

A Conversation
with
LISA KLEIN



Interviewer: When reading Ophelia, it is clear that you, as the book's author, have a deep understanding of Shakespeare's plays and the Elizabethan world. How did you come by this expertise?

Lisa: I wrote my doctoral dissertation and my first book on Elizabethan poetry (Sir Philip Sidney and the sonnet craze) and taught Renaissance literature to college students for several years. So while I wasn't trained as a Shakespearean scholar, Shakespeare goes with the territory. I've taught most of his plays, *Hamlet* more times than I can count. Then I became interested in the lives and works of Renaissance women and wrote articles about the needleworks of Queen Elizabeth and not-so-famous women of the period. I read (and taught) women's journals, letters, and poetry. I studied so-called "nonliterary" works such as conduct books, religious tracts, and satirical works about women. So while Shakespeare's works are a wonderful window into the Renaissance, there are many other sources for understanding how sixteenth-century people experienced their world.





Why did you choose Ophelia as the character from Shakespeare whose story you wanted to tell?

Whenever I taught *Hamlet* I found that students shared my disappointment that Shakespeare's Ophelia is such a passive character. To be fair, he was writing a revenge tragedy, a popular genre at the time, not a love tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*. Still, I think he missed an opportunity to deepen Hamlet's conflict by enhancing his relationship with Ophelia. The film versions of the play, which many readers have seen, focus on her naïveté and madness. Well, if Ophelia was so dim, what on earth made Hamlet fall in love with her? How would the play have been different if she had not drowned? If Ophelia could tell her own story, how would it differ from Shakespeare's version? These were the kinds of questions that started me thinking. They just wouldn't let go, so I began writing.

*Why did you decide to tell Ophelia's story in novel rather than play format (as Tom Stoppard did in **Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead**)?*

It never occurred to me to write a play. Maybe I didn't want to take on Shakespeare (or Stoppard, for that matter) on his own turf. I know that I doubted my ability to write good dialogue, and a play is all dialogue. I enjoyed and admired *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, and, like Stoppard, I wanted to write "between the lines" of *Hamlet*, weaving Ophelia's story into the existing time frame of *Hamlet*. The novel format seemed the natural choice, because I find it easier to become deeply engaged in reading a novel than in reading a play.

Are there other Shakespearean characters whose story you would like to tell?

I've been thinking about that. Ophelia was such an obvious choice. So far no other character has grabbed me, like the Ancient Mariner grabbed Coleridge's narrator and said, "Hear my tale." But I am rereading some of the plays that interest me most. Right now I'm intrigued by *Twelfth Night* because I know a certain group of high school students who are acting out its complicated love relationships unawares! Who knows, I might combine characters or plots from more than one play and build my own Shakespeare-inspired novel. Or I might visit a different literary period altogether.

What joys and challenges did writing Ophelia bring?

As I said, writing dialogue was a challenge for me. But as my sense of the characters developed, their words came more naturally. Imitating Elizabethan language without falling into stilted syntax and flowery diction was also tricky. I kept rewriting to make the language plainer, while keeping it literary. I love doing the research for historical novels. I did lengthy word searches in my gigantic *Oxford English Dictionary*, in order to use words that were current in Shakespeare's time. I read sixteenth-century herbals and books about convent life. The writing process itself was exciting. When I would get stuck on a scene or write myself into a corner, I would go for a walk to clear my head, and sometimes the perfect piece of dialogue or a solution to a problem would pop into my head, and I would virtually run home to get it down. Sometimes it would take my story in an unexpected direction, and everything else would have to adjust.





This is your first novel. What was the publishing process like?

I shared a very early draft of *Ophelia* with my reading group and my dad, and the responses I got encouraged me to keep working at it. About a year later I felt it was finished, and another friend advised me to get an agent. I researched literary agents, wrote about thirty letters, and stacked up as many rejections. Finally an agent I had handpicked, full of hope, took an interest. She recommended changing an important plot element, and after I did so, she agreed to represent the manuscript. In just over a month she had offers from two publishers. Of course, I was stunned, then elated. I had expected it to take several months to get a reply. Even after *Ophelia* was accepted, it underwent several more revisions. Like I used to tell my students: no piece of writing is ever perfect. It can always be improved. But I feel tremendously lucky that *Ophelia* found a home so quickly, guided by a good agent and a dedicated editor.

What would you like your readers to come away with after reading Ophelia?

I would tell my readers this: enjoy *Ophelia*. Then go and reread *Hamlet* with a fresh eye, or read it for the first time without being intimidated by Shakespeare. Read more of Shakespeare's works. His plays belong to all of us, and we don't want to miss what they have to say about the human condition that we all share.

How do you see the play Hamlet differently after writing this novel?

In the course of writing *Ophelia*, I studied the play so intently I noticed details I had missed in all my prior readings. For one thing, I realized how compressed the action is and how indefinite the passage of time, as I tried to fit my story into the framework of *Hamlet*. I admire the play tremendously. There is no other work of literature that can stand up to all the literary criticism, movies, books, poetry, and plays that have been created in response to it.

What do you think Shakespeare would think of your interpretation of his play and characters?

That question occurred to me frequently while I was writing. I would like to think that Shakespeare would approve of my Ophelia. After all, he freely adapted his sources when he wrote plays. And what Ophelia does is not out of the realm of possibility for an intelligent and resourceful young woman of Shakespeare's day. I would like to hear him say, "'Tis a fine piece of work, a tragicomedy; would that I had thought of it myself!"



READING GROUP GUIDE

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you see any similarities within *Ophelia* to other famous love stories by Shakespeare or in current books and movies?
2. Ophelia grew up without a mother, so she is always looking for a strong connection with the women in her life. How do you think Ophelia's life might have been different if her mother had survived? Do you think she benefited in any way by growing up without a close mother figure?
3. If you were making a movie of *Ophelia*, whom would you cast in the roles of Ophelia, Hamlet, and Horatio? And how might you change the book version to make a better movie version?
4. How are the relationships between parents and children as portrayed in *Ophelia* different from how families interact today? What did you notice that you might see happen in your own life?
5. Hamlet often behaves differently around Ophelia than with other groups of people. Do you ever see this sort of behavior in your life among friends?
6. Ophelia pretends to have lost her mind due to grief, but does she truly go insane? How does the description of her madness, be it real or imagined, compare to Hamlet's madness? How does Ophelia's friendship with Therese add another layer of possibility to what madness can be and how it can be interpreted?



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7. Ophelia is forced to make a very difficult choice when she realizes that her life is in danger as long as she stays in Elsinore. Do you think she makes the right decision in risking so much to have a chance at freedom?
 8. What do you think Queen Gertrude's motivations are for helping Ophelia to escape from Elsinore?
 9. Ophelia's descriptions of St. Emilion's provide fascinating insight into the life of a religious order during the early 1600s. There were many reasons for becoming a nun in the seventeenth century, not all of them based on religious devotion. Many women joined convents when they were widowed or if they were unable to find a husband to support them. What are the options for women in these situations today?
 10. Discuss how you feel about the book's ending. Were you surprised? What do you imagine would have happened if there were one more chapter? Do you think the ending should have been a tragedy, as in *Hamlet*?
 11. When Ophelia is a child and Hamlet fails to attend to the pansies she gives him, Horatio tells her, "'Do not waste your tears, little girl. . . . We boys are ever careless of flowers'" (page 15). Throughout the novel, Horatio is especially kind to and protective of Ophelia. How does his friendship impact the story? Do you see his actions differently following the conclusion?
 12. If you could rewrite any character in literature, who would you reimagine? What would you change about his or her story?



A READING LIST FROM

Ophelia

From the Queen's Library:

The Mirror of the Sinful Soul

The Heptameron

by Queen Margaret of Navarre

The Art of Love

Metamorphoses

by Ovid

The Book of the Courtier by Baldesar Castiglione



From Hamlet:

Anatomia by Andreas Vesalius



From the Convent Library:

The Legend of Good Women

The Tale of Troilus and Criseyde

by Geoffrey Chaucer

The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius the Roman



