

Exclusive Q&A with *The Secret Garden's* producer, Rosie Alison and Read Manchester



What do you find inspiring in the book?

I was always excited by the idea of a lonely and neglected child finding a secret place, hidden away, which is full of wonder and beauty. It's such a universal story because I think everybody can grasp that central idea of a lost secret place where you might open the door and suddenly everything is going to be sunlit and radiant and blossoming. We all want to find a hidden lost garden. We all have a sense of how inspiring and restorative nature can be. Finding your way to your lost inner haven is something everybody can relate to. As a child, I also really enjoyed the intrepid character of Mary, and the spooky mystery of Misselthwaite Manor: Mary exploring the neglected corridors, uncovering family secrets.

I've watched it and thought it was fab, a really great re-telling. Why was this story specifically chosen for the film re-make?

Well it's such a redemptive story - about renewal and hope and compassion, and finding connection, which is the kind of story we always want to tell at Heyday. It also has a very modern young heroine in the spirited Mary Lennox, and a wondrous setting (with the garden) which cries out for cinema. Of course there have been many film, TV and theatre versions of this. But the last film was nearly 30 years ago, and it feels worthwhile to try and keep this story fresh for a new generation to discover.

It's been our hope to try and make more subjective 'first person' account of the story, experienced through Mary's eyes. The boundaries between her imagination and the world around her are more fluid than in past versions.

We've also done more to emphasise the power of imagination which underpins the story. This is particularly true of our version of the garden. As seen through an imaginative child's eye, it appears more boundless and without edges. And it is a wilder garden (this speaks in part to our times, with the greater enthusiasm for re-wilding gardens.) Our garden has a more reciprocal, symbiotic relationship with the children: we wanted to suggest ways in the natural world can seem to echo or reflect their moods, and respond to them, as if imagination plays a greater part in their relationship to nature.

What character, if any, do you relate to in the film?

I always adored Mary Lennox. I know she is rude, entitled and insensitive at the start of the story, before the garden 'awakens' her and she begins to open her heart and learn compassion. But I always loved her feisty, intrepid spirit. And I was moved by her loneliness.

I do think of this as a story which speaks to children who feel lonely, or marginalised or disconnected. Which I know I did when I was young.

What does the concept of the Secret Garden mean to you?

In times of trouble and sadness, reconnecting with the healing power of nature, and finding a way to your own lost inner sanctum, for rejuvenation and renewal, is something we can all relate to, I hope. I certainly can.

For us, our bookstock within libraries represents a kind of secret garden for children to explore, and we're thinking of strengthening the theme now as we move forwards to our new version of the library, so it's proven very timely! Did you like reading as a child?

Yes, I loved reading as a child. And this was one of the books which hooked me in. Maybe in part because it always had beautiful pictures, and I found that picture books encouraged me into a story. Other childhood favourites included Susan Cooper, the Roald Dahl books, Paddington and Tintin. Also a child's abridged version of The Pilgrim's Progress - an amazing adventure and landscapes.

It is an honour to work at the library in the city that Frances Hodgson Burnett lived in. Have you ever been to Manchester Library?

I've never been to Manchester Library, alas. But I'm very aware of the formative importance of Manchester in Frances Hodgson Burnett's youth. In her memoir, she recalls a key moment in her childhood when she entered her very own 'secret garden' in an abandoned house near an industrial quarter of Victorian Manchester. It's a revelatory account of a small child who transforms a sooty wasteland through her imagination. She describes entering the lost, hidden garden of Page's Hall through a little green door in a high wall - and when she "passed through the enchanted door," the place was a wilderness of smuts and cinders and weeds. But she used her imagination to 'pretend' it was a glorious garden of flowers in bloom, and transformed it through her mind's eye. It seems to have been a defining moment both in seeding her great novel, but also in discovering her own talent as an imaginative storyteller.

The colours and the images of the garden were outstanding - was this something that you had a lot of input into?

From the outset, we knew how important it was to create a garden which could excite wonder and capture something of the spirit of nature. So yes, I was very involved in our garden's creation. We didn't want to 'reinvent nature' - we wanted to celebrate it with real gardens. Together with the director Marc Munden, designer Grant Montgomery, and a Location Scout Jeremy Levy, we travelled all over the UK looking at inspiring gardens which might evoke different aspects of the garden. Our filming odyssey then took us through Yorkshire, North Wales, the Forest of Dean, Cornwall, Somerset, Dorset and Hertfordshire. But we searched many more houses and gardens before reaching our final shortlist of filming locations. It was a joy and a privilege to work on this, and to go on the full journey to create a secret garden.

Another point particularly relevant for the present moment in time is the link to how we develop as people by interacting with others. I love the examination of other people's motives, e.g. Mary's mother and the link to her sister. How crucial a link do you see this as being?

Frances Hodgson Burnett herself encouraged people to read between the lines of her stories – in her own words, “between the lines of every story there is another story, and that is one that is never heard and can only be guessed at by the people who are good at guessing.” With that thought in mind, our adaptation delves further into some of Mary’s key relationships, such as with her deceased mother. We’ve tried to mine further into the mystery of family griefs blighting Misselthwaite; and the characters’ emotional hauntings through bereavement have become a ghost story in our film. It seemed to us perhaps strange that Mary would never give a thought to her dead parents, the source of her own pain. So we explored Mary's emotional haunting through a mix of memories and ‘ghosts’. We tapped more into the roots of the grief underlying the story (the spirit of grief in which the author wrote it, long after the trauma of losing her own son, together with her well-documented lifelong struggle with depression.) It is in part a story about damaged children learning to break cycles of inherited family grief in a house haunted by its past. Perhaps it became, for us, as much about Mary and Colin beginning to understand the mysterious frailties of their parents, as they build their own friendship. We tried to tease a connection between the growth of Mary’s imagination (awakened in part through the wondrous garden) and the growth of her empathy and understanding, which helps her to heal the disconnected Craven family.

What are your hopes for the 'take away' for those who watch this film?

We see this both as a children’s story but also a story about childhood. It’s a story which seems to affect children deeply, so I hope we reach some! It speaks in particular to children who might feel marginalised or lonely: Mary is such a singular and memorable creation, a difficult outsider who thaws and transforms as she finds her way to friendship, via the garden. She’s performed here with such spirit and nuance by Dixie Egerickx – who shines with all the astuteness of childhood which this story affirms. We hope our interpretation celebrates the power of both nature and imagination, and also the greater empathy which can grow through imagination. Above all, it’s a story of hope and renewal, something we all seem to need right now.

In this current climate, are there any lessons from The Secret Garden about how we should connect in today's increasingly online society?

Even a walk in a local park seems to lift people’s spirits. The Secret Garden encourages us not to lose our connection with the cycles of nature and the great outdoors, they are so vital to our wellbeing. It’s a simple and obvious message but one that can never be over-stated!