

The *evocative* East



Author Dinah Jeffries will sweep you away to a world of exotic locations and emotional twists with her latest novel

WORDS BY: KATIE JARVIS

Get your passports ready and fasten your seatbelts: a novel by Cheltenham-based author Dinah Jeffries involves being transported to an exotic destination where love, mystery and complex relationships colour the landscape as deeply as tropical blooms.

Dinah is being compared to greats such as Victoria Hislop and Kate Morton; yet her style is unique. Her debut novel, *The Separation*, set in Malaya in 1955, drew on her own childhood, played out against the backdrop of Malayan independence, which heaved with the violence of a brutal guerrilla war.

This month sees the publication of her second book, *The Tea Planter's Wife*, set in colonial Ceylon - inspired by old family stories of life in South Asia. But while you're reading of far-flung locations, look

out for the Cotswolds, too - for they're often tucked away in Dinah's novels.

Tell us about your books, particularly the latest...

The Tea Planter's Wife is a tension-filled novel that, I hope, captures the atmosphere of colonial Ceylon in the 1920s and 1930s. It explores where the boundaries of love lie for 19-year-old Gwendolyn Hooper who steps off the steamer in Ceylon, eager to begin her new life as a married woman. But the husband who greets her is distant, secretive and brooding. Laurence is forever away working, leaving his young English bride to explore the vast plantation alone. Wandering into forbidden places, Gwen finds locked doors, trunks full of dusty dresses, a tiny overgrown grave - clues to an unspeakable past. In this world of 1920s racism, amid the uncertainties of a disintegrating colonial power, Gwen soon

has something heart-breaking of her own to hide. *The Tea Planter's Wife* is about what we feel we have to conceal from the people we love, and what happens when we do.

Where did the inspiration come from?

My late mother-in-law was born in India and her family included tea planters in India and Ceylon. The book was initially inspired by stories she told. I was also born in the East and my first novel *The Separation* is set in Malaysia. When it was finished, I looked across the Bay of Bengal and spotted a little pearl-drop in the India Ocean: Sri Lanka, once a British colony, known as Ceylon. I already had the idea for the core story, so it was just a case of going to Sri Lanka, where I fell in love with a misty tea plantation overlooking a lake in the central highlands.

It was a case of going to Sri Lanka, where I fell in love with a misty tea plantation overlooking a lake in the central highlands

Who would enjoy your novels?

I want to transport my readers to another time and place. If you enjoy being swept away to be immersed in a moody, evocative setting and a more leisurely world, then it's for you. I write grown-up women's fiction - though some men have also enjoyed the book - so really anyone who loves a gripping story, with emotional twists and turns and believable characters who get under your skin. If you like Kate Morton, Victoria Hislop, Kate Furnivall, Julia Gregson, then you'll probably enjoy mine. And though it's set in the past, the themes are universal. Santa Montefiore, author of *The Beekeeper's Daughter* and many others, said, 'My ideal read; mystery, love, heart-break and joy - I couldn't put it down'.

Do you have a writing routine?

I write pretty much every day and start in the morning and go on until I drop. I have a small room at the back of our house where it all happens! It's not tidy. I've never been a person who needs everything in order before I begin.

What do you enjoy reading?

Currently I love Sarah Waters and Rachel Joyce, but my favourite book last year was actually non-fiction: *H is for Hawk*.

What's your background?

I was born in Malaysia and lived there until I was nearly nine. I love to go to the East and, along with Sri Lanka, I've also been to Vietnam, where I researched my next novel, *The Silk Shop* in Hanoi, which Penguin will publish in summer 2016. I'm very excited that in the New Year I'll be going to India to research the fourth book. I've always wanted to go, so it really will be one of the high points of my life.

To what extent did the Cotswolds influence your writing?

Not so much an influence, but more a presence. In *The Separation*, one of my characters went to school in Cheltenham, and my *Tea Planter's Wife* originally comes from Owltree Manor, which I based on Owlpen Manor near Uley. It's a gorgeous, intimate manor house, perfect for Gwen's family home. Although I'm going to India for book four, there will be chapters set in a

village based on Chipping Campden. So the Cotswolds and its environs do figure in the books and are a big part of my life.

If you could be any character from one of your books, who would you be and why?

I'd love to be Fran in *The Tea Planter's Wife*. Although her parents died during the sinking of the Titanic (before my book begins), she is a woman of independent means who is drawn to the more bohemian characters in life. She also gets the best dresses and loves to Charleston. I'd like that.

How easy was it to get published? And any advice for other would-be authors?

It wasn't easy at all. You have to persevere, develop a thick skin, take on feedback from the professionals and you need a hefty dollop of good luck too. It helps to develop dogged determination even when the outlook is grim. ■

The Tea Planter's Wife by Dinah Jefferies is published by Penguin General on September 3. You can find out more at www.dinahjefferies.com

