

"For a writer, the best thing to do when you don't understand something is to write a book about it."

The Anecdotal Archeologist

BY JONAS MOODY

Tracy Chevalier, author of the 1999 bestseller *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, speaks with Jonas Moody about her latest book, the Zen of fossil collecting and her love/hate relationship with Wikipedia.

Jonas Moody: Your newest book, *Burning Bright*, is touted as the story of William Blake, but in fact it's about Blake's kid neighbors. How on earth do you build an entire novel out of that kind of marginalia?

Tracy Chevalier: It always starts with a spark of interest: a Vermeer painting, a Victorian cemetery, William Blake, or a fossil collector. There is that first moment when I discover them. It's like knocking along a wall. Something sounds different than the rest and it's like I've found that secret compartment full of treasure.

JM: What was that spark for *Burning Bright*?

TC: I was at a Blake exhibit at the Tate in 2001. I knew his poetry and some of his images, but I had never seen them all together and I'd never seen the illuminated books. And all the cramped, close writing, page after page. I didn't understand it at all but wanted to. For a writer, the best thing to do when you don't understand something is to write a book about it. But in the end, this was a process of me accepting that I don't understand it.

JM: So how does a moment in a museum become a novel?

TC: I didn't want this to be a biographical novel about William Blake. I was interested in the effect he had on people. I wanted to see him in a wider context. Not just as the writer or the painter, but the neighbor and the man you talk to about the price of fish, or you might have a drink with at the pub, or have a disagreement with about the height of your wall.

JM: But is there some point in your process when you abandon the figure and take hold of the narrative?

TC: Yes. In a way, that's why Jim and Maggie, the kids in the story, become much more important than Blake. As I was writing, the kids' story became more important and I realized it's more about his influence indirectly.

JM: So I hear your next novel has you down on all fours digging in the sand.

TC: Yeah, I found a dinosaur shoulder bone. I was doing research for my next novel about a fossil collector named Mary Anning in the 19th century. She found some of the first dinosaur fossils in England. I

was looking around, not really in the mood, because you have to get into the rhythm of looking. I looked down and there it was!

JM: No pick-ax or tiny brushes?

TC: Just sitting on the beach. You don't need a hammer to find most fossils. Actually, most stuff is just lying there.

JM: So what goes through the mind of a fossil beachcomber?

TC: It's Zen. You don't think about anything. Most of the time I'm thinking too much about looking. *I've got to be more thorough. Why do I never find anything?* But usually when I find something, I'm not thinking

about it and not expecting it. It's when I become non-verbal, which is rare for me. The few times I've found something nice on the beach, I've really felt totally joyful and non-verbal about it. I'm obviously switching into some kind of "find" mode. When I'm not in this mode is when I'm self-conscious, thinking too much. My writing is like this too. My best writing is when I'm not worrying about every word. *What adjective shall I use?* It needs to be more flowing and spontaneous.

JM: But isn't preparation and careful study critical to your work as well?

TC: The historical details have to feed the story and have a reason to be there. I do ten times as much research as I use, but all research is useful. It gives



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you a more general understanding of the context for the book. So even if you don't describe the type of whitewash used on the house, you know how the light comes in on it. You don't describe every bit of furniture in a room, but you know it's there and the effect it has.

JM: What I found interesting about you from your Wikipedia entry is that you actually worked for five years as a reference book editor.

TC: What? I didn't know I had a Wikipedia entry!

JM: Come on. You must have, with all your research. You never looked up your own name?

TC: I never thought about it.

JM: Well, as an ex-reference book editor, what are your feelings about Wikipedia, *the* anti-establishment reference book?

TC: As an ex-reference book editor I ought to be horrified, but in reality I love it. I use it all the time. I don't use it in the classic sense. If I want an introduction to something I start with the Wikipedia. It's not stuffy. You can find entries on Paris Hilton and Jessica Biel. Who the hell is she? People were talking about her and I was thinking, I'm too old, I don't understand. So I looked her up on Wikipedia and got my answer. You won't find her in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It's all knowledge. Not just all knowledge *we think you should know*.

JM: Does that reference book editor ever creep up in you when you write?

TC: All the time. Mostly when I'm researching, but also when I'm writing. I'm fanatical about getting things right. If I'm going to make it wrong, I do so knowingly and try to correct it somehow. Like by putting a mention in the acknowledgements. I try to use the facts as they are, but I choose subjects where there are lots of gaps and I can make up a lot. It also comes out in my love of research. I love sitting in the British library and finding out as much as I can. It's wonderful, but it's also a great form of procrastination. I have to learn to stop researching and start writing. [a](#)

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