

Q&A with Sarra Manning

What inspired you to write *The Rise and Fall of Becky Sharp*?

I first read *Vanity Fair* when I was at University and even though it was heavy going (733 pages!) it had so many interesting things to say about class, fame and society, which are still so applicable today. It's also really funny, so sharp and knowing. I've always thought about writing a contemporary version and last year with everything that was happening in the world from Trump and Love Island to #MeToo and the inexorable rise of the Instagram influencers, it felt like the right time to take it on.

What was it like to take on a classic novel and make it your own?

It was actually pretty terrifying when I finally sat down in front of a blank screen! I did get the fear quite badly and suddenly felt that I wasn't a good enough or a clever enough writer to take on *Vanity Fair*. I was a few weeks in and just about to pull the plug when I went for a swim (I do all my best thinking as I go up and down, doing a sedate breaststroke) and had my lightbulb moment - that instead of becoming so fixated on rewriting a classic novel, I should treat the project as a Sarra Manning novel and have some fun with it. It took all the pressure off me and I was able to really enjoy the writing process, which doesn't happen very often.

Becky Sharp is the ultimate anti-heroine – ruthless, scheming and quite brilliant at manipulating people to do what she wants them to do. What was it like to write a character who is – on the surface at least – unlikeable?

The main reason why I always wanted to do a modern remix of *Vanity Fair* is because Becky Sharp is one of the most fascinating characters in literature. You love to loathe her and you loathe to love her. It was wonderful to write a character who didn't do a lot of navel-gazing or introspection, but was so utterly without shame. I wouldn't exactly want to be friends with her (or even go for drinks with her as she'd probably steal my debit card while I was in the Ladies) but I think there's something admirable about the way that when life gives her lemons, she throws the lemons back in life's face, as she says to Amelia.

And what do you think society makes of unlikeable women?

Who's to say whether someone is unlikable or not? I think the whole issue of being 'unlikeable' is just another stick that society uses to beat women with. Do men constantly worry about whether they're unlikeable? I think not! I always aim to practise kindness but I've realised that not everyone is going to like you and that's OK. Likeability is not a rent that women have to pay to take up space in the world.

Your update of *Vanity Fair* brings Becky Sharp brilliantly into the twenty-first century – how has your novel moved away from the original text and why did you make those choices?

I would say that *The Rise And Fall Of Becky Sharp* does quite faithfully follow all plot points and the highs and lows of the original novel. It's still very much a story of one girl who's come from nothing but wants everything and will do what she has to do to claw her way up the social ladder. I dug deep with the characters and thought very hard about what they would be doing and who they would be in modern times. So, George Osborne became a Conservative MP with a surname change so I didn't get sued, the Crawleys became an acting dynasty (and I got rid of some of the Crawleys because they were more numerous than Kardashian/Jenners) and Lord Steyne became a media mogul. The only thing that really differs is the ending. I think Thackeray punished Becky and Amelia whereas I wanted them both to be triumphant and end the novel with what they wanted most in life.

What do you want readers to take away from *The Rise and Fall of Becky Sharp*?

I hope the novel has some interesting things to say about how we regard fame, class and the role of women but mostly I want my readers to have a cracking good time with the book. I would also like at least three actual LOLs, please.

Do you think William Makepeace Thackeray would approve of your version!?

I really hope so! I felt so close to him as I was writing. I was grateful that he'd gifted me with these wonderful characters and done all the heavy-lifting in terms of structure and story. But I also despaired of the plotheoles and the lack of pacing that he'd left me with. But ultimately he was a great co-pilot and I feel sure that he'd take *The Rise And Fall Of Becky Sharp* in the spirit that it was intended.