

Q&A with Stef Penney

Questions by Annabel

1. This has been a vintage year for me reading books about the frozen white stuff – I've read so many, both fiction and non-fiction, but your character of Flora in Under a Pole Star stands out by miles. Can you tell us a little about how she came to be?

Thank you! I'm so pleased she works as a character. I felt that I'd read enough books where women wait for men, or write to men while the men are off doing exciting things, and I was determined to write about a Victorian explorer who does it herself. There were female mountaineers at the time, and though getting a woman to the Arctic was harder, logistically, I had to find a way to do it. I've got family ties to the Dundee whaling industry, and when I decided she would be a whaler's daughter, her career became possible.

2. I enjoyed that you didn't put Flora and Jakob together for ages in the novel – and when they finally get together, their relationship becomes quite physical and there was a surprising amount of sex! Something I didn't quite expect from the Victorian setting. But then, they were both outsiders, did that free them?

Both Flora and Jakob do have unusual backgrounds, but I don't think that's the sole reason for the intensity of their relationship. Flora has always been aware of her sexuality, but she isn't free in the same way that Jakob is. She is deeply conflicted and stuck in her particular circumstances, but that has never prevented people from expressing and acting on powerful feelings, no matter what the period. She is someone who takes risks – she couldn't be an explorer if she weren't.

Thinking about the sex issue, I sometimes wonder about how far we have really come since the 1890s. We have access to contraception (in this country), and we inhabit a superficially sexualised culture in terms of the images that surround us, but in the course of my research, I was shocked by the amount of ignorance and misinformation that still prevails. That's partly why the sex in the book is so explicit – I get annoyed by books that are vague or misleading, or simply phallogentric, and I wanted to write a sexual relationship that I could believe. I don't see anything wrong with being specific!

3. You tell us on your website, that you do 'zero-carbon research'. I can remember when it came out that you'd not been to the Canadian locations used

in *The Tenderness of Wolves*; there was some hoo-hah about it. You obviously see no absolute need to travel to locations in order to write about them, is this a legacy of your former agoraphobia which you also mention?

The short answer is 'yes' (and, I suppose, having got away with it once...) The long answer is that I'm not sure how valuable field research would be for me. After writing *The Tenderness of Wolves* I went to Lapland to research a film project. It was a lot of fun, but I'm not convinced it made my writing any better.

There is so much good travel literature (from people who dedicate their lives to it), as well as masses of visual material. There's even a web cam at the North Pole! I do a lot of research into this stuff, and incorporate that into imagination and memory. Since many Canadians have read the book and thought I must have been there, it seemed to work okay!

More generally, if authors thought they couldn't write about something without first-hand experience, we'd be missing a lot of wonderful books. Ultimately, I believe you have to create the locations of your story for that story, just as much as you create characters who don't, but could, exist.

4. I was amazed at your depth of research in *Under a Pole Star*. There was one small moment where I did a double take – Flora's first love, Mark is now teaching at the 'Regent Polytechnic' and I thought surely Polys weren't Victorian, so I looked it up and was delighted to find that this establishment did exist. I was impressed. How deep do you have to go in your research?

I don't know that it's 'have to', as much as 'love to'. But there certainly are things I feel I have to know, because it gives me deeper insight into the characters and how they would feel. Again – for me – ignorance and vagueness are the enemy. I had to research, for example, fin de siècle plumbing (plumbing is very important), contemporary underwear, women's higher education, the Brooklyn Bridge, how whalers operated, what auk meat tastes like... If that sounds alarming, not everything I find out ends up on the page!

5. The competition between the groups of explorers in the Arctic was intense – as you depict in Armitage's alpha-male drive to get his name in the history books at any cost. Yet Flora as a feminist with her totally different priorities is something the men find hard to get their heads around. Were Victorian feminists so different to modern ones?

If anything, I soft-pedalled the bitterness and bullying in comparison to their real-life counterparts (I'd like to point out that none of my characters represent actual explorers!) I don't see Flora's priorities as totally different to theirs – she's personally ambitious too.

What the men struggle with is a woman being there at all, making it look easy. Explorers of that time (and, perhaps, now?) were obsessed with 'manliness': the word is used constantly in their diaries. There was growing hysteria around the time of the Boer Wars at the decline of – as it was termed – our 'fighting stock', and a concomitant feeling that women's only business was producing as many soldiers as possible. But then, as now, some men react better than others...

I don't really know how much Victorian feminists differed from modern ones. There were plenty of women who chafed at their ridiculous constraints – and some, like Flora, who refused to be bound; who forced their way through the obstacles, no matter what the cost.

6. For those of us who want to read more about the golden age of Arctic exploration, can you recommend some further reading?

There's a lot of engaging material, especially non-fiction. Wally Herbert's book on Robert Peary, *The Noose of Laurels*, is a gripping portrait of this tormented personality, by someone who had himself walked to the Pole. My favourite historical overview is Pierre Berton's *The Arctic Grail*. If you're really keen, Robert Bryce's *Cook and Peary: the Polar Controversy, Resolved* is a brilliant, forensically detailed account of an extraordinary rivalry. If you like murder mysteries, the strangest tale of all is to be found in *Weird and Tragic Shores* by Chauncey Loomis. In fiction, although set slightly earlier (1850s), I highly recommend Andrea Barrett's *The Voyage of the Narwhal*.

7. And finally, what are you enjoying reading at the moment?

I'm reading Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Funnier, bleaker, more nuanced than the recent TV series (isn't that always the case?) I find that period endlessly riveting – it's different and other, but psychologically feels very modern, as vast social changes began to turn the old order upside down. (For the same reason I love the novels of George Gissing.) Next, I'm going to read *My Name is Lucy Barton*, by Elizabeth Strout – because I loved *Olive Kitteridge*.

Thank you.