

Interview with Marilia Piccone about “The Ice Baroness”

There is one real character in the novel, Frederic Tudor, the Ice King. Was it he who gave you the starting idea for your novel? What is real and what is fiction in “La baronessa del ghiaccio”?

My agent called me one day, asking whether I’ve ever heard of the Ice King from Boston. I already knew that before the era of fridges, ice was cut from frozen rivers and lakes. But to ship ice to India – as Tudor did -, losing sometimes more than half of the cargo on the way and still making a fortune, sounded completely absurd to me. And definitely like a story I wanted to tell. Even more when during the same phone call, my agent mentioned a coffee-table book they once had in the agency, about Russia in the 19th century. He still had one picture vividly in his mind, of a little boy harvesting ice on the frozen river Neva, and instantly, Grisha was popping up in my head. That was the initial spark from which I developed Katja’s and Grisha’s story.

To me, the characters in a novel are always real. I only have to find them in their fictional world, each an autonomous personality. Not unlike an archaeologist, it’s my job to dig out their biographies from their respective historical and cultural background. In the records, I couldn’t find a single reference for ice traders in Hamburg, I took a liberty with that. Though with its port and history of trade, Hamburg seemed a perfect base for this kind of business, besides having an interesting story to tell itself.

The ice is a character as well in your novel, alongside Katja and Grisha. I loved the definitions for the different sorts of ice at the beginning of each part and was very much interested in them. They seemed to me as an attempt to tell the reader the nuances of a character called ‘Ice’. Was that what you had in your mind?

I really like the notion of ice as a character of its own!

I wanted ice to be present throughout the whole novel. Not only within the story, but as some kind of undercurrent. We all have realized now that our planet as we know it will be unhinged if we don’t stop global warming which causes the ice caps and glaciers of the world to melt. But it was new to me that ice had been a driving force in the emergence of life on earth. That every raindrop was ice before it falls to the ground, and that the friction of ice crystals in the clouds causes thunder and lightning.

That was what I wanted to express: ice, seemingly so simple, so fragile and evanescent, is nothing less than a force of nature. Always present, always shaping our world, a fact we’re unaware most of the time.

Besides I was also under the impression that there was a subtle relation between the sort of ice introducing each section and the contents of the following section of the book- the clearest example is Diamond Ice for the last section which ends in a sparkling success. Was it a construction in my mind?

That was exactly my intention. I was fascinated by the many forms of ice described in glaciological literature, their names in different languages, they read like poetry to me. And I soon discovered some that were perfect leitmotifs for the different stages of the story I had in mind.

In another age Katja might have become a glaciologist like Smilla whom I thought of, while reading. The characters are different, the stories are miles apart, but was Smilla a sort of inspiration, together with Frederic Tudor, for your story?

Of course I also had to think of “Smilla’s sense of snow” while Katja’s character with her special gift was taking shape. I actually read the novel for the first time during an early stage of the manuscript, and I’m convinced the icy gush I felt while reading helped me to write the scenes set amidst of ice and snow. It literally gave me a taste of the Polar regions.

Definitely an inspiration from the start were Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Snow Queen” and “The Wild Swans”, which I’ve always loved since being a little girl. I wanted the novel to touch slightly on fairy tales like these, as my vision of the saga was that of a story anchored in the past but essentially being timeless.

The two main female characters, Katja and Henny, are one the opposite of the other. Henny seems to be there to make Katja stand out. Is Katja an anticipation of the ‘new’ woman of the 20th century?

When you look closely enough in history, you can always find women defying the odds of their era. But never before were there more than during the course of the 19th century, an era of great conservatism, but also of change and transformation.

Henny stands for what is familiar, for stability, Katja for the new and unknown. Together, they outline the contrary movements of these years.

Also the characters of the 4 men seem to make Katja stand out. All the 4 of them, Grisha, the two brothers and the expert of ice, have a flaw. And in an age where women count less than nothing, Katja is a shining exception.

What intrigued me in Katja's character is the fact that she doesn't fit into the stereotype of the rebellious girl. Headstrong right from the start, yes, but it doesn't occur to her that her life might take a different course other than remaining the handmaid of the family. She just clings to Grisha when he is about to leave the farmstead for good. But over time, his example, her experiences during their journey, and last but not least the impact of Silja and Johann encourage her to develop and pursue dreams of her own.

With her special gift and her knowledge of ice she is not only crucial for the success of the business. From the beginning, I've imagined her as the gravitational center in the relationships between the three men, conflicts included.

Silberberg- what a nice name for an ice expert- tells Christian that he is unable to distinguish among lust, love and friendship. In reality all the characters often seem not to know clearly what they feel. Is love as treacherous as ice?

I keep a list of unusual or beautiful names, in order to use them one day in a novel. And the moment I understood Katja would need some sort of mentor, teaching her all the scientific facts to base her business on, I knew Silberberg would be perfect.

When we say "ice", just as when we say "love", we usually imagine only one form, unaware that there are many more. We're convinced we know what ice – or love - looks like and how to handle it. To our surprise, we sooner or later learn that it is in fact somewhat different from what we expected. And both, ice and love, are nothing short of a miracle and too often taken for granted.

Up to now I have read only three of your books, but there is a journey in all of them. What is it that makes a journey- then and now, at whatever age - a turning point in our lives?

As different as my novels may be, a journey is definitely the red thread throughout my work so far.

A journey expands not only our outer limits but also the ones inside. In new surroundings, with unexpected encounters and experiences and challenges, we discover new sides within

ourselves - good ones or bad. Sometimes we even have to surpass ourselves. In any case, we will never come home the same person we were when we left.

I know that the sequel to “La Baronessa del Ghiaccio” has already been published in Germany. I was so curious that I read the summary hoping it would tell me something of what is going to happen next, but obviously it told me nothing. Without revealing too much, can you tell me what is in Katja’s future?

Success and failure, betrayal and heartbreak, love and marriage – not necessarily in that order. One of the biggest challenges Katja has to face is becoming a foster mother to Betje, a girl begging in the alleys of Hamburg. Abandoned by her parents because of her limp arm, Betje is full of anger and distrust and will even unknowingly bring mayhem into the lives of the four ice barons. Stormy years lie ahead, for all of them, and when Hamburg goes up in flames in 1842, everything is at stake – and a child is born that will play a major role in volume three of the saga. Which I’m currently writing on ...