



# Dredging the Past: Sally Gardner's new novel

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Sally Gardner delves into uncharted waters for her new novel, **The Double Shadow**. Damian Kelleher gets his toes wet for **Books for Keeps**.

Tackling a new novel is rather like diving for treasure on the high seas according to Sally Gardner. 'I know where my wreck went down,' she admits, laughing. 'When I write my books for eight-year-olds, I say I'm going snorkelling. With **The Red Necklace** and **The Silver Blade**, I plunged further in, but writing this,' she picks up and shakes a copy of her latest novel, **The Double Shadow**, 'writing this was like going to visit the Titanic. And just when I thought I was running out of oxygen I thought, no, now I've got to go and check the china!'

It's that sort of attention to details that is the hallmark of Gardner's genre defying novel. A brittle young woman named Amaryllis, Ezra, an innocent young lad, and a mysterious memory machine that promises to transform lives - it has all the makings of another absorbing episode of **Dr Who**. But these are just some of the mainstays of Sally Gardner's most ambitious novel to date.

Beginning in a 'between the wars' England ('the U-bend of history' as Sally puts it), **The Double Shadow** tells an involved tale of rich, rebellious Amaryllis who has been left with fragments of memory by a machine invented by her own father. Gardner has previously explored the French Revolution (in **The Red Necklace** and **The Silver Blade**) and 17th century London in **I, Coriander** to huge acclaim, but it's to the early/mid 20th century that she turns her attention for this first novel published by Orion's teen imprint, Indigo.

'There's a huge wasted generation of people at this time,' Gardner explains, 'and it's such a fascinating period - historian Juliet Gardiner looks at it in great depth in her work. History I find intriguing because it's tangible, a safety net that we can all look back on. The characters and situations are still terribly relevant to today.'

Writing stories firmly grounded in the past makes fearsome demands on authors as Gardner knows only too well. If you're going to set a story in the 1930s, you have to make sure the details are all present and correct.

'I always had a feeling the story was set in the 1920s or '30s,' says Sally. 'I had this idea originally I was going to start it in a Lancaster bomber, and it was going to be told through Ezra - and you didn't know what he was going to bomb. I did a lot of research because I then realised that writing about Lancaster bombers and aeroplanes is like heading for Nerdsville! You really have to know what you're doing. The detail is so important.'

With accuracy in mind, Sally called upon the expertise of a wartime hero, nonagenarian RAF veteran Tony Iveson. With his assistance, she ensured Ezra's experiences were as true to life as possible. 'He's an amazing man,' says Sally, 'ninety years old, sharp as a knife, and he's just written a book about his experiences as a bomber boy. We sent him the chapter to read to get it absolutely right.'

Ironically, it's writing about the past that has allowed Sally the freedom to stretch herself creatively. In this book, the plot revolves around a myriad of themes that embrace everything from history and physics, to literature and science-

fiction.

'I was very inspired by listening to Ted Hughes read Eliot's 'The Wasteland',? Sally explains. 'That really was a starting point ? such an extraordinary poem. It captured what I wanted to do with the memory machine. Yes, it took immense detailed research. I'm done my best with the physics ? I had to do a lot of reading but I'm not particularly mathematical ? so I had to check with a lot of people.'

Housed within a glittering mirrored picture palace tucked away in the woods, Arnold Rubens' machine is capable of creating another world out of people's memories in a whole new dimension. But why memory, and why the concept of isolating it from the human mind?

'My mum is losing her memory now ? she's 80 something ? and I have a friend who's got Alzheimer's,' Sally says. 'I became fascinated by what it stripped you of, and how much memory you lose. Also, I realise we re-write our memories to suit the story of ourselves, today.' For Amaryllis, denied so much of her youth in the form of memories, this proves to be a huge source of frustration. As a heroine, she is compelling and fascinating, and yet she also defies the conventions of so-much modern fiction.

'There is this common view that you want your heroine to be loved straight off, ? says Sally. 'But I don't want you to love Amaryllis at first, I want you to be intrigued by her. The way she treats Ezra is terrible ? she's a right bitch! ? but she has this incredible vulnerability. I wanted her to exist on many levels: Ezra always remains true, he's the constant, and Amaryllis is like this flickering light; she's unobtainable in a way. But in the end, yes, I want you to completely fall in love with her.'

You might imagine breaking with convention comes naturally to Sally Gardner. She began her career in children's books as an illustrator, before moving on to writing and illustrating, and finally, writing her historical novels. She no longer illustrates ('my illustrations never really captured what was in my head') but for a defiant dyslexic like Sally, writing novels doesn't seem like an obvious career choice.

'I was proud to come out and admit I'm dyslexic. I just don't see it as this terrible burden. It's a gift!' She laughs. 'Dyslexia is a word that shouldn't belong to us ? we can't spell it, we can hardly say it! But it's a world that we inhabit with so many gifts. I see in three dimensions ? when I'm asked, how do you write such complicated novels, well it doesn't seem that complicated. I visualise everything. I know exactly what the memory machine looks like in **The Double Shadow**, for example. If I can't see it in my mind's eye, I can't write it.'

Like many leading children's authors, Sally is in great demand to go into schools to talk to children about her writing. When she arrives in schools, her own unique take on dyslexia can provide practical help for children with similar problems.

'I hand out squeazy balls at schools ? you know, those stress balls? If you see young boys trying to learn, the teachers are forever telling them to sit still, sit still. The boys are constantly fidgeting. What they're trying to do is get one part of the brain to work so the other part can take in the information, and they can only do that with movement. When I'm doing all my history research, I use a stress ball ? if I don't do anything with this paw,' Sally flexes her left hand, 'nothing goes in. Boys often find it helpful No one need know what they're doing and it really helps focus.'

Strangely, Sally's own experiences of school may have been exactly what her imagination needed to develop in its own inimitable way. 'I couldn't spell, but I always told myself stories,' she explains. 'I've lived in my head. From the age of five I had wonderful stories in my head. I had a little monkey called Tiddleywinks and a whole set of characters; they all needed looking after. In school I was just seen as thick so I sat with Janet and John for eleven years while these stories just spiralled in my head. At one stage in my marriage, when I became unhappy, I just started again; I lived in my head and told myself stories. So in a way, writing is just an expression. It's ironic isn't it that this is the one thing I can do? Amazing!'

Sally Gardner's **The Double Shadow** is published by Indigo (400 pp, 978 1 7806 2012 1) at £9.99 hbk.

Damian Kelleher's latest book, **Life, Interrupted**, is published by Piccadilly (192pp, 978 1 8481 2003 7) at £6.99 pbk.

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