The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper

Phaedra Patrick
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Discussion Questions

Would you call The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper an adventure tale? A romance? A mystery?

Arthur, at 69 years old, has led a pretty sheltered life. Do you think he is typical of many in his generation?

When someone rings his doorbell, Arthur often pretends not to be at home. ‘He screwed his eyes shut and pretended he was a statue in the garden of a stately home.’ (Chapter One). Why do you think he does this? Is it something you might do?

If you were in Arthur’s situation, bereaved after a long marriage, would you also devise strategies and routines to get you through the day?

Arthur’s daughter, Lucy, worries about him. ‘Lucy was more thoughtful. She sent thank-you cards and never, ever forgot a birthday.’ (Chapter One). Do you think that girls are expected to be more caring and thoughtful than boys? Is this a natural thing, or something that is passed on?

Arthur is a very decent man. Why has he grown estranged from his own children?

Bernadette looks after her ‘lost causes’ with home-cooked food? Why do you think she does this? Do you ever use food as a way of looking after yourself, or others?

What do you think teenager, Nathan Patterson, thinks of Arthur when his mother, Bernadette, strikes up a friendship with the pensioner and Arthur tags along on their trip to look at universities? Can inter-generational friendships work?

Arthur finds himself being entertained in the home of tiger-obsessed Lord and Lady Graystock. How does the Graystocks’ life contrast with Arthur and Miriam’s? Are there any similarities?

Arthur comes out of his comfort zone by travelling to London, Paris and India. When you have travelled to other countries, do you feel excited, or more apprehensive, about your travels? Were the places you travelled to as you expected, or were they very different?

Arthur encounters many people on his travels including tiger-crazy Lord Graystock, young homeless man Mike, Sylvie the French wedding boutique owner, Bernadette the busybody neighbour, caring daughter Lucy, illegal immigrant Sebastian, novelist Francois de Chauffant, and Indian doctor Mr Mehra. Which character did you feel most emotionally connected to, and why?

Young homeless man, Mike, tells Arthur, ‘Those charms might bring you luck.’ What is your own lucky charm, and what luck has it brought you?

Which is your favourite story behind the charms – heart, paint palette, ring, book, tiger, elephant, thimble and flower – and why?
Arthur learns more about technology through his conversation with Nathan (eg Nathan uses Facebook to find Sonny Yardley). Would Arthur have been able to trace each of the charms on Miriam’s bracelet without technology? Do you tend to shun or embrace technology?

The book tackles real life situations, but also asks the reader to accept life’s random circumstances. Have any strange coincidences happened to you?

Do you think most married couples keep secrets about their pasts from each other?

What would you say is, ultimately, the most important thing that Arthur discovers about Miriam? About himself? About their life together?

http://www.phaedra-patrick.com/reading-groups/
An Interview with Phaedra Patrick

May 2016

Phaedra Patrick studied art and marketing and has worked as a stained glass artist, film festival organizer and communications manager. She is a prize-winning short story writer and now writes full time. She lives in the UK with her husband and son. The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper is her debut novel.

In this interview, Patrick discusses how to set a character off on a quest, happy endings, and using coincidence in a novel.

Michael Noll: The novel begins with the main character, Arthur, deciding to go on a quest. It’s a decision that is part of a long tradition of quest stories that is alive and well as shown by The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry; Eat, Pray, Love, and Wild. The difficulty, I would imagine, in writing such a story is that you need a reason to push the character out the door. Did you always know that Arthur would find the charm bracelet? Or did he begin as a character in search of a reason to go searching?

Phaedra Patrick: The charm bracelet idea came to me first, as I showed my young son my own bracelet. I write short stories too, so I liked the idea that each charm would be like a short story in its own right, then there would be a thread linking them all together, like a bracelet. I then had to find the right character to discover the bracelet and to set off on the journey to find out more about it. I thought it would be interesting if it was an older gentleman, who was rather set in his ways, and who I could take out of his comfort zone to go on this search. One of my favourite exercises is to write down the ten worst things that could happen to your character, then to explore how they’d react if these happened. And that’s what I did with Arthur.

Michael Noll: One question that often comes up in my writing classes—especially with college undergraduates—is “Why must stories be so sad?” The “literary” novels and stories that they’re reading tend to end unhappily. (One caveat: this isn’t really true of the fantasy and science fiction novels they read.) So, I was struck as I read this novel how its emotional arc is pretty much always oriented toward a happy ending—and it’s to the book’s strength. The book jacket even says that it’s a “joyous celebration of life’s infinite possibilities.” What was required—in dreaming up the novel, in its early chapters—to get it moving in a happy, satisfying direction?

Phaedra Patrick: I believe in happy endings! And in order for the story to be happy at the end, it kind of needs to be the opposite (at least in places) at the beginning, so the character can go on
his/her transformative journey. The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper has been described as a kind of fable and even compared to a fairy story. A lot of fables or fairy tales traditionally start with the character in an unhappy place—Bambi’s mother dies, Cinderella is ill-treated by her step-sisters, etc. So I had to put Arthur in a bad place to make things right for him in the end. It was a fine balance not to make him too self-pitying, but as soon as I introduced his neighbour, Bernadette, then this brought along humour to lift the first couple of chapters.

Michael Noll: I had the pleasure of moderating a recent panel on writing that included Alexander Chee, and he talked about how coincidence is often frowned upon by writers, and so he wanted to write a book with a lot of it (and did, in The Queen of the Night). Your novel is full of coincidence; I suppose these moments (such as the ease with which Arthur finds the people he’s looking for) might be unrealistic, but they’re also hugely entertaining. How do you approach coincidence in your writing? How do you manage to explain a plot point enough for the reader to buy it but not overexploit it until the reader is suspicious?

Phaedra Patrick: I think because the book had to link up eight charms then there had to be a rather strong element of coincidence, or else Arthur would just discover the first charm and then get stuck! It’s also a story rather than a real-life account, so it does invite readers to suspend disbelief a little and get swept along with it. For quite a while I pondered on whether readers would believe there was a phone number engraved on the elephant charm, but then I decided that Arthur had to get his first lead from somewhere, and that this was the story I wanted to tell. I also ensured that Arthur found out about the charms in a variety of ways—word of mouth, letter, photo, a receipt, family, etc., and at one point he even gets stuck in his search. I think this helps to make the coincidences more believable. It is a difficult balance though.

Michael Noll: Near the end of the book, Arthur has a conversation with a woman named Sonny Yardley. I don’t want to give anything away to readers, but Sonny’s response to Arthur’s questions is strikingly different from what he’s encountered before. Did you always know the scene would play out like this? Or did you sense that the novel needed a kind of unexpected hard turn to shake the reader a bit?

Phaedra Patrick: We know that Miriam led a secret life before she and Arthur married, so there had to be a rather big reason she kept this from him during 40 years of marriage. And it was unlikely to be a happy reason! So when Arthur finally speaks to Sonny, the conversation is serious and upsetting, as it needs to be considering the subject. I actually didn’t know what Miriam’s secret was until this part of the book, and I found out at the same time as Arthur. I had to have faith in my writing and plough on with the storyline in the hope that Miriam’s secret would reveal itself to me, and thankfully it did.

https://readtowritestories.com/2016/05/05/an-interview-with-phaedra-patrick/
Q & A With Phaedra Patrick: Author of The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper

NATALIE XENOS, SEPTEMBER 29, 2016

Phaedra Patrick’s delightfully heart-warming The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper is published in paperback today (29 September) and to mark the release we asked the author some questions about her unassuming protagonist, his crazy adventures and whether we’ll be seeing more of the titular character in the future.

Q. The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper takes a seemingly mundane man and sends him on an intriguing journey of self-discovery. How did you come up with the story of the charms and the wild adventures that Arthur goes on?

As I showed my own childhood charm bracelet to my son, and told him the stories behind each of the charms, the idea came to me about an elderly man who discovers a mysterious bracelet in his late wife’s wardrobe.

I once holidayed in India and bought a small brass elephant pendant, and this was the inspiration behind the first charm that sets Arthur off on his epic journey of discovery. A few years ago I read a novel about a wedding dress shop, so that was the inspiration behind the thimble charm. At college I studied art for four years, so this influenced the paint palette charm. The tiger charm idea came to me when I saw the Life of Pi DVD in a supermarket.

Q. There are some curious characters in the book but it’s really all about Arthur, who’s such a loveable fellow, a rare British gent. Is he based on someone you know in real life? Where does your character inspiration come from?

I wanted to write a story straight from my heart, and create a character that people would want to cheer, laugh and cry with. I love to collect ideas in my head, so each scene and character in the book was influenced by someone I know, something I’d seen, or personally experienced. Arthur Pepper wasn’t based on anyone I know personally, but he does feel like a real person to me. A lot of his words and mannerisms are my own and I had a lot of fun putting poor Arthur into some tricky situations.

Q. There’s a poignant theme at the heart of Arthur Pepper; it celebrates life, love and getting older. Just because someone is retired, doesn’t mean they no longer have
anything to contribute to the world, and that’s such an important message. Do you feel that the elderly get forgotten about and dismissed? Was it something you wanted to specifically address or did it come about naturally?

I think that such a lot of communication and togetherness comes about through working together, having things in common, or sharing with others. One of the things I miss about office life (now that I write full time at home) is hearing about films friends have watched, or bits of gossip, or general chitchat. If you’re retired then this might be the same too, especially for people who aren’t up to date with technology, or aren’t able to get about as easily as they once could.

The message came about organically rather than as something I specifically wanted to address. I think the admirable thing about Arthur is that he takes things into his own hands, makes decisions and moves on them. And I think that’s what people need to do – to look at what’s around them, partake and maybe take themselves out of their comfort zone, rather than hiding themselves away and becoming ‘forgotten.’ In some cases, it’s easier said than done, I’m sure. I admire how my parents (now in their early seventies) keep abreast of new films and books, what’s going on in the area, helping out neighbours and friends, and my dad even took himself off to night school to learn how to use computers!

Q. Your novel has been compared to the likes of The One Hundred Year Old Man Who Climbed Out The Window and Harold Fry…were you inspired by these other similar themed books?

I’d previously written five (unpublished) novels about young women, so this time round I thought I’d attempt to write about an older man. I was already well into writing about Arthur Pepper when I read Harold Fry, and I admit that I haven’t yet read The Hundred Year Old Man… Rather than inspiring my work, Harold Fry told me that there might be a place in the market for fiction about an older character, and that encouraged me to keep writing Arthur’s story.

Q. For a long time, reading about the elderly wasn’t particularly ‘fashionable’ for the younger generation. Do you think we need more fictional heroes in their twilight years?

I think it’s important that all ages and demographics are covered. I don’t think older characters were particularly well-represented until recently, but all readers are getting older! The original forty-something readers of Bridget Jones’s Diary are probably now in their sixties.

I think we also have more older role models that young people admire too, such as Mary Berry or even The Rolling Stones, proving that age shouldn’t stop you doing something that you love. Even if you’re not the same age as Arthur, you can view him as a dad or granddad figure.

Q. This is the first novel you’ve had published, how have you found the whole process? The positive reaction from readers must make all the hard work worth it.
It can seem overwhelming when you start to write 90,000 words, especially when you reach a sticky bit and the voices in your head kick in, asking if you really know what you’re doing!

You’re also making up a story from scratch, so sometimes you have to be decisive and choose a route, even if you’re not sure where it will take you. Writing can also be very solitary so it’s good to have a support network of friends and family around you.

Writing a novel is almost just the start of the journey. Then you have to submit to literary agents, edit your work, go through submissions to publishers (and prepare for rejection) and go through rounds of structural and copy edits. You have to be very determined and a bit steely-minded. It’s a long process but all worth it when you get to hold your book in your hands for the first time, or see it on a shelf.

I’ve had lots of lovely reactions from readers and really appreciate it when people take the time to write a nice review, or even to send me a friendly note via Facebook. The book will be published in over twenty countries worldwide, so I have to use Google Translate to read some of the comments. One lady in Poland even painted me a picture of Arthur’s potplant!

Q. Finally, it feels as if Arthur’s story is still going, will we see more adventures from him in a sequel?

I personally know what happens to Arthur, Bernadette, Lucy and even teenager Nathan, but their stories are in my head. I don’t yet have another mission for Arthur to undertake, though I’d love to write about him again some time. The characters feel like friends who are currently doing their own thing without me, but one day I might drop in and see what they’re up to and if they want to share it with me!

http://culturefly.co.uk/qa-with-phaedra-patrick-author-of-the-curious-charms-of-arthur-pepper/
10 things I’d like my reader to know about me

By Phaedra Patrick, 6 April, 2016

I wrote five novels before being published

Three remain locked in a drawer somewhere. Two found an agent but not a publisher. It was a case of sixth time lucky, with The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper. J.K. Rowling once said that she could build a sculpture from her rejection letters. I could create a lake-full of origami swans with mine. I really worked for it.

I told myself that people like me don't become writers

I knew from an early age that I wanted to write, but I told myself that I couldn't do it. I still don't know where that negative voice came from and I had to learn to ignore it.

If I don't feel confident, I pretend

A good friend of mine gave me this advice - pretend that you're confident and no-one will know the difference. It works for me. He also told me that in appraisals at work, tell your employer that you're amazing at everything and let them talk you down. All too often we list our faults to others when they probably haven't noticed them.

My dad was an undertaker

He worked for The Co-op Funeral Services for thirty-seven years. Sometimes he brought a limousine or hearse home and would drive me and my brother back to school at lunch time. I also worked for The Co-op too, for twelve years in marketing and communications. My dad is probably the greatest supporter of my book. My parents are very proud of me and Arthur Pepper!

I'm a qualified stained glass artist

I wanted to study English Language at A level but ended up studying art instead, then architectural glass for two years, in North Wales. I won glass design competitions with Clwyd County Council and Pilkington's Glass, though that's a long time ago now.

I can stand on my head

I taught myself to do it when I was a kid and can still perform it now. I do it in front of my son sometimes but he's not impressed.
My key strength is one I didn't expect

A friend at work raved about a book called Strengths Finder by Tom Rath. I thought it sounded rather gibberish. Buying the book gives you access to an online questionnaire, which tells you your five keys strengths. My main ones are for strategy and collecting ideas. The book changed the way I thought about myself, and how I approached writing my novel.

I don't actually read that much

A typical working day for me is writing for 5-6 hours, so when I'm finished I'm usually in the mood for reading something frivolous. Gossip magazines in the bath are a great way to unwind. I love to read on holiday though. My beach bag will probably contain Antoine Laurain, Lucy Clarke or Sarah Addison-Allen.

I try to embrace what I have

My cousin and also a close friend of mine died in their forties, so I try to embrace what I have. I appreciate the simple things in life, such as crusty bread, real butter, a nice strong cheddar, lunch with my parents, a fluffy blanket, a walk on the beach, hug from my son and husband, or cider with friends on a sunny day.

I found my determination

I think most people would describe me as rather gentle and calm, but I am also absolutely determined. I think you need true focus to write a book. It's about finding the time to do it, wanting to do it and keeping going, until you've completed 90,000 words. Then you have to find an agent, and publish, and deal with rejections. It's not an easy task, so if you want to do it, you need to be determined.

About the Author:

Phaedra Patrick's debut novel The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper will be published by MIRA UK on 7 April 2016, and MIRA US on 3 May 2016. The novel will also be translated into seventeen other languages. Phaedra writes full time and lives in Saddleworth, UK, with her husband and son. For writing tips and advice, visit www.phaedra-patrick.com/writing-tips

http://www.femalefirst.co.uk/books/the-curious-charms-of-arthur-pepper-phaedra-patrick-934081.html