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# Trend Setter

Diane Setterfield, author of global bestseller *The Thirteenth Tale*, returns with *Once Upon a River*, a novel steeped in mystery and folklore

PP24-25





The third novel by **Diane Setterfield** centres on a drowned child who miraculously returns to life, and the people who lay claim to her

**D**iane Setterfield burst onto the literary scene back in 2006 with her debut *The Thirteenth Tale*, which was published to rave reviews. "A book about the joy of books, a riveting multi-layered mystery that twists and turns, and weaves a quite magical spell," praised the *Independent*. It went on to sell just under a quarter of a million copies in the UK, with worldwide sales of more than three million units, according to its publisher Orion, due in no small part to its success in the US, where it hit number one on the *New York Times*' fiction list. Much was made of Setterfield's storytelling powers, which are again to the fore in her latest novel, *Once Upon a River*.

The river of the title is the River Thames, and the novel

opens with a powerfully atmospheric description of a riverside inn, situated around 40 miles downstream from the source. All the inns along the upper reaches of the Thames have a particular pleasure to offer, we are told, whether it be music or gambling or brawling, but The Swan at Radcot is famous for storytelling. One midwinter night the regulars are gathered, preparing to listen to stories and tell their own, when the door bursts open to reveal a badly injured stranger who holds in his arms the body of a drowned girl. Hours later, the dead girl takes a breath and returns to life. But how can that be? Is it a miracle? Or magic? Or something else entirely?

When we meet for coffee in a hotel bar near Hyde Park,



3m+

Number of units publisher Orion claims Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale*, has sold worldwide since its 2006 release

copper curls, reveals that her favourite line in the book "is where one of the drinkers in the pub says, 'Oh well, just cos a thing's impossible don't mean it can't happen.' When something impossible does happen, in a world where science is starting to explain the world but old beliefs and old stories are still present, how do you explain the impossible?"

Setterfield anchors *Once Upon a River* in time within the first two pages—a passing reference to the 1387 battle of Radcot Bridge that took place "five hundred years before the night this story began"—but there is a timelessness about the novel. Her characters work as people have since medieval times—publican, farmer, land-owner, midwife—but the injured stranger is discovered (from the contents of his pockets) to be a photographer, a trade first made possible in Victorian England. The other indication of the era is that Rita, the nurse summoned to the pub to deal with the injured man, has been brought up by nuns in a convent hospital but her thinking reveals the influence of the greatest scientist of the age.

### Telling tales

Setterfield sees *Once Upon a River* as a novel about storytelling, specifically "how we use storytelling to explain ourselves to ourselves and to make sense of our lives. I was very interested in how something that appears to be miraculous would be explained in an age where science is having a big impact. This is the Darwinian age and science is a really big-hitter. But, certainly in rural areas and among the less-educated classes, there would still be loads of residual belief in myth and folktales and old wives' tales and superstitions and religion. I thought what I would really love to do is to bring all these ways of telling stories together; [to] have a single event and see how it spins out in all the different ways that a story can be told. I want as many stories in this book as I can possibly squeeze in."

Besides the mystery of a corpse coming back to life, there is the question of who the little girl is. It transpires that three sets of people believe she may be related to them. Helena Vaughan, the distraught wife of wealthy landowner Antony Vaughan, thinks it may be her daughter Amelia, who was kidnapped (by river gypsies, is the common consensus) and never returned to her grieving parents despite a ransom being paid. Local farmer Robert Armstrong discovers a note which leads him to believe the girl could be Alice, the granddaughter he has never met because he is estranged from his wayward son. And, finally, Lily, a woman of indeterminate age who claims to be a widow, and says the child is Ann, her sister.

The roots of *Once Upon a River* lie far back in time. The idea that someone could die but then come back to life caught Setterfield's attention at a young age. She was around 10 years old when she read a story in a tabloid

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newspaper about a boy in the US who had seemingly drowned and come back to life. At the time, her younger sister was very ill, and the family was waiting for her to be physically big enough to undergo heart surgery. "So, maybe more than most children, death was something that was on my mind as a possibility," she says. "Much later, I found out the science behind it, which seemed no less miraculous than the [tabloid] version," and so she stowed the idea away in her mental index-card system as something that would be interesting to write about someday.

Decades later, following an exhausting worldwide tour to promote *The Thirteenth Tale*—she lived "out of a suitcase, on and off, for about a year"—she decided to take a holiday "to decompress" and walked the Thames Path, following the river for 184 miles from its source in the Cotswolds Hills. Over two weeks she walked through the riverside towns and villages that would later appear in the novel: Radcot, Buscot, Kelmscot.

### Joining the dots

Using those two central images (a child who comes back to life, and the river), Setterfield began work on the novel. She had her characters and a good amount of plotting done—"I weep over plot," she says, laughing—when she hit a stumbling block. "It's OK saying it's about a girl who comes back from the dead... but what ties it all together? It really bothered me that I'd got all this plot but [the novel would] just sprawl and go everywhere if I didn't have some kind of moral framework."

It was a significant breakthrough when she realised that at its heart *Once Upon a River* was "about loss and restoration. Everybody has lost something at the beginning and they've often lost more than they know they have lost. The Armstrongs, for instance, have lost their granddaughter but are also suffering the pain of losing their son, who is not the boy they thought he'd be. Everybody wants something back and everybody, in fact, is going to get something back... but they don't get back exactly what they lost. What is restored to them comes back in a different form: to me that was the invisible thread that held the book together."

Setterfield has a beautiful analogy to explain her thought process: "I think of the scenes as beads. There are lots of beads, and you can line them up next to each other and it looks just like a necklace. But until you've got that invisible thread you can't pick it up and wear it, because if you pick it up [the beads] will just scatter and go everywhere. You've got to have that thread, even though no one can see it."

### Metadata



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### Publication history

2006



#### The Thirteenth Tale

Orion, £6.99, pb.  
9781409147763

Setterfield's first novel, a gothic mystery, was made into a major BBC film starring Olivia Colman and Vanessa Redgrave. Biographer Margaret Lea is summoned by reclusive author Vida Winter, who relates the scandalous secrets of the Angelfield family: the beautiful and wilful Isabelle, and the feral twins Adeline and Emmeline.

**239,368 copies sold\***

2014



#### Bellman & Black

Orion, £6.99, pb.  
9781409128069

A Victorian ghost story about a man named William Bellman who, as a boy, commits a cruel act which will have terrible consequences. "Dark, atmospheric... and utterly riveting," said the *Daily Mail*.

**17,854 copies sold\***

\*Sales through Nielsen BookScan UK