

OUR

ALL

a novel of Lady Macbeth

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A Conversation with JOEL H. MORRIS

How did you initially conceive of the idea for this book?

Macbeth is not only one of my favorite works by Shakespeare, but one of my favorite works in all of literature. Like many others, I found myself pausing on Lady Macbeth's mention of knowing "what it is to love the babe" that she once nursed. What happened to that baby? Why don't the Macbeths have any children? A little digging into the history, though steeped in legend, gives an answer to the question of what happened to her son, but not the answer to Shakespeare's erasure of him.

My initial idea was that the boy in the novel would be a ghost, observing the goings-on of his mother and Macbeth from the shadows. But my own sons were about his age, and seeing the life in them—the energy, the curiosity—it seemed so limiting to deprive the boy of a life in the novel. From there, the relationship between the boy and the Lady became both fascinating and important.

What was your writing process like?

This novel was at times a series of moving parts. The kernel remained the same: to consider what various characters might have been like before the events of Shakespeare's play. What were their relationships like? How did those relationships shape the eventual tragedy? Using history as a framework, I hoped to write my version within the world Shakespeare created, developing characters who might appear only briefly—like the Thane of Cawdor, or Macdonald, or even Macbeth's armorer, Seyton. They each took on their own life.

Ultimately, addressing this world through the eyes of Lady Macbeth and her son made it a great puzzle to solve. When the writing engine was fired up, I couldn't stop thinking about the characters, what happens to them, and how to evoke that in words. I would fall asleep thinking of them; I would wake up doing the same, and I would try to tap into those moments and write as much as I could. But often there was a lot of uncertainty about which direction the narrative might take, and then it was the slow labor of writing, fighting for each word, that was the most challenging and maybe even the most satisfying aspect of the process. What made you choose this unusual and clever structure of two perspectives and two timelines? What was it like writing across these perspectives and time frames?

Although I loved seeing this world through Lady Macbeth's eyes, I was intrigued about what the boy's perspective might reveal. In Shakespeare's play, Lady Macbeth is paired with her husband to illuminate their influence on one another. They know each other very well; they shape each other and feed into each other's strengths and weaknesses, only to destroy their strong partnership. Their marriage begins to dissolve as soon as the crime is committed.

I see the boy and his mother in my novel as another important, if very different, character unit. As mother and child, they are uniquely bound, and their change in circumstances—the Lady marrying Macbeth—tests that bond. I wanted to capture their relationship from both sides because, in this time and place, that relationship will have to alter. The boy sees his mother's transformation in light of her new status and marital happiness. The Lady knows that her son is growing up, beginning to navigate how he fits into the world of men. I thought those tensions in their relationship would be interesting to address, and in fact, they also helped me better understand each character.

You've studied and taught *Macbeth* for many years. How has your relationship with the play changed over time? What was your first impression of reading it, and what resonates most with you now?

I've read *Macbeth* many times, and each time I find something new. I think I was first drawn to its supernatural elements: the witches and ghosts. Those are things I still love, but now I appreciate the character relationships the play develops and the challenging questions about loyalty, fate, and power that it poses. Not only on the grand level of a man willing to kill the king, but also in portraying and testing devotion, love, and the complex dynamics of a marriage. Now, of course, I am especially intrigued by the moments where history and storytelling converge and diverge. Shakespeare has given us a particular view of this time and these people. History offers another. It was thrilling to weave the two together and give them my own spin!

Do you have any personal favorite novels that dive into the background of famous literary figures? If so, what are they and what do you like about them?

Some of the novels that stick with me most are those I read in school. One of my English teachers, in particular, assigned us literary retellings. I thought of them as "antagonist stories" because they were often narrated from the antagonist's or villain's perspective. It was that aspect that really absorbed me: entering a familiar literary world, but through the looking glass. The monster Grendel in John Gardner's retelling of *Beowulf* was one I read many times, as was Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to *Jane Eyre*. Both of those novels humanize minor characters in such thoughtful ways. I also love *Circe* by Madeline Miller—so beautifully written! And (staying with ancient Greece) Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is another favorite: *The Odyssey* as narrated by Penelope, waiting for Odysseus to return. Of course, Shakespeare himself took stories and histories and reshaped them in his own way—*Macbeth* being one of them!

What's your favorite line in all of Shakespeare, if you have one, and what relevance does it hold for you?

There are so many lines or passages, each with an important personal connection. I think at the moment I would choose the final couplet of Sonnet 23:

0! learn to read what silent love hath writ: To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.

I like these lines because they capture a connection between writer and a reader. This is ostensibly a love sonnet, but to me it also speaks to the love that goes into artistic creation. "To hear with eyes" is such a great way to think about reading. It is often a silent act, just you and the words on the page. But you meet the author there, and each sentence becomes a bridge between two imaginations.

Which was your favorite scene to write in All Our Yesterdays?

I really enjoyed the scenes between the Lady and Banquo's gentlewoman. I see the gentlewoman as the Lady's first real female friend, since the Lady has been brought up in a world of men. She doesn't quite know what to make of the gentlewoman, and so she sees their burgeoning relationship as a battle of wits. Because of her background, I think the Lady is guarded, suspicious. Even in her happy marriage, surrounded by apparent allies, she is on the lookout for anything or anyone she might not trust. I really enjoyed thinking through how her relationship with Banquo's gentlewoman builds their connection through motherhood, then distrust, and finally culminates in a more complicated understanding.

The title of your novel refers to one of the most famous soliloquies to appear in *Macbeth*, let alone in the larger Shakespearean canon: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, / To the last syllable of recorded time; / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death." Without giving anything away, how does the meaning of these lines

inform the events of your novel?

This would be another of my favorite passages from Shakespeare! Macbeth delivers this soliloquy immediately after his armorer, Seyton, has informed him of Lady Macbeth's death. It is Macbeth's last comment about his wife in the play, and it sparks his consideration of the brevity of life, how ephemeral human existence is as it progresses from birth to "dusty death."

In writing All Our Yesterdays as a prequel to the play, I found it so fitting that Lady Macbeth's death gives rise to this contemplation. After all, she was the one who pushed her husband to make something of his time and his fate, to achieve his ambitions. In my imagining of her, however, she is tormented by the past and how it has shaped her and led her to such fateful outcomes. All those "yesterdays" have affected her in what she has endured, what she has lost. I like to think that is true of all of us. All our yesterdays—the time that has accumulated and brought us to the present are where we can find illumination into how we got to the here and now. I like the idea that our yesterdays show us who we are, especially when the future (if it is not foretold by witches, and even then) is unknown, dark and undefined.

How do you think the treatment of Lady Macbeth reflects our treatment of women today? Has much changed since the IIth century?

I would ask readers to think about any particular woman or group of women who are currently being criticized in the broader culture as interceding in a "man's world," or of calling out certain behaviors or challenging gender stereotypes. When a woman is seen as potentially powerful, and therefore threatening, there are so many forces that want to pull her down. The question continues to be *Why*? Why this perceived threat? What might men have to sacrifice if women gain more privileges? As I was writing, I thought of such women from all walks of life—artists, academics, professionals, politicians. They are women who have revealed truths that might be uncomfortable; they are women who bravely guide us forward at great risk to themselves.

What do you most want readers to take away from All Our Yesterdays?

It's been a great privilege writing this story. To return to Shakespeare's Sonnet 23, I hope that readers might "hear with eyes" the love that has gone into these characters. I miss writing about them. I miss their world and being able to see it from a wholly different perspective than my own. I hope readers might love them, might see another perspective as I did, and might miss them once their reading is done.

Discussion Questions

- 1. What, if anything, did you know about Lady Macbeth before reading this novel? Has this story changed your impression of her? If so, how?
- 2. In what ways do characters shape one another's identities in this novel? To what extent is Lady Macbeth changed by her marriages and by her motherhood? How is Macbeth changed by his new role as husband and stepfather?
- 3. What is achieved by including multiple perspectives and timelines in this novel? What would be different if it had been set in only one timeline and narrated from only one perspective?
- 4. What does this novel seem to say about gender norms and expectations in Lady Macbeth's era? Where do you see the relevance of these themes today?
- 5. Lady Macbeth has traditionally been seen as a villain of sorts. Do you think this story has a "villain"? If so, who or what do you think that is?
- 6. Where does the Boy fit into the conflicts and themes that arise? What does his childlike perspective reveal about the adult world and its values?
- 7. Consider the price of power in this novel. What do various characters sacrifice to achieve power? Is the power ultimately worth the sacrifice?
- 8. This novel deals with themes of prophecy and free will. To what extent do you think the Lady had a choice over her actions and her fate?
- 9. Consider the novel's conclusion. How are larger themes (gender, power, fate, free will) resolved in the final pages?

10. Are there any other Shakespearean characters you'd want to read a backstory for? If so, who, and why? How about any other literary figures?