



Summary

A stunning portrait of an African princess raised in Queen Victoria's court and adapting to life in Victorian England—based on the real-life story of a recently rediscovered historical figure, Sarah Forbes Bonetta.

With a brilliant mind and a fierce will to survive, Sarah Forbes Bonetta, a kidnapped African princess, is rescued from enslavement at seven years old and presented to Queen Victoria as a “gift.” To the Queen, the girl is an exotic trophy to be trotted out for the entertainment of the royal court and to showcase Victoria's magnanimity. Sarah charms most of the people she meets, even those who would cast her aside. Her keen intelligence and her aptitude for languages and musical composition helps Sarah navigate the Victorian era as an outsider given insider privileges.

But embedded in Sarah's past is her destiny. Haunted by visions of destruction and decapitations, she desperately seeks a place, a home she will never run from, never fear, a refuge from nightmares and memories of death.

From West Africa to Windsor Castle to Sierra Leone, to St. James's Palace, and the Lagos Colony, Sarah juggles the power and pitfalls of a royal upbringing as she battles racism and systematic oppression on her way to living a life worthy of a Yoruba princess.

Based on the real life of Queen Victoria's Black goddaughter, Sarah Forbes Bonetta's story is a sweeping saga of an African princess in Victorian England and West Africa, as she searches for a home, family, love, and identity.



About the Author

Denny S. Bryce is a best-selling, award-winning author of historical fiction. A former dancer and public relations professional, Denny is an adjunct professor in the MFA program at Drexel University, a book critic for NPR, and a freelance writer whose work has appeared in USA Today and Harper's Bazaar. She is also a member of the Historical Novel Society, Women's Fiction Writers Association, and Tall Poppy Writers. Originally from Ohio, she likes to call Chicago her hometown but currently resides in Savannah, Georgia. You can find her online at DennySBryce.com.

Discussion Questions

- How did the author blend historical facts and fiction in this book? Did you find the book accurate and authentic?
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- How did the author portray the historical setting and period of this book? Did you learn anything new or interesting about the time and place of the story?
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- Did the author use any historical sources or references in this book? Did you find them helpful and credible?
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- Did this book challenge or change your perspective on any historical events or figures? Did it make you want to learn more about them?
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- How did this book relate to your own life experiences or interests in the present day?
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- Which character did you find the most complex or intriguing and why?
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- How did the secondary characters impact or influence the main character(s) or story?
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- Which character did you relate to or empathize with the most and why?
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- Which character did you dislike or disagree with the most and why?
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- How did the author create conflict and tension in the book? What was the main conflict or problem in the story and how was it resolved?
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- How did the author keep you interested or surprised throughout the story?
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- What was the most memorable or shocking scene or twist in the story and why?
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- What was the most satisfying or disappointing part of the story and why?
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- How did you feel about the ending? Was it satisfying or did you want more?

An Interview With the Author

Fact Meets Fiction | Talking with Historical Fiction Author Denny S. Bryce

by Virginia Grubbs & Jill Maguire

Jun 13, 2023

LJ talks about research rabbit holes and human resilience with the author of *The Other Princess*. Bryce's first biographical historical novel is based on a real-life Yoruba princess who became a ward and goddaughter of Queen Victoria.

When did you first become aware of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, and why did you want to bring her voice to life? What was the most surprising thing you learned about her?

History takes some surprising paths to reveal itself, even to a history geek like myself. I remember watching (and enjoying) the 2016 PBS Masterpiece program *Victoria*. In episode seven, a character was introduced, an African princess and ward of Queen Victoria, Sarah Forbes Bonetta. I immediately Googled her—one of those fact-or-fiction questions—and discovered she was real. Still, at the time, I was an unagented author working on my first novel (*Wild Women and the Blues*, eventually released in 2021). My research focused on 20th-century history, so I didn't follow up. The next time I was reminded of Princess Aina (Sarah's Yoruba name) was in 2019, when Tessa Woodward, executive editor at HarperCollins, tweeted the comment: "Could someone please write a novel about Sarah Forbes Bonetta?" By then, you'd think I would've been all over it, but again, opportunity slipped through my fingers. I was busy finishing my debut novel. But finally, later that same year, I received an inquiry via an author friend and my agent, and the next thing I knew, I wrote a synopsis and a few sample chapters about Sarah Forbes Bonetta. I pitched it to Tessa, and the rest is history!

This is your first biographical fiction novel. Was it more challenging to write about an actual historical figure compared to your two previous books, where you created the characters?

My first biographical fiction novel for me is best described as my fictional account of Sarah Forbes Bonetta's life, inspired by her life. There was so much intriguing information accessible about her, documented through letters (that she wrote or that were written to her), newspaper articles, the 1855 journals of Lieutenant Commander Frederick E. Forbes, the British naval officer who negotiated with Dahomey King Gezo for "Aina's" release, and the children's book, written by Walter Dean Myers in 1999, *At Her Majesty's Request, an African Princess in Victorian England* (to name a few of the initial resources I used). Also, the nonfiction book *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present* by Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola (2019).

An Interview With the Author cont'd

However, even when I “create” characters in a historical setting, the history of the time and the fictional characters I write about are deeply researched and routinely inspired by individuals, situations, and the experiences of people from that period. So the short answer is that the challenge is the same. The goal is to write an intriguing story that entertains and educates and (hopefully) provides the reader with a connection that is emotional but also compelling. And an important area of research I love is the music of the era I’m writing about, and dance. So not only was I attracted to Sarah’s intellect but also her artistic skills—she was a talented musician (piano) and singer.

Set in the mid- to late 1800s, *The Other Princess* takes readers from the brutality of the Okeodon War in West Africa to the court of Queen Victoria and back again. Can you tell us about your research process?

I love research so much that sometimes the “rabbit hole” catches me and refuses to let go. That happened with this novel. To better understand Sarah and her choices, I had to become familiar with the history of West Africa in the 19th century. The conflicts led to the battles between the Egbado and Dahomey and others. What were the origins of these conflicts and the role of the Church of England’s missionary work on West African societies? A question I ask early on in developing any story I write is, how do the people earn an income? How does income define class? What did the world look like during the period I’m writing about? What technology existed? That’s where I begin my research. I also spent a few days in the Map Room at the Library of Congress, examining old maps from West Africa and England during the 19th century.

The novel, however, is not solely about conflicts or church missionary schools but a young African woman’s journey into vastly different worlds and the impact of her experiences on her character. The more I learned or researched about the Victorian era in England and Africa, the more I fell in love with Sarah Forbes Bonetta.

How does the present influence your writing about the past?

I am fascinated by how history repeats itself. Any number of scenarios replay themselves and resonate from generation to generation, century to century. Sarah’s story is that of a resilient Black woman who survives atrocities and develops the strength to fight back while conquering her flaws and fears. But it is also a story of choices—when you have none but don’t give up and show the world that you can make good choices, the best for you and those you love. Men and women face daily decisions that can impact their lives for an hour or forever, and I think one of Sarah’s greatest talents is her ability to make mistakes but never stop striving to make better choices.

An Interview With the Author cont'd

What is next for you? Are you working on your next novel yet? If so, can you share with us what it is about?

My next novel is another biographical historical fiction, entitled *Lady Ella and Norma Jean: A Novel of the Friendship Between Ella Fitzgerald and Marilyn Monroe*, written with my coauthor Eliza Knight (author of *Starring Adele Astaire* and *The Mayfair Bookshop*). Eliza and I began working on this novel in 2019 and have noodled away until William Morrow acquired our proposal. So look for this novel coming in early 2024. We are excited and hope readers will enjoy reading about this surprising friendship between these two female icons of the entertainment industry.

Courtesy of <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/Fact-Meets-Fiction-Talking-with-Historical-Fiction-Author-Denny-S-Bryce>