

Interview with Sophie Weeks

Can you speak a little bit about the inspiration for Outside the Spotlight? I'm curious to know how your existence both as a scholar and lover-of-literature influenced the premise, genre, characters, and setting of your book.

SOPHIE: *Outside the Spotlight* was very much influenced by my graduate study—it's hard to imagine a more “bookish” book, really. The book asks a lot of questions about ontology; literary characters question the terms of their extratextual existence—so I'm very much looking at the ways that the interplay of extra-canonical works affects characters. With all that said, it's a very light-hearted novella, full of winks and nods to the scholarly reader.

What influence does your work in the study of women, gender and sexuality have on your creative writing in general and this novel in particular? Do you explicitly set out to deal with issues surrounding gender and sexuality in your creative work, or do you find that this just naturally finds its way into your writing?

SOPHIE: I rarely intend to address questions of gender, femininity, etc., and yet I rarely find myself free of them. A good example of this is my forthcoming novel, *The Soured Earth*. On its surface, it's a simple tale of a family caught in a supernatural disaster—the rousing of angry earth spirits who blight the land. If anything, it would seem more an ecological parable. Yet a character like the child Jess, who practices limited transvestism, naturally led me to question societal norms relating to gender. I was strongly influenced in my creation of this character and subplot by the CSWGS classes I've taken and what I learned about people like Brandon Teena. I wanted to explore the heartache and horror I felt over Teena's murder in a safe space, and offer hope for children who don't fit into fixed gender roles.

Finally, can you talk about the challenges and logistics of working on a novel while also writing a dissertation? What relationship do you find your creative work to have to your scholarship (both in terms of how you manage your time but also what you find yourself drawn to write about in both contexts)?

SOPHIE: Novel-writing really became my form of play and escape during graduate school. It didn't necessarily interfere with my work more than any other hobby might have, except, in one memorable instance, when I convinced myself that I “had” to finish my current novel before I could finish writing my dissertation (I defended in May). I think that the strongest influence my graduate study had on my creative work is in my choice of topics. My dissertation focused on girls and reading in Victorian England, and so many of my characters are avid readers, young women developing and learning about themselves through literature as well as through life. This influence is perhaps strongest in my current work in progress, a coming-of-age story about a young girl in WWII Britain. In writing about adolescent development and education, I'm constantly referring to what I've learned and theorized on these topics. There's also a little pushback from my creative writing to my scholarly writing—in my fourth chapter, I included a playful little piece of narrative as a thought experiment. It acted as a lovely little cap and summation of the ideas and facts I'd been exploring throughout the dissertation process.