

COLBERT, VIVIAN WITH DUFFY, STELLA

**Theodora “Rewritten”: An Interview with the Author of
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ABSTRACT

In 2010 and 2012 Stella Duffy published her two historical novels about the Empress Theodora. As is the case for many other famous women of history, Theodora’s image has suffered a lot through her reception by men. However, Duffy’s novels take a different approach towards the character’s personality and are able to paint a new picture of a courageous and intelligent woman. This interview with the author offers a glimpse into the details of how she approached and created her Theodora.



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1. Introduction

In 2010 Stella Duffy published her first historical novel *Theodora – Actress, Empress, Whore* which only two years later, in 2012, was followed by its sequel *The Purple Shroud*. Both novels explore the life of Empress Theodora, the famous consort of Justinian I., who ruled over Byzantium during the 6th century. The critics celebrated the works by Stella Duffy: *The Guardian* described the first novel as a “rip-roaring ride”¹ and praised Duffy’s achievement in the second novel even more: “... Theodora is, in Duffy’s hands, a richly paradoxical character from whom the light of life shines brightly”.² As emphasised by these reviews, Duffy chose indeed a rich and interesting topic.

The first novel, *Theodora*, deals with the life of the protagonist before she became the infamous Empress of Byzantium. Duffy used a combination of extensive works by modern historians,³ combined with ancient sources, such as the *Secret History* by Procopius, as well as her own imagination and experience as a well-practised author of fiction. Not much is known about the ancient Empress Theodora. Procopius provided us with the most detailed information on her character, however, in context, it has to be considered as a highly subjective account. In his *Secret History* he portrays both Emperor Justinian and his wife as two highly immoral and gruesome characters. In doing so he refers to situations to which no documented source, nor living witness could have been privy to. This makes his whole account less credible to today’s scholars. However, it remains the most important source of information about Theodora; therefore, Duffy also took it into consideration whilst crafting her character. Just like contemporary historians, she made plenty of deductions from Procopius’s work and she also used her skills to create a rounded character of a young, clever girl growing into a strong-willed and intelligent woman. One aspect of the real Theodora’s life we can be sure about are the surroundings she grew up in.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/17/theodora-actress-empress-whore-duffy> (accessed 25 February 2019).

² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/20/the-purple-shroud-stella-duffy-review> (accessed 25 February 2019).

³ Browning 1987; Herrin 2001; Evans 2002; Cesaretti 2004 are among the works used by Stella Duffy. Also notable are more recent publications, as Pratsch 2011 and Potter 2015. Duffy’s novels are not the only works of reception of Theodora; throughout history her reception has been quite prominent in all kind of media, see Carlà 2013 and Carlà 2015.

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In her story Duffy made sure to include all the major sites that might have played an important role in the real Theodora's life and which can still be seen today; Theodora's journey starts at the Hippodrome, where she became a popular actress and a prostitute. In addition, she makes considerable use of the ancient Hagia Sophia by using it as a central location in the novel's landscape. The young protagonist develops a rather deep attachment to this church, which is picked up again in the second novel, *The Purple Shroud*, in which the church is burnt down during the Nika Riot (532 CE) and afterwards rebuilt by the imperial couple. Cornerstones such as these buildings and famous cities like Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch, which all played a part in Theodora's life, are skilfully used within the plot. It can be proven by the historical sources that Theodora had actually been at those locations, in Duffy's novel they also mark the spiritual journey her heroine undertook and that led her to become a believer of the faith of the Monophysite Christians – another aspect that is picked up again in *The Purple Shroud*.

The life of a married noblewoman of late antiquity would have mostly been confined to her house. The same was true for the empress herself, which provided Duffy with far fewer opportunities to use different locations and settings to aid the development of the character of Theodora, and her story. Duffy's sequel about Theodora also excels by providing an idea of the protagonist's intelligent, and in many ways independent character. Once more, the misogynistic facts that Procopius offered are turned against him by underlining Theodora's strength instead. *The Purple Shroud*, which was named after a phrase used by Theodora in her famous speech recounted by Procopius,⁴ is a story of a brave and clever woman who knew how to handle the power she accessed, not for the sake of being powerful but instead with the ambition to be a wise consort to the emperor. *Publishers Weekly* very eloquently described Theodora as "... a portrait of a woman who rose from misfortune and poverty to build an empire alongside a devoted husband",⁵ the same can be said about *The Purple Shroud*, which explores the relationship between Theodora and Justinian in even more depth. The said relationship of the imperial couple shown by Duffy is one of love between

⁴ Procop., *B.* 1.24. Theodora refers to preferring being buried in her purple gown (which was only worn by the imperial couple) rather than fleeing from the riot.

⁵ <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-14-311987-6> (accessed 25 February 2019).

two people who found their intellectual partner in each other. Politics, religion and social status remain ever present clouds hovering over the storyline, reaching the occasional peaks. One of them is the Nika Riot that erupted during Justinian's reign. When the Emperor found himself cornered and was about to order his court to flee, Theodora steps up. Her experience of the stage and skills as an actress help her to deliver her iconic speech, that can be traced back to her contemporary sources, even Procopius himself. Theodora's courage and wisdom inspire her husband to face the agitators instead of running away and thus it was Theodora herself who actively shaped history. The character's journey ends where Duffy first "met" the ancient empress: soon after her death in the novel, an artist finished her mosaic in the church of Ravenna. To this date, it remains the most famous – and probably the only – of Theodora's contemporary portraits.

Stella Duffy's name has already been well established among authors of literature. Most of her novels can be attributed to the genres of crime and contemporary fiction. *Theodora* was her first historical novel; after finishing *The Purple Shroud* she has only published one more historical fiction to date (*London Lies Beneath*, 2016). Apart from being an author, Duffy has also worked as a theatre director as well as performed herself, for example as a member of an improvisational theatre group. Furthermore, she is very active in campaigning for LGBTQ, women's and arts equality issues.⁶ For her Services to the Arts she has been honoured with an OBE in The Queen's Birthday Honours 2016.

In one of their reviews *The Independent* stated rightfully, that "Duffy has carefully followed the history of this woman but has achieved something much more: the creation for her heroine of a real inner life, which is the most affecting achievement of a historical novel".⁷ Although historical fiction remains first and foremost that, fiction, the two novels depicting Theodora's life prove the quality and insight we obtain through the modern reception of historical questions. Just like a historian, an author of historical fiction has to engage in research and its results to construct a

⁶ For further information about Stella Duffy's biography and (writing) projects see her official online blog: <https://stelladuffy.blog/> (accessed 25 February 2019).

⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/theodora-actress-empress-whore-by-stella-duffy-2048872.html> (accessed 25 February 2019)

narrative for their topic. In 2017 Stella Duffy generously agreed to a short interview regarding her novels on Theodora, which provide a more detailed insight into how exactly a non-historian might work with historical contents.

Vivian Colbert: What inspired you in the first place to write about the Empress Theodora?

Stella Duffy: I had been invited to a book festival in Ravenna and I went to see the chapel there where I saw the mosaics of Justinian and Theodora. I didn't know a great deal about either of these people and was stuck by the size of Theodora's mosaic – the same size and shape as that of her husband. This made me think that Theodora must have been hugely important in her own time, to be given such prominence. There was very little information about her at the chapel itself, just a small pamphlet.

When I returned to England I started researching more into her life. It was clear that there are two common angles from which Theodora is perceived today: one is based on *The Secret History* by Procopius, a contemporary of Theodora. It is the only source from that time and makes her out to be a monster – in the classic 'evil ambitious woman' mode; the second one is a more critical and modern reception by historians portraying her as a 'woman of her time'.

The difference in the two approaches and what I understood about her life interested me and, aware there was little about her in fiction I chose to write my own – fictionalised – accounts of her life. These two novels are my eleventh and twelfth novels, but my first historical works.

VC: How did you proceed in transforming the idea into fiction? What methods of research did you use?

SD: I did a lot of reading, dozens of books about the period and about Theodora. Paolo Cesaretti's *Theodora: Empress of Byzantium* was very useful,⁸ as was *The Secret History* by Procopius – the latter primarily for what I discarded. The biggest task was to fill in the gaps, to try and figure out what her character might have been doing during those periods, for which neither research literature nor primary sources provided information.

⁸ Cesaretti 2004.

However, research only provided a framework for her character, it was my work to give her depth, a real personality. As a performer and theatre-maker, my experience on and off stage helped me immensely when it came to creating that real psychology for Theodora. As writers, we can only ever write from ourselves, so whether we feel our lives are connected to our characters or not, our own experience is always the filter through which we write.

VC: By creating the fictional character of the empress, did you have any aim? How did you want your Theodora to be perceived by the readers?

SD: When writing the first of the two novels I wanted to consider Theodora's development; how she went from a little girl growing up on stage, into a woman who, like most women actors of her time also worked as a prostitute, and suddenly was offered a chance to change her life, taking a new path that let her to Justinian and her future as Empress of Rome. Explaining how she became a woman who would be remembered by history. It was also important to show how intelligent she must have been, it was more than luck that led her through life. It was vital to emphasise this part of her character just as much as the importance of love and explore what the character's personal concept of love might have been like.

The second novel *The Purple Shroud* was more difficult because in this story, Theodora is already the Empress, which means the setting is more limited. The action mainly takes place in the palace, Theodora could not travel as much as she did in the first novel, which means interactions become more limited, more internal, and while there were major events that also happened in the palace and the city, the stronger action is personal, towards her death.

VC: Is it easier to write about a completely fictional character or one who actually existed and offers a framework to work with?

SD: Even though research was helpful when it came to creating a fictional Theodora it made the actual writing process more complicated in many ways, which is why doing too much research can actually be difficult for a fiction writer. Knowing so much of the factual story made it difficult to get into the narrative flow of the novel at first, which is a problem because I was writing fiction and like most fiction the core and impetus needs to be

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based on character, it is usually character that pulls us through a story and therefore – whatever the ‘facts’ (and all history is subjective anyway) – the character must be enticing and engaging.

I chose not to specifically focus the many wars that took place during Theodora’s lifetime, since that would have meant adding even more facts, narrowing the possible storylines. Also, by excluding the wars fought by Emperor Justinian, I distanced myself from studying more one-sided reports. As we know, history is always written by the conqueror.

VC: Faith and religion play an important part, after Theodora’s experience in the desert. How did you work out a possible way of how she experienced her epiphany? As far as I am aware not even Procopius offers a theory.

SD: Those experiences Theodora had are, in part, based on my own understanding of faith. I am a Buddhist and the experiences I made when I found Buddhism helped me in figuring out what the character might have been going through. The faith experiences of people close to me also helped me in that regard, as well as life in general.

VC: Also, the Hagia Sophia plays a central part in Theodora’s life – what inspired you to make that decision?

SD: The Hagia Sophia is a fascinating and multi layered building. It played an important role in Theodora’s story; the church burned down during the Nika riots and was rebuilt by order of Emperor Justinian – the story is that he wanted it to be rebuilt for his wife. The architecture of this new church influenced that of the entire Christian East of that time. I went to Istanbul to get a better impression of the city Theodora lived in and seeing Hagia Sophia now, I imagined the church must have appeared to be rising from its own ashes like a phoenix when it was rebuilt after the Nika riots.

Even though the church has been altered through the course of history and no longer looks the same as it did in Theodora’s time, it is still an impressive and magnificent building and it gives us an idea of what it might have been like for Theodora to see such a striking building, the sense is still comparable. Although many things have changed, one thing remains: the

sun still rises and illuminates the church in the exact way it did for Theodora.

VC: I was particularly delighted to see Theodora having a romantic relationship with Macedonia. Was that a choice you made based on any hints by sources or historians?

SD: I believe that a novel can only be realistic if it reflects variety in its characters. Complexity is normal in society, always has been since humans started to exist. More importantly, a range of characters reflects the readers' own world and allows them to identify with the story.

Macedonia is also mentioned by sources and literature. In my story I turned her into a 'spy' who is working for the patriarch Timothy. When she and Theodora meet, Theodora has just been through her spiritual journey, which also distanced her from her life as a prostitute. I have known several women who worked as prostitutes and afterwards felt disturbed or disengaged from men, more drawn to women, so Theodora developing feelings for a woman seemed to be plausible.

VC: The "little" decisions you made, what were they based on? (e.g. the relationship with her own mother and daughter; the character of Theodora's best friend Sophia; her relationship with Macedonia and with Anthemius)

SD: I tried to find logical explanations for some of the gaps that were not covered in the research – as well as creating elements that make sense for a character or narrative point of view. For example, Theodora's father was a bear keeper, which is a dangerous occupation, so it seems reasonable to assume he might have died while working with his bears. When it came to the relationships within Theodora's family, I considered my own life experiences and that of other families I know. In general it comes down to working with situations and feelings that are common to all of us, allowing everyone to relate to what the characters are going through – the sense of being an outsider, for example, which Theodora has very strongly, is actually very common and most of us feel it at one time or another.

One major difference between writing a novel and non-fiction is creating new characters who can become the protagonist's allies, as in the case of Sophia. I chose to make Sophia a small person, because again it

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reflects the variety and complexity of the readers' world. Along with multiculturalism, these aspects are highly important in also helping the readers and thus the world to grow – not least because Constantinople at the time was full of refugees and asylum seekers and the population was hugely mixed.

Sophia in particular was very important when it came to writing about the Nika riots in the second novel. Her death during the riot helped me to create an impetus for Theodora's famous Nika speech and emphasise its impact. The boys who caused the fire that burned down the Hagia Sophia also supported that story arc and are based on any young people, just as in our time, who might unknowingly instigate a major crisis out of seemingly innocuous actions.

VC: Thank you.

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