



TEARS OF PEARL

by Tasha Alexander

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A Conversation with Tasha Alexander

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

Stories have always been a central part of my life. My parents are both university professors, so I grew up in a house full of books and spent many wonderful evenings listening to my father reading out loud to us over an enormous bowl of perfect, buttery popcorn. He'd read Thurber, Saki, and Frank O'Connor and have us all in stitches laughing. We also made weekly trips to the library, where I was allowed to check out as many books as I wanted (often stacks far too tall for me to carry). By the time I was five, I was a devoted reader and writing stories of my own. Bad, bad stories of my own. My parents were very kind about them.

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Is there a book that most influenced your life? Or inspired you to become a writer?

The first book that was truly significant to me was Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*—it's what my mother was reading to me when I realized I could read on my own. Talk about life changing. I was astonished to find that books didn't require a grown-up; it was as if the entire universe had opened itself up to me.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Jane Austen, David Mitchell, Anthony Trollope, Jeanette Winterson, Arthur Phillips, Elizabeth Peters, Anne Perry, Dorothy L. Sayers.

What was the inspiration for your heroine, Lady Emily?

Having spent much of my life devouring every book dealing with the Victorian and Edwardian eras, fiction and non, I knew I wanted to write about the period. Real-life women inspired me—Gertrude Bell, Lady



Meux, Jennie Churchill, and even Queen Victoria herself. But what really appealed to me was thinking about how, in the midst of a period wrought with rules and etiquette, women managed to embark on adventures and stake out their independence.

I didn't want to write about someone too radical. Instead, I was interested in creating a character who had the opportunity to grab her freedom, but to keep her true to the period. I wanted to bring her to enlightenment gradually. Emily starts off as the pampered (though obstinate and intelligent) daughter of an earl. She wants for nothing, but is bored with society. From there, she undergoes an intellectual awakening that in turn sets her up to take a broader view of society and the world around her.

You have already authored three books in the Lady Emily mystery series, *And Only to Deceive*, *A Poisoned Season*, and *A Fatal Waltz*. What was the inspiration for *Tears of Pearl*?

Tears of Pearl was always going to be a honeymoon book, and I knew the setting would have to be exotic—Emily would require nothing less from a wedding trip. But I also wanted it to be a novel that dealt with some difficult facets of Victorian marriages. The loss of an infant was extremely common during the period—about 150 babies died per 1,000 births (for context, the current rate in the UK is estimated to be 5 per 1,000). This was something women of the period had to face and deal with, and something I didn't feel right ignoring in the series, particularly as Emily is now a happy newlywed. Childbirth was a dangerous prospect, both for mother and baby, and I wanted to give serious thought to how women must have felt about this, particularly given they had no real control over the situation.

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Do you scrupulously adhere to historical fact in your novels, or do you take liberties if the story can benefit from the change?

I’m fanatical about accurate details (although admit freely that no one can get everything right all the time). I don’t like to be sucked into a story only to find out the background or key events weren’t correct. In my first book, *And Only to Deceive*, everything Emily looks at in the British Museum (minus the novel’s fictional vase) was an object already on display in 1890.

Clothing, food, and transportation, as well as everything significant to the books’ settings, are accurate. I try to be careful about how I portray real historical figures—I do my best to keep their personalities true to what they actually were, and to stick to the basic facts of their lives (for example, Abdül Hamit II’s first daughter did die after being burned while playing with matches).

And to what extent did you stick to the facts in writing *Tears of Pearl*? How did you conduct your research?

When I first started working on the ideas for the book, I had expected there would be strict limits to what I could have Emily do in Constantinople. Like most contemporary Americans, I assumed women—particularly Western European women—wouldn’t be able to move effortlessly through the city, wouldn’t have any access to the sultan or the harem. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whose husband was the British ambassador to the Ottomans in the early eighteenth century, wrote a series of letters that radically opened my mind. She visited with the sultan, bathed with his concubines (and revealed that the Turkish baths were not, in fact, lascivious and degenerate), and became familiar with the city and its culture. Her letters were greatly influential to



subsequent English women travelers, who followed her example and explored the Ottoman capital with abandon over the next two centuries. In the nineteenth century, Lady Layard, another British ambassador's wife, became close friends with the sultan, dining with him and his family, watching him play with his children in the harem, and making frequent visits to the palace. As accuracy is of vital importance to me, I was thrilled to see there was historical precedent that made it possible for me to send Emily into these places without having to stretch credulity.

In the end, though, I did decide to take some liberties in *Tears of Pearl* when it came to one character—the first time I've done such a thing in any of my books. The character Bezime is based on an actual person, the valide sultan who eventually came to be called Pertevniyal. Deciding it might be confusing to have two valides whose names started with "P," I kept her as Bezime. I further played with history by letting her stay alive some years longer than she actually did. How could I resist having such an extraordinary character avoid death long enough that Emily might meet her? The real Bezime slapped the empress Eugénie, was extremely interested in astrology, smoked a pipe, and attacked the minister of war when he came for her son, the sultan. She also, as described in the book, gave her son the scissors he used to kill himself. She was not, however, unceremoniously murdered by an unruly Englishman.

As far as research, along with reading about a time and place, travel is an essential component. It's impossible to get a real sense of a location without visiting it. I spent weeks in Turkey working on the book. It's an extraordinary place—a gorgeous meeting of East and West. The architecture and scenery is stunning, the

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“As much as society has changed over the centuries, humans are human.”

food delicious, and the people some of the most friendly, helpful, and generous I’ve ever met. One of my favorite experiences came on my third visit to Topkapı Palace. I was sitting on the floor in the Imperial Hall, scribbling notes after having taken countless pictures. The guards couldn’t believe I was spending so much time in each room and asked why I wasn’t rushing through like the other tourists. When I explained I was researching a novel, they were delighted, and took me through the harem, telling me stories and pointing out details I would have missed otherwise. It was fantastic.

In your research of the Ottoman Empire, the Sultans, and their harems, what was the most interesting/surprising/shocking thing you learned?

Two things surprised me equally. First, when reading Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters, I learned that Ottoman women used their veils to give themselves a measure of freedom. Her identity disguised, a woman could meet anyone she wanted—including her lover—in public. I’m fascinated by the idea of something that can be an instrument of repression can also be used to gain freedom.

Second, although I knew the sultan’s concubines came from all walks of life, I did not know that even those from the most humble positions outside the palace had an equal opportunity to gain power and influence within the harem. In *Tears*, I tell the story of the sultan seeing Bezime carrying laundry through a square in Constantinople and deciding at once he wanted her in the harem.



Why do you think readers are so drawn to historical fiction?

It's an escape into an entirely different world with novel clothing, rules, and politics—but one where the same fundamental things matter to the characters. As much as society has changed over the centuries, humans are humans, battling difficult choices, searching for love, caring for their families.

Who are some of your favorite historical figures?

Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire.

Are you currently working on another book in the series? And if so, where is *Lady Emily* going next?

Dangerous to Know is set in France, where Colin has taken Emily to recover from the injuries she suffered at the end of *Tears of Pearl*. They divide their time between his mother's house in the Norman countryside and visiting friends in Rouen. I spent a great deal of time last summer in Normandy doing research. It is a spectacular place: rolling fields of barley, cloud-filled skies that look straight out of one of Monet's paintings, the rugged coastline. And the food! I'm getting hungry just thinking about it. Gorgeous cheeses, perfectly flaky croissants, sole cooked in brown butter sauce, beautifully tart cider.

*Please find an excerpt from *Dangerous to Know* following this Gold guide.*

*About the
Author*



A Timeline of Events

- 1466–1478 Topkapı Palace built
- 1837 Victoria becomes Queen of England
- 1861–1876 Abdül Aziz reigns as sultan
- 1875 Ottoman Empire goes bankrupt
- 1876 Murad V reigns as sultan; Victoria named Empress of India
- 1876–1909 Abdül Hamit II reigns as sultan
- 1882 Married Women's Property Act in UK expanded. "All married women are . . . rendered capable of acquiring, holding, and disposing of any property as their separate property..."
- 1887 Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee
- 1901 Queen Victoria dies
- 1922 The last sultan, Mehmet VI, sent into exile. End of the Ottoman Empire.



Recommended Reading

Reading
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Inside the Seraglio

John Freely

This book's subtitle gives a hint at the stories of intrigue found inside: *Inside the Seraglio: Private Lives of the Sultans of Istanbul*. It reads more like a novel than nonfiction, and is full of mesmerizing details about the personalities of the Ottoman rulers.

Lords of the Horizons

Jason Goodwin

Goodwin's beautifully written history of the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire is a delight to read. Carefully researched and utterly engaging.

The Imperial Harem of the Sultans: Daily Life at the Çiragân Palace during the 19th Century

Leyla (Saz) Hanimefendi (translated by Landon Thomas)

This slim volume is an absolute treasure—the memoirs of a concubine who lived in the sultan's harem from the time she was four until she was released to be married. An unmatched account of what life in the harem was really like.

In the Palaces of the Sultan

Anna Bowman Dodd

Dodd, an American travel writer, visited Abdül Hamit II at Yıldız Palace in 1901 and wrote this memoir about her experiences. A fascinating and entertaining read.

Keep on
Reading

The Turkish Embassy Letters

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

Lady Mary's letters are a gold mine for anyone interested in learning about the lives of women in the Ottoman Empire. As the wife of the British Ambassador, her time in Constantinople provided her with the opportunity to bury herself in Ottoman culture—which she did with much pleasure. Her smart, insightful commentary enlightens and educates.

Lady Enid Layard's Journal

www.browningguide.org

Lady Layard, the first woman to dine at the sultan's table, became a close friend of Abdül Hamit II while her husband was ambassador to the Porte in the late nineteenth century. The royal children visited her home for tea, and she was a frequent guest in the harem. Her journal catalogs her experiences and provides detailed descriptions of the sultan's character.



Reading Group Questions

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1. What did you know about the Ottoman Empire before reading *Tears of Pearl*?
2. Take a moment to discuss your perceptions about harems. How are they portrayed in popular film/television adaptations? In previous novels? In *this* novel? How, if at all, did this book inform you about harem culture and/or women's rights in Victorian-era Turkey?
3. As the author noted in the Conversation, Victorian women faced extreme danger in childbirth. How do you think this affected their views on motherhood? How does it affect your own?
4. How do women, in the past and today, find ways to be independent in restrictive societies?
5. Compare the ways in which Bezime and Perestu handle their power. Do you think Perestu will maintain her influence once she's no longer valide?
6. Do you think the concubines would be better off outside the harem? Why or why not? Discuss the types of challenges they might face in the "real" world.
7. Why do you think modern readers enjoy novels about the past? How and when can a powerful piece of fiction be a history lesson in itself?
8. We are taught, as young readers, that every story has a "moral." Is there a moral to *Tears of Pearl*? What can we learn about our world—and ourselves—from Emily's adventure?

Keep on
Reading

*Now that you've experienced
their honeymoon you can attend the
occasion of their marriage...*

"Emily and Colin's Wedding"

I'd never given the slightest consideration to the implications of being a drenched, mud-splattered bride. The rain, cold and heartless, had not daunted us in the least. Its contrast to the warmth of our urgent kisses only increased the bliss that surged through my trembling body after I agreed to abandon convention (as well as my mother's—and Queen Victoria's—carefully orchestrated plans for a grand society wedding) and marry my dashing fiancé, Colin Hargreaves, at once, as we stood on the cliff path on the Greek island of Santorini.

I had assumed, in the moment, that we'd take our vows rain-covered and rumpled, though I'd not worked out the mechanics of how such a ceremony would be managed. Logistics rarely have a place at such times. What could be more jarring than to worry about details in the midst of a grand romantic gesture? Colin told me he had a license; the rest could only be trifles. If Buckingham Palace relied on him as one of its finest agents, capable of bringing any mission to a satisfactory conclusion, I had no need for concern. I slipped my arm around his waist and nestled my head below his shoulder as he pulled me close. We turned away from the Aegean Sea, its foamy grey waves crashing into the rocks far below us.

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