the experiences – everyone knows what it is to be cold; what it is to be lost; what it is to be in pain. And then there are parallels with some of my own experiences – walking in the Scottish Highlands in winter, for instance.

*How much research went into the creation of The Tenderness of Wolves? Did you base any of the characters on fragments of real people you may have read about?*

A lot of research in the British Library in London, which is an incredible resource (and free to anyone). Probably most of the characters have elements of people that I came

across – I think for example that Susannah and Maria were influenced by Susanna Moodie (who, as I'm sure you know, wrote *My Life in the Backwoods* and *Roughing it in the Bush*), and Donald by any number of young men who came to work for the Hudson's Bay Company. But the only person I really 'lifted' from research material was Thomas Sturrock, who is based on an Anglo-Irish journalist called Thomas Mulock. He wrote about the Scottish Highland Clearances in the 1850s – a really amazing character.

*Francis is at first thought to be a girl by his adoptive parents. Was this something that was actually common in those days – boys being disguised as girls in the hopes that they would be adopted out more easily? Is this part of his story based on something you read while researching?*

I don't honestly know. As far as I can remember I just made it up!

*Why was the bone fragment ultimately lost? It was such a key piece of the puzzle – a beacon of sorts, drawing characters into the story – and it simply disappears at the end. Why?*

I was intrigued by the idea of a vanished written culture, but I wanted it to be a tantalising idea, not confirming whether it was real or faked. I think the vanishing clue suits Sturrock's evanescent personality. And it was important to me not to bring every strand in a neat conclusion – I find that if a story leaves no questions in my mind, I just forget it, but mysteries resonate forever.

*You tantalize your readers with the slow simmering passion Mrs. Ross develops for Parker. Somehow the deeply intimate moment they share when he is warming her frozen hands under his arms seems to satisfy us despite their frustrating restraint. Why did you choose to have them both demonstrate this restraint? Why was it so important to the story?*

When characters come along, you just know how they would behave in any given situation – and Mrs Ross and Parker had to act like this – there was never any question in my mind. I'm glad you feel that the small intimacies they share are satisfying – for me they were more moving, and in a way more erotic, than any explicit sexual encounter between these two people could have been. I have also found, in screenplays and films, that often the moment two people get together is the moment when all tension and excitement goes out of the story!

*The wolves encountered in the story are at times both curiously passive and frighteningly savage. How do they mirror the human characters in the novel?*

I don't think I explicitly meant them to mirror the human characters. The way I saw it was twofold – there is a delicious mythic resonance to wolves from fairy tales and folk stories, and they crystallise what people fear about the wilderness – the thing they can't tame or control. But their reputation for danger far exceeds the real danger they pose. Mrs Ross, for one, is hemmed in by her own fears in many ways, not by real dangers.

*A reviewer once commented on the fact that you write with incredible authority - as though you know far more about the history of your story's time and place than you actually reveal. How much did you immerse yourself in the world of The Hudson's Bay Company, fur traders and Canadian Pioneers?*

Again, I did a lot of research, so inevitably you do know more than ends up in the book. I have pages of research notes about all sorts of things – much of it fascinating but only tangentially relevant. But the more I read, even if it was about polar explorers or something else quite off the point, I found that I became clearer and clearer about how the story was going to take shape.

*How did you know when the story was complete? What made you sure that there was no more to tell - that enough had been revealed?*

Even before I started writing, I knew how and where it was going to end. In many ways the writing process was just about finding a route to that end point – and it was the end that really mattered to me.

*Who are your literary inspirations? Who do you like to read?*

I love complex, dense thrillers, eg. 'An Instance of the Fingerpost' by Iain Pears, and the books of Swedish writer Kirsten Ekman (eg. 'Blackwater'). I like books that tell me something I don't know, so things set long ago or far away (or both). I also love reading histories of extraordinary endeavor – exploration, mountaineering, and tales of survival. Writers I would always look out for include J G Farrell, Haruki Murakami, Robert Louis Stevenson, Annie Proulx, Barry Lopez, Donna Tartt and Kazuo Ishiguro – to name but a few.