

Q&A with Lucy Foley

In *Last Letter from Istanbul* you explore an epic, complex history through the eyes of individual characters, to brilliant effect. Was it difficult to balance the characters' personal stories against the broader historical backdrop?

I wouldn't say difficult so much as essential. My interest in writing historical fiction is always in exploring the intimate, personal experiences of people living through what might later be given the grand title of 'history', of the dramatic and occasionally mundane ways in which their lives are shaped by events. History is people – and I suppose you could say I'm interested in the 'little' people: not those making the decisions, but those who must muddle through the consequences of the decisions made by others, who simply have to get on with the business of living.

At a time of conflict I'm interested in the ways in which some people express their humanity – the love and courage that they find within themselves. I'm also interested in exploring how other people forget theirs and are damaged irrevocably by that. These are the elements that, for me, make historical fiction relevant, through which we can find parallels with our own time.

You evoke the atmosphere and historical richness of Constantinople so beautifully. How did you get under the skin of the city?

I went to Istanbul three times in the process of researching this book – and fell utterly in love with it, though I had known that I would even before I went – so fascinated was I by what I had read and learned of the city beforehand. It is such a rich, multifarious, multilayered place that I wanted to make it a character in itself, a place that seduces and rebuffs the characters by turns. Somewhere that could be a beloved, familiar home for one person and utterly alien and fascinating and occasionally hostile to another. I wanted the reader to experience this too, to feel differently about the city depending on which character's account they were reading at the time, so to understand all its many different incarnations.

The book is obviously set in a specific period, but at the same time I hope I have given the sense of Constantinople/Istanbul as an ancient place, with many layers of history. I think this is the impression you have on visiting it. Reminders of Byzantine and Roman rule are everywhere, and this layering is a fundamental part of the city's identity, and an understanding of that crucial to getting beneath its 'skin'.

Were any characters in the story more difficult to write than others?

Yes. 'The Traveller' was tricky – writing in such a way as to leave clues to their identity, to keep the reader intrigued and perhaps forming their own suppositions, but without giving

the game away. And then there's 'The Prisoner'. He's someone who has done and does terrible things but at the same time I wanted him to be a sympathetic character, I wanted the reader to understand what has driven him, and to feel that if they were in his shoes, there is a chance they might have behaved in the same way. I'm not interested in writing 'villains' and I didn't want him to feel like one. Instead, I wanted to paint a portrait of a young man who has lost his innocence, who feels he has lost his homeland, and is driven to do something unforgivable as a result.

Nur and George have a complicated, and heart wrenching, relationship. Did you always plan to end things in the way you did?

Yes. It felt like the only way that things could end, because of who they are, their characters, their moral compasses. They are both quite similar people in that sense, despite coming from such different backgrounds. I had a clear idea of how it would finish from the beginning, and I think that's always important when I'm writing: to have that fixed point of the ending, though I don't always know precisely how I'll get there!

Tell us about your writing process. Do you have any writing rituals?

These days I often start by writing longhand first, in notebooks. I love the freedom of that – there's nothing worse, I think, than a blinking cursor and a blank screen. I can cross things out and write between the lines and just get things

down. I know I can refine it all later when I come to type it up – and this way, every word in the first draft is written twice, so I'm self-editing as I go along. I love writing in coffee shops, I like that background hum, the interesting conversations you overhear . . . and I definitely write better when well-caffeinated. And I don't tie myself to a nine-to-five schedule, at least not anymore. Some days, the words just don't come, and it's better to go for a walk and mull things over – on other days I'll be scribbling away from seven in the morning to ten at night. Most of all, writing has to feel fun which, luckily, it does most of the time. As soon as it feels too much like work the words dry up!