

Sharan publishes as Sharan Newman. Her books to date are::

*Death comes as Epiphany*. Tor, 1993

*The Devil's Door*. Forge, 1994

*The Wandering Arm*. Forge, 1995

*Strong as Death*. Forge, 1996

*Guinevere*. (reprint) Tor, 1996

## WISHING FOR HISTORY

"But women in ancient Celtic countries were the equals of men. Why don't you put **that** in your historical novels?" The women who ask me this perennial question are all young and often angry. Whether they send me e-mail or latch onto me at science-fiction conventions, they so badly want it to be true that they generally don't listen when I start talking about primary sources in literature and the documents of law courts. "The old sagas were all written down by monks," they tell me. "They hated women and changed the stories. Besides, I read about the women being equal in a book, a history book."

How do you counter a beloved myth? And why, I sometimes ask myself, do I bother to try? All historical novels contain a greater or smaller helping of fantasy; mine, with their magical and mythical elements, serve up more than most. Why not tell my readers what they want to hear, that pre-Christian Celtic countries were a feminist paradise? Plenty of novelists, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley and Patricia Kenneally, have done so, and they make a lot more money than I do.

They draw upon the pseudo-historians whose books my angry readers proffer: Norma Lore Goodrich, for example, or John and Caitlin Matthews. All of these writers start with a few remarks in Tacitus or Strabo and a few out-of-context quotes from ancient law texts; they cobble together more material out of the gilded whimsies of older Celtifiers such as Iolo Morgannwg. Upon these shaky foundations they then build an amazing construction, a veritable cloud-castle like Morgan le Fay's, of non-logic and wishful thinking. You can find their works prominent in chain bookstores, all filed under non-fiction.

I would suppose that these people believe what they write. Certainly many of the minor novelists, such as Persia Woolley, who draw upon this body of myth believe it to be history with all their hearts. We can't blame the readers of fiction if they, in turn, believe what they find in books that impress them. Like most of the ardently deceived, they refuse to acknowledge the truth when they finally do hear it. It's not just my novels that draw their fire. I find myself roasted in such good company as the anonymous recorder of the *Tain Bo Cualinge* on the one hand and Stuart Piggot and Barry Cunliffe on the other. I haven't heard so many accusations of "patriarchal conspiracy" since the early 1970's.

It's not, of course, only Celtic studies that produce this sort of wishful thinking. In the field of prehistory generally we can find writers who skim the work of Marija Gimbutas and take off across the stratosphere of thought before real understanding can weigh them down. Did you know, for instance, that Knossos was never walled because the ancient Minoans had a matriarchal civilization? Neither did I. Yet I've seen this "fact" put forward in a widely-distributed television documentary. The reasoning behind it strikes me as typical: the city had no walls, therefore it needed none, therefore there wasn't any fighting, therefore women must have been in charge.

The examples are legion and historically attested. What's new nowadays is the emphasis on women's rights and freedoms.

What feeds this kind of wishful history? Let's go back to those earnest young women. Talking with them has shown me how much they need a Golden Age, a time when we women were free to own ourselves and to follow our own paths, a time that has somehow been stolen from us and that we can demand to have back as our birthright. Their very insistence on a historical basis for feminism shows how important history is to them. Without historical precedent, they seem to be saying, we have no case. How can we be free if women were never free before?

We will have to build our freedom, I tell them. For the building we can learn more from the real stories and the real histories—about how women survive; how they gather strength in adverse circumstances; how, when all else fails them, they keep their dignity even if the keeping means death. The enormous importance of Women's Studies as a field springs from this need and use for truth. The more that women scholars work with the genuine evidences of the past—the literature, the books of law, the medical texts and archival material, deeds and wills and even linguistic analyses—the more information comes to light on how real women really lived. It takes a flood of history to wash away false dreams.

If we were never Gaulish warrior-women who could study to be bards and have a hundred lovers, so were we never the completely subservient slaves, half-animal and half-whore, of male fantasies—a fact in itself well worth knowing. The knowing, this truth, in turn gives us more to build a future upon than the wish-history. Every now and then one of my young women listens and begins asking where she can find the actual evidence, this genuine history.

And that, of course, is why I keep on bothering to counter the fancies. When even one person listens, it makes the effort of telling worthwhile.

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## **MEDIEVAL ART AS NOSTALGIA FOR THE FUTURE**

I had occasion recently to muse on my nostalgia for the past as I put together a collection of my articles on medieval stained glass, published over the last thirty years. In bringing these studies together for the first time, I realized the extent to which my research on glass paintings had concentrated on the original arrangement of fragmentary and dispersed windows, and their setting in the Romanesque and Gothic buildings of Europe for which they were made. The overwhelming majority of panels I had investigated were in collections, many in the United States; only two essays—the earliest and the latest in order of writing—were entirely devoted to glass still installed in European monuments. In the introduction I will offer the following assessment, among others, of my penchant for re-joining fragments and reconstructing programs.

### **Identification with the object: the fragment as metonymy**

Ultimately, I suspect my fixation with fragments as imaginary field for something whole is not just grounded in archeological training. It seems that, throughout the process of studying dislocated objects, I—like many historians of material culture—have always been personally dislocated. My art historical career began in 1960 as a student abroad, a grateful recipient of a Leverhulme scholarship from the British Institute in Paris where I was placed in the care of the French *Corpus Vitrearum* team, who were preparing a volume in that series (at that time, still patronized by UNESCO as part of their post-World War Two project to document European cultural heritage). I was to be trained to do the same kind of work for British patrimony. My teachers and mentors were Jean Lafond, exiled to Paris from Normandy as an amateur art historian, and Louis Grodecki, an expatriate Pole. Grod was still so little appreciated in his country of adoption that he was serving as curator of the Musée des Plans-Reliefs in Paris (a museum of urban models for military use), even though he was acknowledged