

Author of 'Cleopatra,' 'The Witches' wins 2019 Helmerich Award

By James D. Watts Jr. Tulsa World Apr 21, 2019



Author Stacy Schiff. Courtesy/Elena Seibert

Elena Seibert

Stacy Schiff was working as a senior editor with the publishing firm of Simon & Schuster when she decided the time was right for a new biography of French aviator and author Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

She considered pitching the idea to several writers. But something odd happened.

“Weirdly, I found that I couldn’t quite relinquish the idea,” Schiff said in an interview conducted through emails. “Probably I was too timid to admit that what I really wanted to do was write (it) myself.”

Schiff figured that she could take some time away from her job, write the book and then “scurry back into the publishing.”

“Things,” she said, “worked out differently.”

Schiff’s life of the author of such classics as “The Little Prince” and “Night Flight” would become a finalist for the 1995 Pulitzer Prize for Biography and earn universal praise, with The New Yorker saying that “it is impossible to imagine the job better done. It is balanced, perceptive, thoroughly researched and exceptionally well-written.”

Since then, Schiff has written four more best-selling works of biography and nonfiction, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Vera (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov): Portrait of a Marriage” and the best-selling “The Witches: Salem, 1692.”

It is work that has earned Schiff the 2019 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, presented by the Tulsa City-County Library and the Tulsa Library Trust.

Adrian Alexander, chairman of the award’s author selection committee, said, “Stacy Schiff has a rare and invaluable talent as a biographer. She writes thoroughly researched, engaging and intelligent nonfiction that often reads like a good novel.”

The award is presented annually to give formal recognition, on behalf of the Tulsa County community, to internationally acclaimed authors who have written a distinguished body of work and made a major contribution to the field of literature and letters.

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Past award winners have included Nobel laureates Toni Morrison and Saul Bellow; Man Booker prize winners Dame Hilary Mantel, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ian McEwan; Pulitzer Prize-winning novelists Norman Mailer, John Updike, William Kennedy, Larry McMurtry and Michael Chabon; thriller writers John le Carre, Alan Furst and John Grisham; poets Billy Collins and Wendall Berry; and playwright Neil Simon.

The award consists of a \$40,000 cash prize and an engraved crystal book, which Schiff will receive at a black-tie ceremony Dec. 6. She will also take part in a free public event and book-signing Dec. 7. Both events will be held at Central Library, Fifth Street and Denver Avenue.

Schiff was born in Massachusetts, where she said, "I was more comfortable on or around the page than anywhere else. If I didn't write capsule biographies of my stuffed animals, it was only because I was too busy reading 'Harriet the Spy' for the 110th time."

She graduated from Phillips Academy, then earned a bachelor's degree from Williams College. She began working in publishing during summer vacations from college and after graduation rose from assistant to senior editor.

However, her work in publishing was something of a double-edged sword when she devoted herself to writing.

"I was a good editor," she said. "And in the same way you're unable to tell how you really came off at the cocktail party, you can't edit yourself. Most of the time, you can't even see what screams out to be edited."

On the other hand, Schiff said, "I do think there was something comfortable for me about the (biography) genre. As an editor, you are always behind the scenes, where you're largely invisible. As a biographer, you're subsumed by someone else's life. You're still somewhere behind the page. Your subject's picture runs with the review rather than your own."

Many of Schiff's subjects — Cleopatra, Benjamin Franklin, the Salem Witch trials — are familiar to audiences primarily through how they have been portrayed in popular culture. Her current project is on the life of Samuel Adams, who in his life was thought of as "the father of the American Revolution," Schiff said, "and today, we think of him as a beer."

Upending those myths is one of the things Schiff enjoys about her work.

"People are shocked to discover that Cleopatra was neither an Elizabeth Taylor lookalike nor even good-looking," Schiff said. "That can surprise even more than does the fact that she spoke nine languages.

"It's unsettling to have our assumptions overturned," she said. "Since most of us take what we know of the (Salem) witch trials from Arthur Miller, we have a few misconceptions on that front, too. You would never know from 'The Crucible' that men could be witches, too, and that five were hanged for witchcraft in 1692."

"The Witches" was written well before the rise of the #MeToo movement, but Schiff has been a bit surprised at how this story of the effect that a group of teenage girls had on a society has taken on added resonance in today's society.

"I would not have anticipated seeing the words 'witch hunt' in the news on a daily basis when I began — or for that matter published — the book," Schiff said. "There were a few resonant parallels. The communities in which the panic took off felt that evil angels had descended upon them and were on the lookout for more. They began to point fingers left and right. It was difficult not to think of 9/11.

"And misinformation flew about fast and furious in 1692; an oral culture turns out to bear a remarkable similarity to an internet one," she said. "Both feed on indelible rumor; neither has much use for truth. The internet turns out to be a brilliant tool for sowing mass hysteria. There is no better way to broadcast a zombie apocalypse."

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