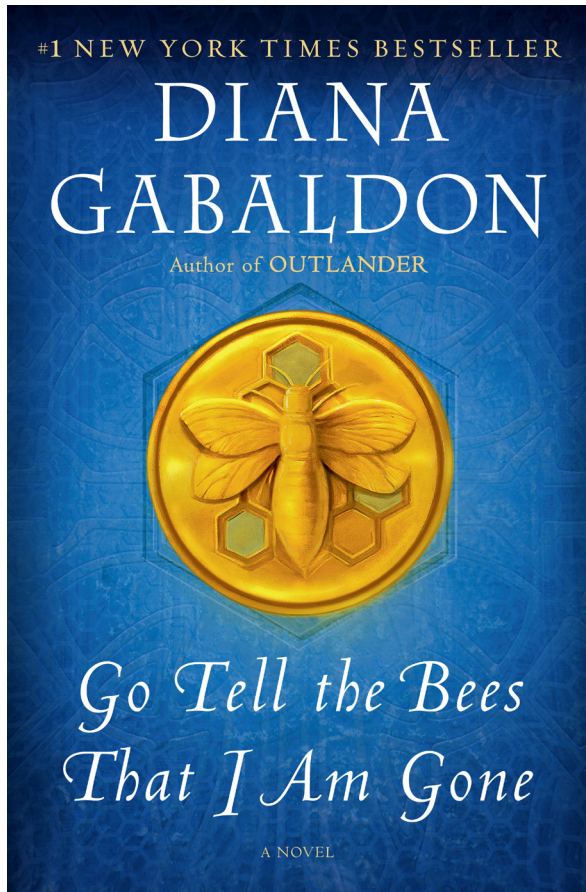




OUTLANDISH HISTORY

The World-Changing Fiction of Diana Gabaldon



The word “outlander” made its first appearance in 1598 in John Florio’s pioneering Italian-English dictionary, *A Worlde of Wordes*, where “pellegrino” was glossed as “a stranger, an alien, an outlander, an outlandish man”. Florio’s Tuscan father had landed in London in 1550, fleeing the Inquisition, so his son knew what it meant to be an outlander. Diana Gabaldon’s *Outlander* series features Englishwoman Claire Randall, an outlander twice over as a “sassenach” (Saxon) in 1940s Britain who finds herself in 18th-century Scotland in a time of turmoil, and later crosses the Atlantic with her new Highlander husband, Jamie Fraser.

Outlander began to take root when Gabaldon saw an episode of *Dr Who* from 1966, featuring a Jacobite in a kilt in the aftermath of Culloden. She was a university professor at the time, and the idea inspired her to try her hand at writing historical fiction. “I knew how to do research,” she says. “I also had access to the whole interlibrary loan system and concluded logically that it would be easier to look things up than to make them up, and if I turned out to have no imagination, I could steal things from the historical record.” What began as practice became an epic project and grew wings: “I discovered what the books were about while writing them. I was writing out of my own muscle, blood, bone and memory, while shaping the things that came through with imagination.”

It was Gabaldon’s female protagonist who turned it into a time-travelling tale: “When I realized (on the third day of writing) that the Englishwoman I had just dropped into a cottage full of Scotsmen (in kilts) to see what she’d do, was not doing what I expected, at all, I fought with her for a short time, trying to beat her into shape and make her speak like an 18th-century woman, but she just kept making smart-ass modern remarks—and she also took over the story, and started telling it herself. So it’s all Claire’s fault that there’s time-travel in these stories.”

Since the first novel launched in 1991, *Outlander* has ignited global interest in Scottish history, culture, and language. The eighth instalment, *Written in My Own Heart’s Blood*, appeared in June 2014, and the TV adaptation premiered in August that year. Rumour has it that its UK release was delayed lest it influence the Scottish Independence Referendum held the following month. Scots looking to learn about their own history often turn to fiction because the education system has traditionally been weighted towards British subjects, and *Outlander* has certainly given them food for thought, as well as bringing their history to millions across the globe. The TV series has had the biggest onscreen impact on Scotland’s international image since *Braveheart* (1995), although *Highlander* (1986), the time-travelling adventure starring Sean Connery, perhaps offers a closer cultural comparison for the men-in-kilts phenomenon. Having said that, neither remotely comes close to the authenticity, complexity and historical accuracy of Gabaldon’s work.

Developing a novel set in Scotland, creating believable characters and following them to British Colonial America was a welcome challenge for such an avid reader and writer accustomed to checking sources: “I read every Scottish novel I could get my hands on; that’s how I developed a sense of what you might call an accessible Scottish accent.” Her engagement with Scots and Gaelic was bound up with a concern for believability: “Wanting the book to be as authentic as possible in its historical details (that’s how you immerse a reader and make them happily follow you off a cliff when you later declare that that set of standing stones over there is actually a time portal...), I thought I must have people actually speaking Gaelic here and there, even if only a few words.”

And it works. In dialogue she conveys the cadences of 18th-century Scottish speech and vocabulary, peppered with occasional Gaelic, in contrast with Claire’s middle-class post-war English. Misunderstandings arise not only because of her mid-20th century frame of reference but her Englishness itself. “A great device for the stranger-in-a-strange land sort of story”, she observes. “If the protagonist doesn’t (at first) understand what people are saying, it’s going to open things up to a good bit of complication, explanation (without the author having to step in and beat the reader over the head), and exoticism.”

Thirty years down the line the ninth book in the series, *Go Tell the Bees That I Am Gone*, continues to captivate readers. Over 1300 pages long and not a stitch dropped, it opens with Claire and Jamie reliving past trauma, of which they’ve had more than their share; moments of recollection, remembrance and recovery foreshadowing further heartache. Their love is a constant thread that runs through the historical upheaval of the *Outlander* books, but it is no *Brigadoon*, no *Neverland*. There is sex, but it is no bodice-ripper. The sex between Claire and Jamie is down-to-earth, nuanced and frank, written

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from a distinctively female point of view, convincing in detail and particularly resonant with women readers.

While her first book was taking shape, she wrote an apprentice piece “in which a young woman explains to her brother what it’s like to be pregnant”. Her then-small contingent of online readers were electrified by how she depicted her experience of motherhood “with familiarity and vividness – because it was vivid, believe me.” All the novels including *Go Tell the Bees That I Am Gone* share this focus on the minutiae of recognisable individual experience set against a backdrop of world-changing historical events. “I write in small pieces, and gradually they form connections and become bigger pieces, and at various points in the proceedings, if I’ve found out something Really Interesting that takes me (or some of the characters) Abroad (physically, mentally or morally...), I’m just fascinated to see what will happen, and am willing to follow a thread of character, plot, action, etc. to find out.”

History’s byways are Gabaldon’s backyard: “I don’t think in a straight line, and I don’t write in one, either. I don’t work with outlines, because a) they’d be pointless (because stuff changes all the time) and b) doing one would destroy all my interest in writing the story, because c) I depend on inspiration and revelation, and an outline is the antithesis of both.” Nor does she feel inclined to become too up-to-date: “English-speaking culture in the present day is largely a foolish and superficial one, and (for me) would be much less interesting to deal with.”

She is not afraid of tackling difficult issues – sexual abuse of women and men, slavery and war – but her method allows her to treat these subjects with considerable delicacy. And although history matters – “I couldn’t very well have Claire and Jamie decide to circumvent the ’45 without bringing in the politics of France and Great Britain at the time” – story matters more, and fidelity to facts never hampers the narrative.

There are five “role models” from whom Gabaldon says she gleaned “education, rather than inspiration”. Significantly, none are historical novelists: “Charles Dickens – from him, I learned how to make a character vivid and unique; Robert Louis Stevenson – who taught me a lot about constructing a narrative and how to focus a plot; Dorothy L. Sayers – I learned plot-pacing from her, but more importantly, how to show the nuances of social class through dialogue, and to consider morality as an intrinsic component of a good story; P.G. Wodehouse taught me how to balance a complex plot and kick the legs out from under it periodically; also, the use of humor for pacing, as well as character development. Also, the grace of playing with language for effect; and John D. MacDonald – from him, I learned how to encapsulate a character with one sentence, how to handle a continuing series character, and how to do deft backstory.”

Scotland lends itself to the historical fiction form, with its turbulent past, dramatic landscape, and the way the Highlands in particular are steeped in myth, superstition and legend. So it should be no surprise that it was in Scotland that the historical novel was invented, with Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* series (1814-31). Gabaldon says she encountered Scott’s *Ivanhoe* when she was nine, and has just written a foreword for a new edition of *Rob Roy*. I’d love to see what she makes of *Redgauntlet*, about a planned third Jacobite rebellion. Like *Outlander* it explores what it means to take sides at pivotal moments

in history, blurring the border between fact and fiction.

I would say the *Outlander* series is probably the richest rendition of Scottish history since Dorothy Dunnett’s six-novel *Lymond Chronicles* (1961-75) which centre on the enigmatic figure of Francis Crawford of Lymond. Like Dunnett’s magisterial depiction of 16th-century Scotland, Gabaldon’s fiction spirals outwards, beyond borders, although urbane lowlander Lymond is a different proposition to rugged Highlander Jamie Fraser. Gabaldon is a fan of Dunnett’s work and says she is planning to revisit the Lymond series. Dunnett once remarked of the writing process that “imagination is a last resort when research fails”. Does this resonate with Gabaldon? “More than you can imagine,” she says. “Having come from the world of science myself – Well, let’s just say some people regard facts as inconvenient obstacles to their creativity, while I’m inclined to view them as a trampoline.” That willingness to delve into facts, driven by a pleasure in, and respect for, accuracy of detail, whether it be scientific, medical, historical or linguistic – is what catapults *Outlander* to a different level.

It took *Dr Who*, the source of her original inspiration, until 2017 to cast a female doctor in the lead role. Gabaldon, herself a time-travelling, world-changing doctor, has always been ahead of her time.



WRITTEN BY WILLY MALEY

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