

Interview with the Author

Jess Wells, on *Dancing Through a Deluge*

This is the third book you've written that is set in the Middle Ages. What do you find so interesting about that era?

The Medieval Period was a watershed time. The Age of Discovery was opening the Americas, trade was more global than ever before, the monarchy was giving way to mercantilism which grew into the middle class.

I personally don't care about the lives of royalty: their stories are overtold. Tradespeople and craft workers make interesting characters because we recognize the products they make, but the processes are very surprising and so, I hope, interesting to readers. The characters are enough like us for readers to identify with them but enough unlike us to surprise the reader as well.

There are also advantages as an author to writing about the Middle Ages: communication was very slow which makes it easier to work with characters who don't have access to information or each other at the speed with which we communicate. It took a long time to travel during that period; there was almost no postal system. It's a time that is less primitive than the early post-Roman era but less well trodden than the Elizabethan era.

What are some of the disadvantages of writing historical fiction?

Historical fiction based in the Middle Ages is going to be inaccurate on a number of levels. While women certainly had power and agency, the majority of them did not and it gets very boring writing about powerless women for the sake of accuracy. Having more than one comment from a man about the oddity of a powerful woman is just jarring to the story. The Medieval Period was also a violent time which is unpleasant to read about, as well as a time when people were very religious which I have no interest in. That means that you are writing about independent, non-religious women who are able to escape much of the endemic violence. You strive for accuracy in so many aspects of the work, but that core conceit is necessary.

Aren't class differences a recurring theme in your work?

Perhaps it's a natural outcome of refusing to write about princesses and court intrigue. Class has always been the key divider between people, between their opportunities, their resources and their status. It circumscribed their life, as it still does, really. *Dancing Through a Deluge* is particularly focused on class because it was a time of extreme upheaval in the classes. After the plague, there were so few people to work the fields that laborers were able to demand higher wages, and they abandoned their depopulated villages. This greatly impacted the gentry and their revenue. Royalty struck back, of course, and passed the Statute of Laborers which made it illegal for anyone to demand more than pre-plague wages. The Ordinance of Laborers mandated that serfs who were found off the manor could be forcibly returned or imprisoned. Pretty shocking stuff. One could say that it set the stage for the 1381 Peasant Revolt led by Watt Tyler which broke out all over England, but which ended with the butchering of the protesters after the authorities deceived them with a promise of leniency. The Middle Ages,

because it was a time of the rising merchant class, saw legislation that prohibited anyone from displaying symbols of status that the royals wanted to keep for themselves, wearing purple, for example. Passing yourself off as a baker was no big deal but trying to pass as a baroness was very very dangerous.

The theme of the book is ‘what happens when people are offered what they have always wanted.’ Explain this.

I’ve been surprised by people’s reaction to their own success. Some don’t feel worthy; some can’t see that they’ve actually succeeded as in wrestling with the angel. Some become voracious and just want more regardless of their triumph. Others have been angry over their failure and blamed others, only to discover that they could have been successful much sooner if they hadn’t spent their time being angry. And then there are some who have devoted so much of their life to being plagued by their own guilt and failure that the specter of their guilt almost becomes a companion, and the void that is presented to them when they are successful is so frightening that they refuse it.

Have you gotten what you have always wanted?

Yikes. That’s a very personal question. I have always wanted to be able to write full time but now that I can do that, my hands and my neck limit the time I can spend at my desk. After the publication of *Jaguar Paloma and the Caketown Bar*, I had a sense of accomplishment and pride like I had never felt. So then, of course, the next question is ‘what do you do after the achievement?’ It also might just be my age: the clawing need and ambition is dampened. But it did raise the question: what do people do when faced with satisfaction?

There are a lot of very interesting industries in this book.

That was one of my favorite parts of this book. I could hardly keep my mouth shut about it all. For example, I knew that individual homes didn’t have ovens, that the bake house was set slightly away from the village to prevent fire from spreading through the entire village, but I didn’t know that people came to the bake house with their dough ball already created and then sat and waited for it to bake. What a great meeting place; a great way to gather characters and then send them on their way. An itinerant baker wheeling a clay oven from village to hamlet? Who knew! The way salt was collected really shocked me. The Master of the Hounds and the use of dogs on a manor makes sense. When I learned that rabbits had been valuable livestock in the Middle Ages, especially in rocky country where crops were difficult to grow, I assumed they would be housed in a big barn, like a modern chicken farm. When I saw pictures of rabbit warren lodges, I assumed that the rabbits lived inside the stone buildings. Nope. Rabbit warrens were enormous spans of land where the rabbits lived protected by moats and their tunnels were fortified with pipes or rock by the warrener. The warrener held a very high position on the estate, which makes sense if he’s running the main revenue-producing activity. The stone building – the warren lodge -- was a veritable fortress of stone walls set deep into the ground with narrow slits for windows. The pelts were very valuable items (think ermine or mink) so preventing a siege or robbery was paramount. The pelts were processed, dried and stretched on the first floor, and the warrener lived on the second floor above the workshop. Even a wetnurse, when you think about it, held

a very special position in a household, privy to all sorts of insider information. It's all very fascinating to me. I love that historical settings are our world, but not really. Almost like magical realism: it's real, but different. Surprising.

Isn't this the second book with a bear in it? What's up with that?

That's funny that you would ask. A bear in "A Slender Tether" makes a cameo appearance, though she is key to the magical realism in it. I suppose the real reason for the bear is that I live in California, and I camp a lot, so bears are a very real issue. There are nearly 900,000 bears in North America <https://wildlifeinformer.com/black-bear-population-by-state/> with 30-40,000 in California so you have to be very careful with your food. In some places the scavengers are racoons but in other places, they can kill you. It's also true that there's nothing that says 'the Middle Ages' more than a bear in a ring fighting dogs. So brutal. So cruel. I wanted to turn it on its head.

The rain is a surprising backdrop in this story. What is that based on?

I had read that there was rain in 1314 in Europe that lasted for five months and produced hailstones that killed horses being ridden by military officers. The rain destroyed not only the crops but washed away so much topsoil that the land wasn't capable of producing crops for years. You have to remember that this wasn't a time you could just call Uber Eats or Instacart. The famine that resulted was incredible. In an early draft these characters were confronted with a five-month rain, but I was told that it lacked credibility, so I shortened it to three months and included the historically accurate information about the rain of 1314. While writing this material, I put on a YouTube video of a torrential rainstorm and let it run all day which is why there's reference to how it can make one crazy. So annoying!

I have read on social media that *Dancing Through a Deluge* was not the book's working title. Tell me about the genesis of the title.

The book includes elements from a project abandoned in 2014 called *The Baker's Lass*, so a decade later it gets its moment in print. At one point this book was called *Jacob the Warrenner* because he is so vivid and key to the story but it was difficult to keep his voice going. Then until nearly the last draft it was called *The Millstone Rebellion* because the story of the millstones embedded in the chapel floor had such an impact on me. I heightened the rebellion aspect of the story but then my beta readers told me that *The Millstone Rebellion* sounded like the story of a battle in a history book or something. Another beta reader told me that it was daring to devote 70 pages of the novel to life during the rain so I thought I should give readers a clue up-front. Hence, *Dancing Through a Deluge*. In looking at the title now, I think we have all been dancing through a deluge recently, surviving Covid, fighting against the rise of the monied class and right-wing hatred. It's a story of perseverance.