



She Walks in Beauty
by Siri Mitchell
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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH SIRI MITCHELL

1. This book takes place over 100 years ago in late-Victorian America. What is the relevance for today's reader?

The more I learned about late-Victorian culture, the more their problems seemed to mirror ours: a burgeoning celebrity culture, use of distortion in advertising, commitment to a single standard of beauty. Women still go to dangerous lengths to "fix" the way they look. And media and advertising still perpetuate such unreasonable standards of beauty that some women are driven to anorexia-inducing behaviors. And, like the Victorians, we also still grapple with our attitudes toward the poor.

2. What surprised you most about the time period?

The contradictions! I had to try and understand a society that sent such contradictory messages to its young women. "No, let's not talk about sex but we'll make sure we emphasize your curves to every advantage. We'll equip you with every artifice known to catch a man, but let's not discuss what happens in the bedroom or the nursery. We'll all go to church on Sunday, but please don't tax your mind in thinking about the sermons. Your role in life, the only way to achieve true happiness, is to be a wife and mother, and no, it doesn't really matter whether you like the groom." That was a difficult mindset to comprehend.

3. Your heroine is put through a training regimen to prepare for her debut into society. Did that really happen?

Yes, it really did, though the education generally spanned a period of years rather than weeks. It was very important for a girl to understand the role she was expected to play in society. Social education was both formal and informal, including etiquette as well as religion, voice training, playing an instrument, dancing, handiwork, and household management.

4. In the same vein, your heroine is quite overwhelmed by the abundant variety of silverware and serving ware that she's expected to memorize. You can't tell us there were really lemon forks and marrow shovels. Surely you took some artistic license in inventing them.

There were, and I didn't! The Victorians also had vase-like celery servers and comb-like cake breakers. Appearances were very important to Victorians in general and to the upper levels of society in particular. This was the period of time in which old money was being challenged by new money. As high society ways were observed and then copied by the lower classes, new rules had to be established to preserve the old boundaries. The Victorians did everything they could think of to differentiate between those who had class and those who did not. They were also reluctant to be placed in the indelicate situation of having to actually touch their food. Thus, dining was meant to set a trap into which the unsuspecting and uneducated could easily fall. So much emphasis was placed on manners and etiquette that the result was a truly astonishing array of arcane implements like lemon forks and cake breakers.

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5. What advice could a Victorian debutante offer to contemporary society?

At its foundation, etiquette and good manners are all about making people feel welcome and placing them at ease. I'm not sure we do such a good job of this today. In some corners of our culture rudeness is applauded and biting, sarcastic comments seem to have replaced more thoughtful and witty humor. Victorian women could teach us quite a bit about focusing our attention on others' needs. Perhaps they did that to the extent that they gave up more of themselves than they ought to have, but I think we could all stand to lean a little bit more in that direction.

6. Your heroine's father, a doctor, appears to be a bit of a quack. Toward the end of the book, you include a recipe for his tonic. Could you enlighten us as to Victorian medicine?

Frankly, I don't think it ought to be called medicine! It had more in common with medieval rather than modern practices. The Victorians made remarkable advancements in technology and education, but their medical establishment still based much of its "knowledge" on superstition and folk remedies. Tonics like Dr. Carter's were very popular and common ingredients included massive amounts of alcohol, cocaine, ether, chloroform, opium, belladonna, and digitalis.

7. What ideas are you exploring in this book? What is the take-away message you want readers to receive after reading your book?

That society will tell you who you are and how to be until you decide for yourself who you are and how you want to be.

8. Any last word to your readers?

God loves you just the way you are. So many problems, so much heartache comes when we fail to understand that, when we try to evade it or convince God that he really shouldn't. The best thing you can do is just confront that idea and deal with it. God loves you. Let that knowledge change your life!