

A conversation with Emily Winslow, author of **THE WHOLE WORLD**

What inspired you to write your debut novel, *THE WHOLE WORLD*?

Moving to a strange place. Not just England, but specifically Cambridge. Cambridge's University culture, shaped over 800 years of continuous history, looms over my life here. The international population that passes through, in a constant exchange of outgoing graduates and new students, keeps the place from becoming exactly "British." It's specifically "Cambridge": intense, quirky, nonjudgmental and alive with intellectual curiosity.

What kind of research did you do to accurately reflect the culture of Cambridge?

I focused on two colleges: the oldest, Peterhouse, and one of the beautiful riverside colleges, Magdalene. I wanted to capture their rooms and courtyards, their rhythms and patterns of student and faculty life. Partly this involved quizzing University people and begging entry into private places. But the University permeates the town, rather than setting itself apart on a campus, so a daily practice of curiosity and observation goes a long way.

People love to talk. The other day I asked a gardener if students could sneak in or stay in after hours; he showed me every good hiding place and low wall. I told an astrophysicist that I needed a high place for an accident; he brought me to an eerie abandoned rooftop telescope dome, carpeted with dead wasps. People are generous with intimate details, like the way that the famous mathematical bridge catches at girls' high heels. I love getting to know this place.

How has your experience as a puzzle designer influenced the way you approach mystery writing?

I love solving puzzles as much as I love creating them. The best ones start with an impossible scenario. I look at the set-up and think, "There's no way!" And, with whatever assumptions I've brought with me, there isn't. So I stare and stare, and return to a puzzle over days, and finally something will click, a realization that it was my baggage that made it seem unsolvable. There is a way after all, if I change my perspective. The best books make that happen for readers.

Why did you use five narrators and what difficulties did this pose?

I wanted the reader to experience the assumptions, prejudices and personal skew that make each of these character's actions not just plausible, but inevitable. Doing it in first-person allowed me to force the reader into not just their situation, but their whole

worldview. Gretchen Paul, who's blind, was a challenging narrator, because of course I couldn't describe what anything looked like. But the hardest was probably Nick. He's a Cambridge local, and takes the setting for granted. It wouldn't make sense for him to comment on his surroundings, either physically or in the way things work. The two Americans were easiest. They gawk at Cambridge, like me, and explicitly notice things that are different from in the States.

Do any elements of the novel reflect your real life experiences?

My family has given me all of my grandparents' old papers, which I've been organizing and transcribing. My maternal grandmother's World War II letters and my paternal grandfather's World War I letters are treasures of detail. Sometimes, my parents' childhood memories and interpretations are contradicted by these letters. Even over small discrepancies, their indignation is vivid. Childhood memories are, of course, by definition childish. Yet we carry these views into adulthood, often unchallenged by the maturity that has infused other areas of our lives.

In *THE WHOLE WORLD*, an important plotline involves memories v. photographs in intolerable contradiction. Unlike in my family, these discrepancies have terrible implications, making resistance all the more necessary.

What's next for Emily Winslow?

I'm working on another book set in Cambridge. In *THE WHOLE WORLD*, I reveled in the wonderful feeling of belonging I've found here. My characters were no longer set apart as "so smart" and, instead, thrilled to fitting in as ordinary among others like themselves.

In my next book, the characters are not so "at home." They're clever enough to be at the University, but lack other elements. They struggle. It's a very different story, but, again is told by five characters, one of whom is from *THE WHOLE WORLD*. I won't spoil it by saying which one.