



THE FIANNA TRILOGY

The Shadows, The Web, The Veil

Skyscape
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Author Interview:

What inspired The Fianna Trilogy?

I'd been thinking about writing a young adult novel for quite some time. I read a lot in the genre and I've always really enjoyed its big emotional moments and balls-to-the-wall drama. You just don't see that kind of operatic scope (yes, I'm an opera fan!) in most other kinds of fiction, and I really wanted to play in that field.

I read a lot of fantasy and historical fiction, and I knew that I wanted to write something that blended the two things, with a good dollop of romance thrown in, because I love that too. One day, as I was taking a shower (water is the best inspiration there is—I get so many brainstorms taking a shower, swimming, and washing dishes), I thought: what would happen if the gods woke up again in today's world?

The thought just kept poking at me, and that led to other questions, like: 1) what gods? Greek? Roman? Assyrian? and 2) where would they wake up and what would wake them? and most importantly: 3) why?

At the time I'd been doing some research on Druids for another project, and I'd done a lot of research on immigrants in New York City for my book *Prima Donna*. The Druids led me to Celtic gods, and the immigrant research led me to Ireland, and so I started researching old Irish myths.

That was when I came upon the tales of the Irish warriors called the Fianna, led by Finn MacCumhail. These men weren't gods at all, but an elite fighting force allied with gods and kings. Sort of superheroes, but human. When I read the legend that Finn and his men were in an enchanted sleep, and could be called back to life at Ireland's greatest need, I knew I had to use them. And what better way than to plunge ancient Irish warriors into the world of Irish immigrants in New York City?

What inspired the characters?

Once I started reading the tales of the Fianna (known as the Fenian or Ossian cycle, after Ossian, who is said to have told the tales to St. Peter), it became a matter of choosing which of the

warriors to write about. Finn was a dynamic leader, and I liked him, and Oscar was pretty interesting too, but then I happened upon the tale called *The Pursuit of Diarmid and Grainne*, and I knew Diarmid, with all his complexities—his love for women and his loyalty to the Fianna and his tortured relationship with Finn—had to be my main character.

Once I had Diarmid, and the idea that he and the others would be called back to the strange and alien immigrants' world of New York City, with its poverty and tenements and gangs, I needed conflict and contrast, which meant that my heroine couldn't be an immigrant herself. She needed to be in danger from the Fianna, and from the otherworldly forces that their return brought into play. She needed to be the focus of the legend and prophecy that brought them back, which meant she had to be of Irish heritage. And she and her family needed to be in dire enough straits that her attraction to an immigrant boy was the very last thing she would want.

That was the inception of Grace Knox, an upper middle class girl whose father's death has left her family in terrible financial need, and her brother Aidan, whose behavior is putting them more deeply into debt. It also helped to create the young man who has the power to save her and her family, Patrick Devlin, the rich childhood friend who has loved Grace for years, and who has—unbeknownst to her—a dangerous part to play in the unfolding of the prophecy.

What kind of research did you do?

For the historical research, I prefer using primary sources whenever possible—so I read many diaries, journals, newspaper articles and magazines about living in New York City in the 19th Century, and particularly about immigrant life. Jacob Riis, who was a photographer in New York City, wrote many books on the poor, and took photographs as well. His *How the Other Half Lives* is a great resource. Studies of life among the immigrants in American cities, including *City of Women* by Christine Stansell, *Gangs of New York* by Herbert Asbury, *Five Points* by Ty Anbinder and *Erin's Daughters in America* by Hasia R. Diner were also very helpful. The online Historical New York Times was absolutely essential to me in writing these books, as was the Making of America Project at Cornell University and the University of Michigan. They've scanned 19th century books and magazines into a searchable database, so if you want to read about—oh, say Battery Park—and you run a search, it will pull up magazine articles describing the park in the 19th century in all its wonderful detail.

For the Irish mythology research, some of the most helpful books were Lady Augusta Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men*, W.B. Yeats *The Celtic Twilight*, and *Celtic Myths and Legends* by Peter Berresford Ellis, as well as his *The Druids* and *The Celts*. Also helpful was Barry Cunliffe's *Ancient Celts*.

What was your favorite part of writing the series?

The tales of the Fianna are such a rich mythological cycle that they provided all kinds of inspiration. These tales are said to predate the Arthurian legends, and to be the inspiration for the stories of the round table and King Arthur's enchanted sleep in Avalon, where he waits to be called to Britain's aid. The tales are crammed full of the supernatural and the heroic, the exploits

of Celtic gods—with their multi-dimensions—as well as those of great warriors and enchanted creatures. The Fomori and the Tuatha de Danaan are legendary god-rivals—the forces of life versus those of darkness and chaos ... I mean, as a storyteller it was just such a rich well from which to draw. And I also loved throwing all this mythology down into a (sort-of) modern world and trying to sort it out. Also, as I've said before, I love big drama. I've rarely had so much fun writing a story.

How did the history play into writing the books?

While the Fianna are mythological, and might or might not be based on real people, New York City in that time period, and the immigrant experience, is very real and it was important to me that it feel real. The reason I picked 1874 as a starting point was because the U.S. was experiencing a very bad depression that started in '73 and which had a huge and lasting impact. People lost everything, just as Grace's family did, in September 1873, when Jay Cooke & Company went under and banks everywhere collapsed in response. Shantytowns rose overnight; there were scores of homeless; and although churches and charity organizations helped as they could with soup kitchens and aid for the poor, they were overwhelmed. The city struggled to make sense of what had happened, but New York City's response to the poor was not always the best, and the fact that many of the poor were immigrants didn't help. As a result, there was a big rise in gang activity and violent protests against city policies. It was fun to take all of these real events and blend the Fianna into them.

Where did you get all the names and the Irish words?

The Fianna members in *The Shadows* are all warriors who were in the myths, though I anglicized some of the names. Keenan is actually Caoilte in the mythology, and Oscar is Osgar. Learning how to pronounce the names was no mean feat. There are many sites online that helped with that. One of the best is <http://www.namenerds.com/irish/trad.html>.

Most of the stories have been translated into English. One of the best sources for these is *Gods and Fighting Men*, by Lady Augusta Gregory. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/gafm/index.htm>

How many books are going to be in the series?

Right now, three.

What are some of your favorite young adult books?

When I was young, my favorites were *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien (not young adult, but I read them as one), *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth George Speare, *The Little White Horse* by Elizabeth Goudge, C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain* series, and Mary Stewart's Merlin series (*The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills*, etc.—they aren't really young adult, either, but I loved them) all of which I read numerous times—and when I say numerous, I am not kidding. I was passionate about all of them.

Lately, I've loved Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments* and *The Infernal Devices* series, Libba Bray's *Beauty Queens* and her *Gemma Doyle* series, Holly Black's *The Curse Workers* series, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* by April Genevieve Tucholke, Laini Taylor's series beginning with *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*, *The Scorpio Races* by Maggie Stiefvater, *Graceling* by Kristin Cashore, *Cruel Beauty* by Rosamund Hodge, *The Winner's Curse* by Marie Rutkoski, Melissa Marr's *Carnival of Souls* and *Ink Exchange*, and *Revolution* by Jennifer Donnelly. And yes, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, too! *Eclipse* was my favorite.