



INTERVIEW ARCHIVES

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NICE GIRLS READ BOOKS
WITH BRITTANY

I'm so pleased to host Sarah Miller here on the blog today. Her latest book, *The Lost Crown*, is possibly my favourite book of 2011! Sarah discusses her personal interests in the Romanov era, how she tackled writing the story from 4 different viewpoints and more.

NICE GIRLS READ BOOKS [NGRB]: Your latest novel, 'The Lost Crown', focuses on the last few years of the Russian Romanov family. Why do you think the assassination of the Romanov family still has so much staying power – even though the event happened almost 100 years ago? And what about it has it held your interest for so long?

SARAH MILLER [SM]: Think about the things that fascinate the public: celebrity, royalty, beauty, youth, power, wealth – and, of course, tragedy. One or two items on that list are enough to grab most people. The Romanovs can boast all seven.

I suspect it also has a lot to do with the extreme contrasts in the story. There's the riches-to-rags aspect, and also the incongruity between the irresistible appeal of Nicholas II's personality and his ineptitude as a ruler. With the possible exception of the empress, the whole family was so guileless and personable that you can hardly help liking them even as they hurtle themselves toward their own destruction. Even their jailors were taken aback by the sympathy they developed for the Romanovs after observing them in person.

There's just something enthralling about a senseless tragedy. As you mention in another question, it's hard to quench people's appetite for stories about the Romanovs, Anne Frank, and the Titanic. Things that never should have happened are hardest to let go of because we crave an explanation. That's why the grand duchesses in particular have tremendous staying power. People can stomach the political necessity of executing the tsar, the empress, and maybe even the 13-year-old heir to the throne, but there was no reason for those four sisters to die. To top it off, so many photos have been left behind showing them vibrantly alive – dancing, swimming, roller skating, playing tennis. That's pretty much a recipe for immortality.

Personally, I think I've stuck with the Romanovs because you can forever be digging just a little but further into the minutiae of their lives. A staggering amount of information has been preserved – mountains of photographs, thousands of letters, scores of diaries. Technically I've been done researching for months, yet within the last week I've found myself engrossed in discussions about the plethora of stairways in the Ipatiev house, the bars on the windows on the upper floor of the Alexander

Palace, and whether or not Maria was sitting in a wheelchair in a snapshot from the spring of 1917. There's always something more to learn or see – a new detail in a photo, another tidbit translated from a diary entry. Like most Romanov fans, I love the photos. There seems to be no end to their volume or their range – you can see the tsar in full regalia at the coronation, or skinny-dipping in the Black Sea. Again, it's those contrasts that enthrall people.

[NGRB]: The narrative of “*The Lost Crown*” switches between each of the four sisters. Was there a process you went through for each chapter, in order to get into a particular mindset for each individual Grand Duchess? What were the hardest things to incorporate and what came easiest?

[SM]: I didn't have a process, per se, but as they emerged I did keep a chart of the distinctive features of each character's voice.

The easiest and most enjoyable aspect for me was matching the style of each sister's language to her personality. With Tatiana I took a literal approach. She's the most formal, so her language is the most precise. But she's also very religious and fond of fashion, so many of the similes she uses relate to things like fabric, lace, hymns, and so forth. Similarly, Anastasia likes to make an impact, so I built a lot of punch into her vocabulary with words like *blam*, *bang*, *jab*, *pinch*, *poke*, and *slap*.

For even more emphasis, I used italics to accentuate the beat of particular words or syllables. Olga was considered the brightest and most introspective, so her voice is more complex than the others. Her use of figurative language is more imaginative (less concrete) than her sisters', and her tendency to compare things to books and poems reflects her love of literature. I also used dashes to show her mind connecting one thought to the next. Maria, on the other hand, is the simplest. Her vocabulary and sentence structure are the least complicated, and her speech is loaded with sweetness of all kinds: references to babies, ducklings, kittens, candy, etc.

The little things were hardest to keep track of, and for whatever reason most of the little things related to Tatiana. She doesn't use contractions, for example, and she always puts her mother first, saying “Mama and Papa” not “Papa and Mama” like her sisters. So I was constantly on the lookout for slip-ups. Some things about their voices weren't deliberate – they just happened. All four girls use endearments, but partway through the book I realized that Tatiana's are almost always Russian (*dushka*, *dorogaya*), while the other three favored the English equivalents: *dear* and

darling. Once I figured that out I had to go back through the book and make sure it was consistent.

Actually, the hardest thing might have been keeping each sister's dialog consistent within the chapters she's *not* narrating. In other words, Maria always has to sound like Maria, even when she's speaking in one of Olga's chapters. So I could never abandon myself fully into just one voice at a time. One tricky thing I almost missed was in chapter one: I caught Anastasia using a contraction when she's *imitating* Tatiana, and Anastasia was too good a mimic to overlook such a distinctive element in another person's speech.

[NGRB]: The way you ended the book was through a single pair of eyes – Olga's. Did you consider writing the ending from each sister's point of view? And how their final experiences differed? (For example, history tells the Little Pair survived slightly longer than the Big Pair, and that one may still have been alive when their bodies were being moved.)?

[SM]: That is a very interesting question!

I don't think I ever considered revolving through each sister's perspective on the execution. Rather, the challenge for me was in creating a sense of resolution for each grand duchess *before* the final scene. In other words, I wanted to make sure each character had found something within herself to carry down to the cellar with her – something that would reassure the reader that the characters are all at peace with themselves, and hopefully make letting go of all those girls a tiny bit more bearable.

I had a terrific talk about this with Laurie Halse Anderson about two years ago. When I told her I was telling the story through four voices, she immediately said, "So you have to end the book *four times*?" She's lucky I didn't jump over the table and into her lap right then, because she got it without me even attempting to explain. For example, Maria's resolution happens in chapter 45. But there's still three more chapters left before the end. So even though Maria's emotional arc is complete, she has to remain 'onstage' for another 17 pages – without developing any further – while Anastasia and Tatiana find their own closure. Olga was trickiest of all. Because I knew I wanted hers to be the last voice, I had to split her sense of resolution over two chapters (43 & 48). Thinking about it now, I'm suddenly realizing that tactic dovetails with what's known about the real Olga – as the end grew nearer, she began to withdraw, so she was the natural choice to begin 'fading out' of the narrative first. Although I don't believe Olga

realized just how grim their fate would ultimately be, she was still the one most resigned to fate, again making her a fitting choice to narrate the final moments.

HELLO I FEEL VERY SMART RIGHT NOW.

[NGRB]: What's the most rewarding thing about writing stories revolving around 'real' characters? Do you find new audiences are learning about the world's history in new ways by reading these books?

[SM]: I love it when someone says to me, "I thought I knew this story!" Case in point: One of my beta-readers, a longtime Romanov fan, told me after reading up through chapter 16 of the manuscript that he'd never fully appreciated what it might have been like for the tsar's wife and daughters during the outbreak of the revolution. He knows the history inside and out, but this opened a vantage point he hadn't considered. So in a sense, fiction has the capacity to make history more real.

Even so, if you tried to construct a history of the Russian revolution from the information in 'The Lost Crown', it would be profoundly myopic and incomplete. But that's ok, because that's the perspective of my characters. Although accuracy is very important to me, when I write a historical novel my goal is not to teach the facts – I'd rather make you feel the emotional impact of those facts.

[NGRB]: There seems to be some steady attention in today's YA market for stories about the Romanovs, Anne Frank and the Titanic. Is there a particular historical figure or event that you feel needs more attention?

[SM]: World War II gets a lot of hype, but I would love to see more literature about World War I. We're so accustomed to mechanized warfare nowadays that I think it's difficult for us to comprehend how drastically WWI affected people of that era. In fact I'd go so far as to say that we've become so comfortable waging war via technology that hand-to-hand combat has come to feel barbaric. At the turn of the century, it was precisely the opposite. It must have been profoundly disturbing to experience the beginning of that shift.

In a similar vein, I think there's room for more stories about the Armenian genocide that was going on during WWI. You could fill a bookcase to overflowing with Holocaust novels, but I can count

the existing titles about the Armenian equivalent on one hand. Why is that?

[NGRB]: How would you persuade a hesitant reader (that's perhaps not a fan of historical fiction) to pick up 'The Lost Crown' or other titles like it?

[SM]: It's not history when it's happening to you – it's just life. Also? There's no quiz at the end, so don't let the character list and Russian glossary at the beginning overwhelm you. In fact, skip it. Just know it's there to help you find your bearings if you get muddled later on.

[NGRB]: A huge, huge, HUGE thanks to Sarah for answering my questions with such great answers! I'm sure everyone enjoyed reading them as much as I did, especially Romanov fans. If you haven't read The Lost Crown yet, I urge you to look into it as soon as possible!