



INTERVIEW ARCHIVES

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ROBIN BRIDGES YA REVIEWS
WITH ROBIN BRIDGES

If you haven't guessed by now, I'm rather fond of books about Romanov history. Today is the launch day for Sarah Miller's novel *The Lost Crown*, about the four daughters of the last tsar. Knowing Sarah from both Verla Kay's *Blue Boards* and the *Alexander Palace Time Machine*, I was delighted when she agreed to answer a few questions about the Romanovs, *The Lost Crown*, and writing in general. The voices of these sisters become a chorus singing the final song of Imperial Russia. Impeccably researched and utterly fascinating, acclaimed author Sarah Miller recounts the final days of Imperial Russia with lyricism, criticism and true compassion.

ROBIN BRIDGES [RB]: Welcome, Sarah! How are you planning to celebrate the launch of *The Lost Crown*?

SARAH MILLER [SM]: The library is hosting a launch party in June. One of the reference librarians claims she's on the lookout for a samovar.

[RB]: What's your writing process like? Are you an everyday writer or do you binge-write?

[SM]: I aspire to be an everyday writer. I'm much more likely to spend most of the day not-writing, until I can't stand myself any longer. And the longer I avoid it, the more intimidated I get. It's something I fight nearly every day. (*Ahem* Right now I am using this interview as procrastination.)

[RB]: What inspired you to write *The Lost Crown*?

[SM]: I have a low-level aversion to the concept of "inspiration." It sounds magical -- like it's something that strikes at a moment's notice and fuels the entire process. Although my interest in a person or a story has indeed been sparked that quickly and burned at a furious rate, years can pass between the initial strike and the moment I sit down to begin writing a book. The Romanovs are a case in point: I've been interested in the last tsar's family for at least 15 years, but it wasn't until 2005 or 2006 that I began to think seriously about writing about them.

[RB]: What books did you enjoy reading as a teenager?

[SM]: I've always favored stories with historical settings, but that didn't keep me from plowing through most of the stuff everyone else my age was reading in the late 80s and early 90s: Christopher Pike, R.L. Stine, *The Baby-sitter's Club*, etc. It wasn't until high school that I fell head over heels for Donna Jo Napoli's retellings of fairy tales.

[RB]: What are you reading right now?

[SM]: Mostly non-fiction. It's very strange -- I have read precisely ONE novel this year. (*True Grit*) I used to read 3-5 a week.

[RB]: Tell me something about your revision process?

[SM]: It's my saving grace. For me, drafting is like painting an entire wall, then stepping back to realize it's...not quite the right shade. It's close, and it's fixable, but your heart just sinks thinking about all the time you've spent on something that doesn't measure up to the picture in your mind. That's why I revise as I go -- I would end up mired in discouragement if I tried to draft straight through without looking back.

[RB]: When the creative well is sapped dry, what gets you writing again?

[SM]: I'm suspicious that the well never actually runs dry -- it's more likely a case of neglecting to lower my bucket.

[RB]: Do you have a favorite dessert recipe? Or favorite writing munchie?

[SM]: Nope. I munch whatever's handy.

[RB]: Did you have a playlist of songs while you were writing this book?

[SM]: I do have a small playlist labeled "OTMA" but I didn't use it very much while actually writing. (According to iTunes, it was last played on March 15, 2010.) It's mostly lifted from soundtracks, because film composers excel at telling stories and/or evoking emotion without the distraction of lyrics:

- The Letter That Never Came (Thomas Newman, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*)
- Opus 17 (Dustin O'Halloran, *Marie Antoinette*)
- Opus 23 (Dustin O'Halloran, *Marie Antoinette*)
- Opus 36 (Dustin O'Halloran, *Marie Antoinette*)
- Buon Giorno Principessa (Nicola Piovani, *Life Is Beautiful* [La Vita È Bella])
- Neverland - Minor Piano Variation (Jan A.P. Kaczmarek, *Finding Neverland*)
- The Last Spring (Edvard Grieg)
- L'évocation (Bruno Coulais, *Les Choristes*)

And every once in a while I cranked up God Save the Tsar for good measure.

[RB]: What are you working on next?

[SM]: Something I refuse to talk about. I learned from *The Lost Crown* that telling people what I'm working on isn't much different from inviting them to read over my shoulder while I type. My head gets too crowded if I try to let anyone but myself and my characters in.

[RB]: How did you get interested in Romanov history?

[SM]: I have no idea. I mentioned in an interview on Frozentears.org that my first awareness of the Romanovs came from an Unsolved Mysteries segment about Anna Anderson, but I really don't remember when or how I became captivated by the story of the real Romanovs.

[RB]: Do you have a favorite grand duchess?

[SM]: I've recently been informed that my favorite grand duchess is Maria, and I have not felt compelled to argue with that proclamation.

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[RB]: Do you have a favorite Tsar?

[SM]: No contest: Nicholas II. My interest in Russia and the Romanovs is about as narrow as it gets. I'll pay marginal attention to Alexander II and Alexander III, but only because of their influence on Nicholas II. After the murder of the last tsar, my interest in Russian history completely dissolves.

[RB]: Do you have a favorite Romanov movie?

[SM]: I have been crazy about Rasputin: Dark Servant of Destiny since high school, but it's hard for me to watch now without sniping at the historical liberties. Probably the best feature film is

Romanovy: *Ventsenosnaya Semya*. And even though it's pure baloney, I can't resist watching Ingrid Bergman and Helen Hayes in *Anastasia* once in a while..

[RB]: What were some of your favorite non-fiction books about the Romanovs?

[SM]: For pure enjoyment, I'd have to say:

- *Tsar: The Lost World of Nicholas and Alexandra*, by Peter Kurth
- *Nicholas and Alexandra*, by Robert Massie
- *The Last Tsar*, by Edvard Radzinsky

But in terms of usefulness, my loyalties lie with books that reproduce the imperial family's own letters and diaries. In English, those titles include:

- *The Complete Wartime Correspondence of Emperor Nicholas II and The Empress Alexandra*, edited by Joseph Fuhrmann
- *The Diary of Grand Duchess Olga Nicholaievna - 1913*, edited by Raegan Baker and translated by Marina Petrovna
- *The Fall of the Romanovs*, edited by Mark D. Steinberg & Vladimir Krustalev
- *The Last Diary of Tsarista Alexandra*, edited by Vladimir Kozlov & Vladimir Krustalev.

[RB]: Have you been to Russia?

[SM]: Nope. Most of the places that were relevant to *The Lost Crown* have either fallen into disrepair or are entirely gone. Restoration of the Alexander Palace has only recently begun in earnest, and the Ipatiev house was demolished in the 1970's. That only left the Tobolsk governor's mansion – in Siberia. As much as I'd like to see the places Nicholas II and his family called home, I just couldn't justify the expense under those circumstances.

[RB]: Thank you, Sarah!