

# HANNAH Richell

## The Peacock Summer Q&A

### **Would you tell us in a few words what *The Peacock Summer* is about?**

*The Peacock Summer* is a novel of two summers and two women, connected by family ties and the secrets hidden inside the locked room of a fading English manor house. It is, I hope, a compelling and emotional read for anyone who loves stories with romance and mystery at their heart.

### **What inspired you to write a novel with an old wall painting at its centre?**

Whilst procrastinating on the Internet, I stumbled upon an intriguing slice of history. In the late 1800s, an American businessman living in London commissioned a famous artist, James McNeil Whistler, to come to his town house and paint an entire room with floor to ceiling murals. The businessman intended for the room to be a real show-stopper and a talking point amongst his influential society friends. Once the artist had finished the room, the two men fell out rather publicly. It was acknowledged their spat was over money, but whispers abounded of an affair between the artist and his patron's wife. It was this small detail of the possible affair between artist and wife that captured my attention and sparked the idea for the novel ... though the rest is a complete flight of imagination.

### **Why peacocks? Do you have a special connection to them?**

The peacock image was a key image in the real life 'Whistler' room that I mention above. The more I thought about peacocks, the more I realised how perfectly they fitted with some of the themes woven into my own fictional story: vanity, pride, beauty and that show-stopping moment when something is revealed in all its glory. I knew they had to be a central image in the book.

### **Would you yourself like to live in an estate like Cloudesley?**

I would love to visit an old house like Cloudesley – perhaps stay for a long weekend and pretend to be 'lady of the manor'; but the reality of owning or caretaking an estate of such size and grandeur seems a heavy responsibility. I think, like my character Maggie, it would cause me some sleepless nights!

### **What was easier for you the write – the present or the past storyline?**

I assumed I would find the contemporary storyline the easier to write, being closer to my own age and experience, but I found the more time I spent with Lillian in the 1950s, the more affection I held for her and her story. At the time of writing the novel, I identified closely with her feelings of loneliness and longing.

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## **What was the most challenging thing about writing *The Peacock Summer*?**

My husband died very suddenly while I was half way through writing the first draft of *The Peacock Summer*. I was overwhelmed with shock and grief. It took me a long time to get back to my writing and rediscover the ability to immerse myself in a fictional world. Though once I had, the writing process became a sort of release and therapy in itself. The novel isn't about what happened to my family, but I can see now, on reflection, that a lot of what preoccupied my thoughts at that time is gently woven through the novel in the themes of longing, loss, creative frustration, love and hope.

## **How does a typical writers day look like for you? Do you have certain rituals whilst writing?**

I juggle my writing around my children. When they are at school – or in bed – I work. This novel was written at the kitchen table and fuelled by a lot of coffee. I don't have any set rituals, though I do like to write to quiet music. I find the soundtracks to movies particularly inspiring and helpful when trying to evoke a mood.

## **Is there anything you have in common with your characters?**

I do identify with both of my lead female characters. I grew up in the Chiltern Hills and enjoyed revisiting my memories of the area in my story. Maggie's story opens in Sydney, a city I also know and love from having lived there for twelve years. Both women have difficult choices to make and must juggle and balance the needs of the people they love with their own desires and needs, resulting in a certain amount of personal sacrifice. I think most women – particularly mothers – can relate to this feeling.

## **What is your favorite place for reading?**

My favourite place to read is snuggled up with my kids on their beds at the end of the day. It doesn't matter how busy the hours before have been, it always brings such a wonderful sense of peace and connection.

Hannah  
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