Q&A

Q: Why did you decide to write this book?
   A: Because I have always been struck by how the body is absent from biography. Bodies rarely get a mention in the lives of famous people unless something goes wrong – serious illness. And yet we all of us experience the world through our bodies as much as our minds. As a biographer myself (George Eliot, Mrs Beeton) I wanted to see what would happen if I wrote about 5 iconic Victorians, using a particular body part as my starting off point. I wanted to know what new information and fresh narratives might emerge from topics that might have seemed to be exhausted.

Q: What were some of the most surprising things you learned while writing/researching the book?
   A: I learned that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, had very poor personal hygiene. Even by 19th Century standards, he couldn’t be bothered to keep himself clean. His friends had to nag him to change into a clean shirt.

   I learned that George Eliot’s right hand was larger than her left on account of the fact that as a teenager she had spent so much time churning butter and making cheese on her father’s farm.

   I learned that the origins of the phrase ‘Sweet FA’ or ‘Sweet Fanny Adams’ comes from a child murder in 1867 when an 8 year old working class child was eviscerated to the point where nothing much was left of her.

   In the course of my research it emerged that some of Charles Darwin’s bear hairs are still in the possession of his descendents. Sequencing has begun on his genome which may eventually give us clues as to the nature of the many symptoms that plagued him throughout his life (eczema, vomiting, fainting etc)

Q: What is new about your book/research that sets it apart from other books in the field?
A: While there have been social histories of particular 19th C illnesses, or histories of disability, or even histories of touch and smell, no-one has tried starting with an individual body and then working outwards. I am attempting to reassemble the body in the text.

The intention, then, is two fold. First to tell new stories about well-known Victorians but Second to attempt to repair biographical writing’s relationship with the bodies of the people it claims to know all about.

Q: Did you encounter any eye opening statistics while writing your book?

A: No, it’s not statistically based. But I spent a decade in the archives doing a forensic search, looking for the traces that the body leaves behind. In the process I discovered George Eliot’s glove, and some hairs from Charles Darwin’s beard. It is thrilling that these material remnants of past lives still remain to this day.

Q: Does your book uncover and/or debunk any longstanding myths?

A: It’s always been assumed that young unmarried Queen Victoria didn’t know anything about the facts of life before her marriage to Albert in 1840. I can show that she was extremely knowledgeable about the sexual goings on of the ladies and gentlemen in her court, not to mention her very racy relatives. In fact, like any teenager, she was slightly sex obsessed.

I’ve also debunked the idea that mid-Victorian intellectuals grew beards because it made them look like ‘sages’. In fact, in all cases that I’ve discovered, there’s a very human story behind the decision to stop shaving – desire to carry up eczema (Darwin) or facial scarring (Longfellow) or a weak chin (Dickens). Victorian men were vain in ways that they probably wouldn’t care to admit to.

Q: How do you envision the lasting impact of your book?

A: To restore a sense of lived reality to our understanding of how people negotiated their world 200 years ago. The Victorians sometimes seem strange and remote to us in the way they operated. But the fact is that they lived in bodies that are remarkably like the ones that we inhabit. 200 years is not enough to witness significant developmental changes. Their tickles and tremors and toothache are remarkably similar to our own.
Q: What do you hope people will take away from reading your book?

A: If the Victorians have come down to us as prudes, it is not because they weren’t aware of their bodies, it was because they were confronted with them on a minute-by-minute basis in the new, cramped conditions of industrialised urban living. I want to make people think about how George Eliot manage to write masterpieces when she was plagued with toothache, or why Rossetti couldn’t bear to sit still on a hard chair for more than a few seconds at a time.

In short, the Victorians had bodies which delighted, ashamed and worried them – just like us.