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The Light Between Oceans
H.L. Stedman
Scribner
352 pp.

Summary

The debut of a stunning new voice in fiction—a novel both heartbreaking and transcendent

After four harrowing years on the Western Front, Tom Sherbourne returns to Australia and takes a job as the lighthouse keeper on Janus Rock, nearly half a day’s journey from the coast. To this isolated island, where the supply boat comes once a season and shore leaves are granted every other year at best, Tom brings a young, bold, and loving wife, Isabel. Years later, after two miscarriages and one stillbirth, the grieving Isabel hears a baby’s cries on the wind. A boat has washed up onshore carrying a dead man and a living baby.

Tom, whose records as a lighthouse keeper are meticulous and whose moral principles have withstood a horrific war, wants to report the man and infant immediately. But Isabel has taken the tiny baby to her breast. Against Tom’s judgment, they claim her as their own and name her Lucy. When she is two, Tom and Isabel return to the mainland and are reminded that there are other people in the world. Their choice has devastated one of them.

M. L. Stedman’s mesmerizing, beautifully written novel seduces us into accommodating Isabel’s decision to keep this “gift from God.” And we are swept into a story about extraordinarily compelling characters seeking to find their North Star in a world where there is no right answer, where justice for one person is another’s tragic loss.

The Light Between Oceans is exquisite and unforgettable, a deeply moving novel. (From the publisher.)

Author Bio

M.L. (Margot) Steadman was born and raised in Western Australia and now lives in London. This is her first novel. (From the publisher.)

More

Her official biography comprises a single line: "M.L. Stedman was born and raised in Western Australia and now lives in London." Even her first name, Margot, is concealed.
In only her second media interview, by phone from Perth, Stedman is nervous and bats back questions about her age, schooling, family and her work as a lawyer with a polite: "I really don't want to answer that." Stedman later explains that she has never been one to seek out the limelight. "As the book's not autobiographical, details of my life won't really shed light on the story for the reader and I'd much rather let readers focus on the book and their own experience of it."

These are the dot points of her writing life that Stedman reluctantly offers for public consumption: raised and schooled in Perth, she says she always adored the artistry of words, had an affinity for them. Working in London as a lawyer in 1997, while staring at her office computer screen, she had a eureka moment, "from God knows where", deciding then to try creative writing. She hired a writing coach, went to Greece on a creative-writing holiday, where she wrote her first published short story, Flight, and went on to study creative writing part time at the University of London. Three novellas were published in an out-of-print anthology, Desperate Remedies, in 2008.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Discuss the novel's title, The Light Between Oceans. Why do you think the author selected this title? What do you visualize when you hear or read The Light Between Oceans?

2. The novel is rich with detailed descriptions of the ocean, the sky, and the wild landscape of Janus Rock. Is there a particular passage or scene that stood out to you? What role does the natural world play in Tom and Isabel's life?

3. "The isolation spins its mysterious cocoon, focusing the mind on one place, one time, one rhythm—the turning of the light. The island knows no other human voices, no other footprints. On the Offshore Lights you can live any story you want to tell yourself, and no one will say you're wrong: not the seagulls, not the prisms, not the wind." (page 110) Discuss the impact of living in seclusion on both Tom and Isabel. Why do you think each of them is drawn to live on Janus Rock? Do you think, in the moments when we are unobserved, we are different people?

4. When Isabel tries to get Tom to open up about his family, he responds: "I'll tell you if you really want. It's just I'd rather not. Sometimes it's good to leave the past in the past." (pages 44-45) Do you think it is possible to leave the past in the past? What do you think of Tom's opinion that it's a “pity” that we're a product of our family's past? What does this tell you about his character? Discuss the impact of family history on Tom, Isabel, Hannah, and Frank.

5. Tom is haunted by what he witnessed—and what he did—during his enlistment in World War I. The narrator reflects that he's not “one of the men whose legs trailed by a hank of sinews, or whose guts cascaded from their casing like slithering eels….But he's scarred all the same, having to live in the same skin as the man who did the things that needed to be done back then.” (page 10) How do you think Tom’s experiences as a soldier impact his decisions throughout the novel? What other outside elements, like the war, influences the narrative?

6. Janus Rock is named for Janus, the Roman God of doorways, “always looking both ways, torn between two ways of seeing things.” (page 65) How does this knowledge impact your reading of The Light Between Oceans? Who is “torn between two ways of seeing things”? 
7. Discuss the theme of opposites in *The Light Between Oceans*—darkness and light; safety and danger; land and water; truth and lies. How do these opposing forces shape your reading?

8. When Isabel brings Tom the map of Janus, complete with new names for all the locations on the island, Tom has an interesting reaction: “Janus did not belong to him: he belonged to it, like he’d heard the natives thought of the land. His job was just to take care of it.” (page 62) Discuss the difference in Tom’s point of view compared to Isabel’s. Does this difference in opinion foreshadow future events? How does it relate to their conflicting opinions of what to do with Lucy?

9. Did you sense that the silver rattle might turn out to play a pivotal role in the story?

10. Tom believes that rules are vital, that they are what keep a man from becoming a savage. Do you agree with him?

11. Which characters won your sympathy and why? Did this change over the course of the novel? Did your notion of what was best or right shift in the course of your reading?

12. Tom and Isabel’s deception impacts the lives of everyone around them. What did you think of the other characters’ reactions when they discover the truth about Lucy? Consider Hannah, Gwen, Septimus, Isabel’s parents, Ralph, Bluey.

13. Discuss Hannah’s reunion with Grace. Do you think she had fair expectations? Did you agree with Dr. Sumpton’s advice to Hannah about completely cutting Lucy off from Isabel and Tom?

14. M.L. Stedman makes it clear that there is no one perfect answer to the question of who should raise Grace/Lucy. She seems to undermine all notions of absolutes. It is clear that she will not dismiss all Germans as evil either. There is Hannah’s husband, ripe for persecution, and yet he is utterly innocent. Discuss the places in the novel where easy certainty turns out to be wrong.

15. Were you surprised by Isabel’s final decision to admit her role in the choice to keep Lucy—freeing Tom, but losing her child forever? Why or why not? What would you have done?

16. What did you think of the conclusion of the novel? What emotions did you feel at the story’s end? Did it turn out as you expected? Were you satisfied?

(Questions issued by publisher.)
M.L. Stedman talks about 'The Light Between Oceans'

'The Light Between Oceans' author M.L. Stedman discusses her debut novel, her world view, and how her background as an attorney grounds her as a writer.

By Marjorie Kehe / September 18, 2012

"Haunting." "Atmospheric." "Harrowing." These are the kinds of adjectives readers are applying to "The Light Between Oceans," the debut novel by London attorney M.L. Stedman. Set on an island off the coast of Western Australia (home territory for Stedman), the book tells the story of a World War I veteran and his wife, a childless couple with a loving marriage but no child to share the remote outpost that they call home. This couple -- with a single breathtaking decision -- set into motion an unimaginable course of events. I recently spoke with Stedman about her book.

Q: The story of "The Light Between Oceans" is so atmospheric, intense, and -- in several senses -- remote. How did this story come to you?

A: I write very organically -- a picture or phrase or voice turns up in my mind, and I just follow it. For this story, I closed my eyes and could see a lighthouse and a woman. I could tell it was a long time ago, on an island off Western Australia. A man appeared, and I sensed he was the lightkeeper, and it was his story. Then a boat washed up, carrying the body of a dead man. I kept looking and saw there was a baby in it too, so I had to keep writing to see who all these people were and what happened next.

Q: Several of your characters face difficult ethical dilemmas. Some make poor decisions, but in the end, as we come to understand them, most turn out to be quite sympathetic people. Would you say that this reflects your world view?

There's a great deal to be said for that old expression 'walk a mile in the other person's shoes', don't you think? I believe that people are born with a strong instinct for good. Of course, views of what 'good' looks like differ wildly. But I think it's usually possible to find compassion for even the most misguided of individuals: that's different from condoning harmful behavior. It's just recognizing that the business of being human is complex, and it's easy to get things wrong. Compassion and mercy allows society to heal itself when we do.

Q: Much of the story involves either loss -- or fear of loss -- of love. Would you say that you see this fear as the great driver of much of human experience?

You probably only fear losing love if you already have it, so I'd say that the driver starts a step earlier -- satisfying a basic human need for love in its very broadest sense: that includes giving as well as receiving it. In its infinite variety of forms, it plays a role in bestowing life with meaning.
Q: The plotting in this novel is tight and neatly crafted (almost like a ship, I kept thinking as I was reading). Do you think that your work as a lawyer has impacted your writing style in terms of attention to details, an ability to cross all the "t" and dot all the "i"s?

I love the idea of the plot being as sound as a ship! I think the greatest impact of my legal background is that it allows me to write freely and spontaneously, without meticulously plotting in advance. Lawyers are probably hard-wired for structure, so it's a reflex rather than something to spend a lot of conscious thought on. And yes, the legal training helps on the detail, too, making sure that things are consistent.

Q: When it comes to the setting, the book seems to be written with much love. Is that coastal setting close to your heart?

Definitely! I'm always happiest beside an ocean. I grew up with the West Australian landscape, and I so enjoyed putting it on the page – describing the place I've loved all my life.

Q: Who are your own favorite writers? Do you think any of them have had an impact on this novel?

A few favorites who spring to mind (in no particular order) are Graham Greene, George Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Cormac McCarthy, Jane Gardam, Andre Gide, Ian McEwan, Edith Wharton, Katherine Mansfield... I suppose what they have in common is an unflinching eye, a profound understanding of the human heart, and a mastery of language. Those are the qualities I find most rewarding in books, so they're the ones I'd like to bring, in however pale a reflection, to what I write.

Marjorie Kehe is the Monitor’s books editor.

The Light Between Oceans’ M.L. Stedman Answers Your Questions: Spoiler Alert!

October 23, 2012 | By Maura Fritz |

Hello, Bookies:

Anyone who has already read *The Light Between Oceans* knows that it takes some twists and turns. But for those who might stumble across this blog post without having first read the book, its author, M.L. Stedman, cautions: “NB: Major spoiler alert! If you plan to read the book, I strongly suggest you read no further until you’ve finished it.” And, in fact, Ms. Stedman reveals a lot about her highly regarded debut novel. Our sincere thanks to her for sending along her insightful answers. (Note: I’ve left all of Ms. Stedman’s punctuation as is, true to the English-Australian publishing tradition.)

From reader Rosemary Wolfe: The lighthouse offered a twist that has me wondering—if they could have stayed on the island without ever going back to the mainland, would their isolation have allowed them to maintain the secret forever. Do we only do the right thing when someone is looking? Wonder if the author had that in mind when writing…

This is a great question, Rosemary. I suppose what struck me was how it can be easier to fool ourselves when we don’t see the effect of our actions on other people they affect. ‘Out of sight, out of mind’, like all clichés, is based on a truth. I think in this case, it’s not that Tom and Isabel would ‘only do the right thing when someone’s looking’ (Tom in particular has a deep drive to do the right thing)—it’s more that it’s easy to be confused about what the right thing is if you’re isolated and don’t have all the facts. On Janus, there are no people around to act as ‘moral mirrors’, reflecting their behavior back to them. Personally, I doubt that Tom could have lived his whole life burdened by the lie—my guess is he would have had to act sooner or later.

From reader Karissa Swanson: How did you come up with the story? Have you visited or worked in a lighthouse? Did you know the ending you were headed for when you started writing the story?

Ah, that’s three questions, Karissa! So, taking them in order:
• I write very instinctively, letting a picture or phrase or voice come into my mind, and just following it. For this story, the setting turned up first—I closed my eyes and saw a lighthouse, then gradually a woman, and I knew it was a long time ago, on an island off Western Australia. Then a man appeared—the lightkeeper. As I wrote, a boat washed up, with a dead body and a crying baby, so I had to keep writing to see what happened.

• I visited several lighthouses in the course of writing the story. (I’d love to say that I’ve worked in one, but alas, there aren’t many jobs going ‘on the Lights’ these days…) I also did a lot of research on lighthouses, and went through the lighthouse records in the Australian National Archives. It was amazing to read the old correspondence, and hold in my hand the leather-bound logbooks like the ones I imagined Tom handling.

• I had no idea how the story would end until it ended: In one sense, it really could have gone any way. I loved having complete freedom to see where it wanted to go. Because I don’t plot, I didn’t have to contrive a way of getting to a given destination. Having said that, in some ways the ending arose simply from letting the characters be who they were—letting them play out their values and desires.

From reader Alison Gauld: What emotions were you experiencing or trying to convey while writing the ending post Isabel’s confession? I know that some described it as a peaceful end or lonely for Tom but I found it a bit haunting with ghosts of what might have been.

I know what you mean, Alison. I think the ending’s a bit of an ‘ink blot’ test that reflects back one’s take on life. To my mind, Tom and Isabel went on to have a good marriage, and their love was deepened, not broken, by all they’d been through together. Above all, they forgave one another and, eventually, themselves, for their mistakes and failings. I think Tom is unflinching at the end—he is able to hold in his soul all those aspects you mention—he is at peace, he is alone, he has been granted some gifts in life and denied others. There isn’t a ‘but’ missing from that sentence. He opens himself totally to the fullness—the pain as well as the happiness—of his time on earth.

From discussion leader Erin Henry: Though I was ultimately glad that she ended up raising Lucy-Grace, I was initially very resistant to Hannah. I kept hoping that Isabel and Tom would either get the child back or, short of that, continue to have a role in her life. Were you hoping that readers would feel conflicted about Hannah?

It’s always interesting, Erin, to hear how different readers respond to different characters. I’ve met some very ‘pro Hannah’ readers, and some who, like you, really didn’t want her coming between Lucy and the person she thought was her mother. I wasn’t hoping that readers would feel conflicted by Hannah specifically, more just by the whole situation. I wanted there to be no safe place for them to rest—for the dilemma to remain dynamic throughout the book, just like things are in real life.

From deputy editor Maura Fritz: The incident in Part 1 of Tom saving the woman on the boat (who later turned out to be Hannah) gave us important insight into his character early on and but in the long run, in terms of his connection to Hannah, for me it was
something of a red herring. How did you see it? Why did you think it was important to make Hannah the woman on the boat?

This is harder for me to answer, Maura, possibly because I didn’t have a particular agenda about it. I suppose I was quite interested by the effect on both Tom and Hannah of this knowledge of an intimate connection they’d shared and long forgotten: a highly charged bond from which Isabel was excluded. And I’m also interested in how our view of people can change with time and circumstances: At that moment on the boat, could Hannah ever imagine feeling anything other than gratitude to her rescuer? And, years later, to the rescuer of her daughter? Only once I’d finished it did I notice that the theme of ‘the kindness of strangers’ runs right through the book.

Some of our readers have commented about what they believe the lighthouse (and the light itself) symbolize. What do they symbolize for you?

As you can imagine, my answer to this is a long one!

A lighthouse automatically implies potential drama: You only find them where there’s a risk of going astray or running aground. They’re stoical guardians in places of danger. They’re a reminder, too, of human frailty, and the heroic endeavour of mankind to take on the forces of nature in a ludicrously unfair fight to make safe our journey through this world. And they betoken binary opposites such as safety and danger, light and dark, movement and stasis, communication and isolation—they are intrinsically dynamic because they make our imaginations pivot between those opposites.

They’re also a rich metaphor for what the characters experience, especially Tom and Isabel. For a start, there’s light and shadow, especially in the Jungian sense of the shadow side of human nature, and questions about what the characters suppress or disown. Lighthouses don’t move. They are dependable, efficient and concerned with others’ safety. I see Tom as the lighthouse and Isabel as the mercury that allows him to move whilst staying anchored. Looking at a lighthouse at night, we can only see a light—we can’t tell what’s going on inside it or even see the structure that supports it. And the lighthouse cannot illuminate the space closest to it: its light is only for others. The one person Tom can’t save is himself.

The Janus light rotates, going dark then returning a few seconds later. You can only identify it by looking at the whole pattern, not just the light or the dark in isolation. In life, too, it’s important to take people as a whole, and in particular not to focus just on flaws or moments of weakness. There’s something about having faith, in the moments when the light is obscured, that it will come back. Later in the story, Tom tries to keep faith that he will see Isabel again, even when she’s lost in darkness. And I also see a parallel between the lantern lens and the characters’ actions: The light is a tiny flame that is magnified and reaches far beyond the lightkeeper’s sight.

Interview: M.L. Stedman

March 24, 2012

Her novel was the centre of a multi-publisher battle in Britain and was sought-after in the US, but she’s still not ready to consider herself a bona fide author, writes LINDA MORRIS.

Follow the light … Stedman wanted a publisher who appreciated her explorations of truth and morality.

From Virginia Woolf to Colm Toibin, the lighthouse has been a source of myth-making in literature. The lighthouse has stood for sanctuary, the edge of knowledge and reason. Its beam of white brilliance slashes inky-black nights, thick sea mists and dense squalls to light the way of the heroic and mark the graves of the reckless. Magnified through a beehive of glass, the glow of lantern light reaches beyond the curve of the Earth to a distant and unforeseeable future, its pulsating light symbolising silence and surety, the moon and the sun, lullaby and prayer, the steady march of time.

The white stone lighthouse of M.L. Stedman’s debut novel, The Light Between Oceans, also serves dramatic purpose, illuminating the tension between right and wrong, good and evil and the shifting sands of moral certainty. "Is there error in an action motivated by best intention?" the author asks. "Can a right make good a wrong? Is there wrong in a greater good?"

The ethical conundrum arrives in the form of a dinghy washed ashore on an island outcrop in south-western Australia. In its hull lies an unidentified dead man and a mewling baby girl. The lighthouse keeper’s wife, Isabel Sherbourne, interprets the chance wreck as divine benevolence. Tom Sherbourne, who moved to Janus Rock to flee the dark memories of the Somme, understands better than anyone that rules are what divides man from savage.

On an island that knows no other human voices, no other footprints and bears silent witness, the couple decide to keep the child, living the fiction of biological parenthood until they can no
longer. Isabel and Tom are the two oceans of Stedman's title drawn together and tested in the cloistered surrounds of the lighthouse, and eventually driven apart by the cold light of reality.

"There is something that appeals to the human psyche about lighthouses because of their isolation," Stedman says. "Their presence offers up a marvellous set of dichotomies the human imagination likes to explore - darkness and light, safety and danger, stasis and movement, isolation and communication.

"The story throws up the role of isolation on morality - when you don't see the impact of your actions. Perhaps it's easier to fool yourself when you cannot see the face of those who are affected by what you do."

It's these universal themes as well as the strong evocation of place that captured the interest of no less than nine British publishers.

In the US, Stedman procured a "high six-figure" for this, her first novel-length manuscript, a rare book that crosses literary and commercial fiction. "It was wild, just so far beyond my experience and imagining. I have no explanation for it," she says of the bidding war. Stedman interviewed each interested publisher, clear-eyed and stubborn in her intent to find someone who recognised her endeavours to explore life's eternal questions about truth, redemption and the nature of happiness for a broad readership of women and men.

Her belief in the authority of the reader lies partly behind her attempts to maintain relative anonymity in the wake of her mass-market success.

Her official biography comprises a single line: "M.L. Stedman was born and raised in Western Australia and now lives in London." Even her first name, Margot, is concealed.

In only her second media interview, by phone from Perth, Stedman is nervous and bats back questions about her age, schooling, family and her work as a lawyer with a polite: "I really don't want to answer that." Stedman later explains that she has never been one to seek out the limelight. "As the book's not autobiographical, details of my life won't really shed light on the story for the reader and I'd much rather let readers focus on the book and their own experience of it."

These are the dot points of her writing life that Stedman reluctantly offers for public consumption: raised and schooled in Perth, she says she always adored the artistry of words, had an affinity for them. Working in London as a lawyer in 1997, while staring at her office computer screen, she had a eureka moment, "from God knows where", deciding then to try creative writing. She hired a writing coach, went to Greece on a creative-writing holiday, where she wrote her first published short story, Flight, and went on to study creative writing part time at the University of London. Three novellas were published in an out-of-print anthology, Desperate Remedies, in 2008.

*The Light Between Oceans* began as a short story of 15,000 words whipped together in three months. After shopping it to an agent who told her it had the makings of a novel, Stedman began "rolling the pastry, this way and that", folding in archival research on lighthouse keepers.
and the bleakness of Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse, which she visited to find living inspiration for Janus Rock.

Most days, Stedman would go to a corner of the British Library, with its green leatherback chairs and desk lamps, to ride her imagination to her homeland and carry back memories of the smell of eucalypts, the blinding slash of sunshine and the expressive cadence of the Australian vernacular.

When I ask if distance makes for a much more vivid experience of Australia, she rattles off the first stanza of Dorothea Mackellar's iconic *My Country*, the poem of expatriates, emphasising the final lines: "I know but cannot share it/ My love is otherwise."

"I went to London for work a long time ago now and ended up staying," she says.

"Whether I'll be there for the rest of my life, a question I often get asked, who knows? I'm not a great one for long-term plans."

Articulate and single-minded, with a hint of an English accent, Stedman is of an age and maturity in which she has deeply considered the human condition. The novel bears traces of her philosophy: a belief in the human instinct for good, the acceptance of fate, the healing power of forgiveness, the ability to wring happiness from any life.

Perhaps some life-changing moment or loss has left her sanguine and grateful, like Tom, sucking the tiny droplets of nectar from honeysuckle blossoms.

Honour is a quality she invests in Tom, the self-sacrificial linchpin of her novel, of whom she is lovingly proprietorial and protective, much as a mother might be of a child.

"I think we can live good enough lives when we don't think we get the things we thought important. Happiness is a modern idea."

As light and darkness drive Stedman's narrative, so it serves as a useful metaphor for her stream-of-consciousness approach to writing.

"I just sit down and make it up. I don't plan, so it's not as though I have an outline or structure. It's an instinctive process. When I start to write I let a picture or sentence or voice come to me.

"I began with a lighthouse, then I could see a woman at the lighthouse and I wrote a bit more and I could see there was a man and he was the lighthouse keeper, then an island, and it was off the coast of Australia and that it was a long time ago.

"All that came within a day or two of writing. The process was like walking into a dark room after having been out in bright sunlight: at first you see nothing and think the room is empty, then little by little, as your eyes adjust, things emerge from the shadows and you see what's in there.

"For me, the trick is to stay, just stay. It can be tempting to say, 'Oh, there's nothing there,' but in my experience, if you wait without expectation or demand, there's always something there that will eventually let itself be seen."
"It may not make any sense at the time but if I write it and follow it through, it usually makes sense in the end."

Such a free-wheeling style accounts for the way *The Light Between Oceans* unfurls in small acts, at first feeling slight to touch, then building in emotional substance. Into the spaces between words, Stedman breathes an anxiety and pulsating intensity that roils with the ocean and the lighthouse beacon. To invoke Tom's conflicted moral currents Stedman put together a playlist of music featuring the swirling counter-rhythms of Beethoven's Symphony No.7, which coincidentally underscored *The King's Speech*, a film also about men of noblesse.

Her original draft, she notes, was a darker, more wintry and visceral work, which at times left her physically sick. A kinder light bathes the transfigured Tom and Isabel by the novel's moving close.

Stedman is not ready to call her herself a writer. Not yet. It doesn't feel real. "I loved writing this book and remember at one stage wondering, 'If I could do anything in the world, how would I be spending this day?' The answer came back, 'I would be doing exactly this'."

*The Light Between Oceans* is published by Vintage, $32.95.

Goodreads Interview with M.L. Stedman

December, 2012

The success of M.L. Stedman's first novel has outstripped most freshman attempts, especially considering its secluded and contemplative story. This best-selling historical novel, *The Light Between Oceans*, is set in the years following World War I and tells of a lighthouse keeper, Tom, and his wife, Isabel, who discover a dead man and a crying baby washed ashore on their island off the coast of Australia. In mourning for her own miscarried children and against her husband's wishes, Isabel nurses the child as her own. A native Australian, Stedman speaks to Goodreads from her current hometown, London, about her wish to stay "behind the curtain" and writing by the seat of her pants.

*Note from the author: Massive Spoiler Alert! I strongly recommend that people read no further until they've read the book, so as not to spoil their experience. (Otherwise it's probably a bit like doing a crossword puzzle where someone's already filled in most of the spaces.)*

**Goodreads:** Your novel started off with a lot of momentum; nine international houses bid on the manuscript. That's amazing and extremely unusual for a first-time author. How did this happen?

*M.L. Stedman:* How did this happen, indeed! I can only put it down to a combination of factors. My wonderful agent, Sue Armstrong from Conville and Walsh, sent the manuscript out to publishers, and it seemed to strike a chord with people, which led to an auction process in various countries around the world. The comment I heard a lot was that the story was universal—readers from pretty much any culture or country could engage with the issues it raised. Another vital factor was, in my view, just old-fashioned good luck, for which I'm very grateful.

**GR:** You're a lawyer and a writer based in London, far from your Australian homeland. Why write about Australia versus your current residence?

*MS:* I've written stories based in contemporary London, too, but I suppose what I enjoy about writing is the chance to explore other worlds and other lives—so it's more than just geography. These days I'm a full-time writer.

**GR:** Instead of the usual blurb, your bio is a single line: "M.L. Stedman was born and raised in Western Australia and now lives in London." Please tell us more about your reticence toward sharing details from your personal background and the usage of your initials rather than your first name. Do you think sharing more from what's behind the curtain affects how people read your story?

*MS:* I like the reader to be free to inhabit fully the world of the book. I think that's more difficult if the author is effectively standing between the reader and the story—a bit like making a movie and then standing in front of the screen. Promoting the author rather than the work is a fairly recent trend. As to using initials—there's a very long and respectable history of writers of both genders doing so: T.S. Eliot, P.G. Wodehouse, C.S. Lewis, P.D. James, A.S. Byatt, J.D. Salinger... Things from "behind the curtain" must surely affect readers' experience, and more
importantly, take them out of the story. Details of my life won't shed any light on the book. Ultimately I think any novel should stand or fall on the words on the page. Every novel effectively begins with the appeal from the writer to the reader: "Imagine the following..." For me, the key is "imagine."

**GR:** What was it about lighthouses that inspired you to focus an entire novel around the people who inhabit such an unusual place?

**MS:** To answer this, I have to say a word or two about my writing process. I write very instinctively, letting a picture or phrase or voice come into my mind and just following it. For this story the setting turned up first—I closed my eyes and saw a lighthouse, then gradually a woman, and I knew it was a long time ago, on an island off Western Australia. Then a man appeared—the lightkeeper. As I wrote, a boat washed up, with a dead body and a crying baby, so I had to keep writing to see what happened. I didn't consciously decide to write a book about lighthouses, but I found they provided an incredibly rich metaphor: They betoken binary opposites such as safety and danger, light and dark, movement and stasis, communication and isolation—they are intrinsically dynamic because they make our imaginations pivot between those opposites.

I researched as the story progressed, reading old logbooks in the Australian National Archives and visiting lighthouses in Western Australia. They're such iconic things and inspire affection and fascination in equal measure. It's sad that they're more or less functionally extinct. I can't say I come from a long line of lightkeepers, though since writing the book I've met many people who do!

**GR:** Speaking of lightkeepers, Goodreads member Thom Jones says, "My wife and I are volunteer lighthouse keepers. We don't know if the author is responsible for the cover, but we were curious why there is no fresnel lens depicted and why the light is not lit, since it seems to be a night scene.

**MS:** I love the U.S. cover (designed by the amazingly talented Rex Bonomelli at Scribner). I think most people assume that the silhouette in the light tower is a man—presumably Tom [the lighthouse keeper]. But if you look at it very, very closely, it seems more likely that it's about a third or fourth order lens of some sort (possibly a bivalve?). What seems to be the head is just one of the astragals. There's something metaphorical about the light being in darkness, given what Tom goes through.

**GR:** Goodreads member German Rogers asks, "If you could, nowadays or in the past, would you have lived in a lighthouse? And why?"

**MS:** I adore the ocean, and I find solitude very restorative, so I'd happily volunteer for a stint on Janus Rock. I suspect, however, that the reality would be daunting: Lightkeepers led incredibly tough lives. The job was poorly paid, physically demanding, and required keepers to sign up for years at a time without a break. The Commonwealth Lighthouse Service was incredibly mean with its money and was constantly taking keepers to task for breaking or losing equipment. In spite of all that, I'd still be willing to have a go, but maybe just as a relief keeper.

**GR:** Goodreads member Alamosa Books said, "Is your familiarity with child loss personal or from others? Because reading the account of her failed pregnancies was so forcefully
real—and accurate—that I had to put the book aside several times and just deal with memories. And in a similar vein, my grandfather was in World War I. I did not know him well, but when I went through that ‘fascinated with history phase,’ having a grandfather who was part of the British Army in the Great War seemed really cool. But I couldn’t get anything out of my mother or uncles other than ‘He never would talk about that.’ Did you create the psychology of the war experience from reading accounts of others, or did you know someone who would actually talk about it?"

MS: I think a writer can ask for no greater reward than that something resonates with a reader in the way Alamosa Books describes. And as a reader myself, I love those moments when I read something and feel that someone I don’t know has truthfully captured an experience that is deeply personal to me. I think the answer belongs "behind the curtain" mentioned above, but I’m curious as to how knowing one way or the other would enhance, diminish, or otherwise alter your view of the book. As for the psychology of war experience, your grandfather’s response is typical of returned soldiers of that generation. One of the few places where Australian WWI veterans "spoke" was in the field diaries and battalion journals written during and shortly after the war. Essentially private records rather than anything to be published commercially, they are truly heartbreaking to read—stories told without self-pity, facts recounted without commentary, and all the more devastating for that. I frequently found myself not just in tears but actually sobbing as I read them, in the otherwise orderly silence of the British Library reading rooms.

GR: Goodreads member Linda asks, "Seems the conclusion that being moral is more critical than being happy. Do you feel this way?"

MS: The key point about this is that it's how the ending seems to Linda. I find readers take very different things out of how the book ends—most find it uplifting, but some find it unbearably sad. These differences are natural given that we see everything in this world through the filter of our own experience—there's no "correct" response. I'm interested that Linda's question seems to see "being moral" and "being happy" as mutually exclusive. I wonder if anyone feels completely happy if they're going against their own personal sense of right and wrong? Perhaps, like The Princess and the Pea, it's not possible to sleep easy? Can that then rightly be called "happiness"?

GR: What is your writing process? Please describe a typical day.

MS: There really isn't such a thing as a "typical" writing day for me, except insofar as I only write in the daytime—never at night. I'm rather allergic to rules about writing, and pronouncements such as "you must write at least an hour a day" or "you must plot everything in advance" or "do all your research before you write a single word." My philosophy is "find out what works for you, and do that: Everyone is different." So, for example, I wrote this book on my sofa, in the British Library, in a cottage by the beach in Western Australia, on Hampstead Heath, and anywhere else that felt right. I consider it a true privilege to have the opportunity to do what I love.

GR: What authors, books, or ideas have influenced you?

MS: This is a Rather Big Question for this space, so the answer isn't exhaustive! I'm not entirely sure what it means to say that I’ve been influenced by a writer—I hesitate lest it seem I'm claiming to be in their league. Writers I admire include Graham Greene, because of his beautifully honed prose and fascination with moral struggles; anyone who turns a beautiful
sentence—like Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne Robinson, and Anne Michaels; and writers who know what makes people tick: Dickens, Eliot, Salinger. For The Light Between Oceans I was also influenced by people who wouldn't call themselves writers at all but who communicated the facts of their lives through documents: the soldiers of the Great War I came across in battalion histories; those left behind fretting for them in letters; the Australian lightkeepers whose correspondence is in the National Archives. And as for ideas, one of the basic principles of natural justice is audi alteram partem—i.e. let the other side be heard. So in this book I was very aware of putting across each character's point of view as convincingly as I could, even though it may have been very different from my own way of seeing things.

GR: What are you reading now?

MS: As usual, I have several books on the go at once. I've just started The Map and the Territory by Michel Houellebecq, and Elijah's Mermaid by Essie Fox. On my iPod I'm listening to Jude the Obscure by Thomas Hardy, and Brighton Rock by Graham Greene.

GR: What's next? Are you working on another book? If so, what's it about? Please give us a morsel about it! Goodreads member Brenda asks, "Will she have a follow-up to this brilliant book, one which will include the life of Tom, his now grown-up daughter, and her life?"

MS: At the moment I'm still very busy with the launch of this book. I'm looking forward to things quieting down so that I can close the door and let my imagination go roaming again. As to Brenda's question, I don't have any plans to revisit Tom's life after the end of the book, but as the saying goes, I never say never...

http://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/830.M_L_Stedman