

K E L L I S T A N L E Y

Miranda's Back in a City of Secrets

CITY OF SECRETS is the second outing for Miranda Corbie, who has already made a huge impact on the genre — she's been hailed as a completely unique heroine, and CITY OF DRAGONS received mammoth critical acclaim. Did your success influence the sequel? Was there pressure?

[laughs] Starting out with a tough question, huh? The critical reception for Miranda has been enormously gratifying. She is a unique and powerful character, someone whom we meet at a point in her life when she is rebuilding and rediscovering her identity. As a woman who is uncompromising in her integrity and with herself—whatever the consequences—she has the potential of, I hope, inspiring women of all ages.

That said, of course there's pressure. There's pressure whenever you write a book—particularly in this publishing climate, where writers and publishers and agents are scrambling to figure out how to recalibrate in the face of so many changes. A series presents a particular challenge. You have to maintain the character's integrity—what makes her herself, what makes her recognizable. At the same time, one of the reasons I love to write series is because they allow us to follow the personal growth of characters, see how they're affected by the events of each book and story. It's a juggling act.

And how do you approach keeping all those plates—or chainsaws—in the air?

I stay true to Miranda. I don't feel like I'm writing her, actually. I feel like she's telling me a long, life story ... and each book is a part of it.

How has she changed in CITY OF SECRETS? It's set immediately after CITY OF DRAGONS, right?

Almost. It takes place in late May of 1940, so just a couple of months later. As far as how Miranda has changed ... well, I'd say she's more confident. Less depressed. Just as angry at hypocrisy, people with their heads in the sand, the rabid isolationists.

I think in **CITY OF SECRETS** you really understand that Miranda sees herself as continuing a war that started in Spain ... Johnny's war, and now hers.

Speaking of war, I understand the action takes place against the backdrop of the fall of France ...

The fall of Belgium, the Netherlands, the miracle of Dunkirk, the fall of France ... some of the most dramatic events of the war, the blitzkrieg in action—not just against the poor outdated (but heroic) cavalry of Poland, but against the “impregnable” Maginot Line of France. Tragic time.

And, though set in 1940 San Francisco and the Napa Valley, the book’s theme is about anti-Semitism. Tell us about that.

As a high school student, I was haunted by the Holocaust. I met with a local survivor, read everything I could, watched films and documentaries. I was wrestling with how to understand an evil so mammoth, so mechanized, so incomprehensible. I remember when the TV movie *Playing for Time* came out, and the idea that the Nazis had these orchestras at concentration camps—composed of Jewish prisoners—while they were butchering Jews (and Gypsies, gays, political opponents, Poles, etc.) ... it just gnawed at my guts.

When I was in college, I visited Dachau. I saw where Anne Frank had pasted magazine pictures of Cary Grant on her wall. Anti-Semitism, like all forms of bigotry, is a pernicious evil. The definition of evil itself, as evidenced by the Holocaust. And when I later learned about anti-Semitism in America, and how our eugenic scientists influenced Hitler ... well, I had to write about it. To reveal it, to deal with it.

I understand eugenics plays a role in the plot.

Yeah, and I won’t go into it specifically, since I don’t want to leak any spoilers, but Hitler is on record as recognizing how the American eugenics movement influenced Nazi racial laws. As you’ll see in **CITY OF SECRETS**, our courts made it possible for people to be sterilized against their will ... because a doctor could declare them “unfit”, either mentally or morally or both. Sometimes “unfit” just meant poor. Though not in the case of Ann Cooper Hewitt, whom Miranda mentions in the book.

She was an heiress who filed suit against mother for having her sterilized while she was in the hospital for an appendectomy. At stake was control of her father’s fortune, which she was due to inherit at the age of 21. She was sterilized a few days shy of her birthday, ostensibly because she was “feeble-minded.”

Wow. So real people make appearances in CITY OF SECRETS.

Not Ann, but several real-life personages do pop up in the book. Sally Rand has a cameo appearance in Chapter One. And someone else appears later on—a man—but no spoilers! [laughs]

What about actual events?

There's a plot thread concerning domestic terrorism. American fascist groups, what today we'd call militias. There were quite a few of them in California and the West Coast at the time.

A New York case (mentioned in the book) was dominating headlines at the time—they were called the “Christian Front” boys, named after Charles Coughlin's isolationist, anti-Semitic and pro-fascist organization. They were stockpiling weapons and planning to bomb public buildings. And of course, a bomb did go off at the New York World's Fair in July ...

You must spend a lot of time in research! Is it fun?

Research is always enjoyable on one level, but what you uncover can also cause you a lot of pain. So I have to stagger researching things like anti-Semitic terrorist groups with what music Miranda might be listening to. I try to keep that kind of back-in-forth, the beautiful and the ugly in balance, as a hallmark of the series.

I've got to say that one of the more enjoyable research projects for **CITY OF SECRETS** involved several trips to the Napa Valley and Calistoga, which is a lovely and charming town. Though my agent said that after reading the book, she'd never be able to think of a mud bath in quite the same way ... [laughs]

So what's next for Miranda? I hear there are some unexpected personal developments for her in CITY OF SECRETS.

Yup. That's all I'm saying. [laughs] As for what's next, **CITY OF GHOSTS** picks up almost immediately after **CITY OF SECRETS** ... as she's trying to deal with some of those personal developments. Along with crime, of course ... this time involving art, the government and a possible spy.

Finally, what do you want readers to take away from CITY OF SECRETS?

A thrilling, entertaining read that will linger after the covers are closed or the e-reader is turned off... and maybe a book that will give them a peek into a part of history they never knew. And hopefully they'll continue to want to follow Miranda and stick around for the rest of the story!