

IN CONVERSATION: Sarah Henstra

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Interview by Melanie J. Fishbane

Mad Miss Mimic, Sarah Henstra's new novel for young adults, is a gorgeous combination of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Libba Bray's A Great and Terrible Beauty. The novel is set amidst the rise of opium use in 19th-century London, with gangs battling to control the drug trade. It imbues the flavour of the Victorian period, while still maintaining a modern tone. Below, author Melanie J. Fishbane interviews Henstra about the book, and about its roots in classic children's literature.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

MJF: The voice of Leo, the young heiress with a gift for mimicry, has the flavour and language of the Victorian period, but still maintains a "modern" feel. What questions emerged while you were fine-tuning her voice?

SH: I worked really hard to get Leo's narrative voice right and to keep track of how it changed over the course of her telling her story. I do read (and teach) a lot of nineteenth-century fiction, so creating a pseudo-Victorian syntax and vocabulary in the novel wasn't a problem. The bigger challenge was finding the right "mood" for Leo's voice, especially in the opening scenes. I tried to balance Leo's initial melancholy with more energetic moments, such as her rapport with cousin Archie, but on the whole I aimed for an elegant, dignified, serious and reflective narrative voice to contrast the varied and colourful voices she mimics.

MJF: In your "Author's Note," you discuss your research into the life of an upper class young woman in the 1870s, as well as speech disorders and opiate addictions. What emerged first: the idea of taking an upper class woman out of what would be "typical" situations, or these unusual reasons? How did your research inform your fiction?

SH: Actually, Tom Rampling, the lockpicker, came first. I had this idea of a street-smart, lower class boy who knows all about locks and clockworks and gadgets, and I wondered what would ever bring someone like him into contact with a "lady" like Leo. It was in the process of fantasizing the relationship between these two protagonists that the rest of the characters and plot elements emerged.

The Black Glove gang's attacks and Dr. Dewhurst's secret experiments are a mystery that Leo and Tom solve together over the course of the story. This is Leo's "external" journey, but I also wanted her to undertake an "internal" journey, and that's where the stuttering and mimicry elements of the story came in.

MJF: One of the themes in your novel focuses on the idea of freedom and (in Leo's case) literally speaking one's truth. Every character (even Leo's upper class suitor, Francis Thornfax) is stuck in a role that is predetermined either by gender or class. Yet other characters, such as Aunt Emma, seem to have found a way around this within the context of the period. How did you navigate this fine line for a YA audience?

SH: Freedom definitely has a lot to do with voice and self-expression in the novel, but it's also closely tied to the question of matrimony. I am curious about the marriage contract as a regulatory tool in society. Along with such "modern" institutions as medicine and law in the nineteenth century, marriage was a way of containing and regulating women's sexuality and public deportment, as well as stabilizing the economies of property and childrearing. Leo initially sees marriage as a route to freedom from her sister's (and by extension, society's) scrutiny and censure, but along the way she realizes that marriage—at least to Mr. Thornfax—is a trap. She has to abandon her romantic hopes of being saved from her plight, and the turning point of the story occurs when she makes the scary decision to risk her fiancé's bad opinion by going out to spy on him and figure things out for herself.

MJF: Leo has a very special connection with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. There are even scenes reminiscent of the classic, such as the Mad Hatter's tea party and Leo and Francis Thornfax's engagement party. Can you speak to these connections?

SH: I really like your comparison of the engagement party to the Mad Hatter's tea party! Leo's discovery of the truth turns her whole world upside down, yet everyone around her continues to act as if everything is normal. So yes, she feels like she's fallen down the rabbit hole! I've always been a huge fan of the way Lewis Carroll used nonsense to engage in social critique (e.g., of the English school system and rote learning) as well as for the sheer delight of it. When I discovered that Carroll had a severe stutter, some of his writings took on new meaning for me. *Alice in Wonderland* not only offers Leo a fictional heroine with whom to identify, but it also represents a way for Leo to see past her own speech limitations and the social injunction for young ladies to be strictly literal and sincere.

MJF: Can we talk about Tom Rampling? He's got a criminal past, yet you make us adore him with his complete appreciation of Leo and sensitivity. How did you approach his character to make him worthy of Leo?

SH: Tom's dubious parentage and shoddy upbringing mean that he has no status in society—yet of all the male characters in the novel, he's the closest we get to a true Gentleman in the traditional literary sense. His actions are driven by higher ideals: duty, honor, honesty, and charity. Though he's ambitious, his goal isn't personal wealth or advancement but to provide for his family and to create beautiful things (music boxes). And like a true gentleman he represses his true feelings and thoughts for most of the novel. What's not to adore?

MJF: Leo's relationship with Mimic is much like struggling with an addiction or illness. At times, Mimic does take over as a character—as if she is a real person. What were some of the questions that emerged while trying to define Mimic's particular—charms? Were there any "voices" that you enjoyed playing in?

SH: For me the thrill of those scenes when Mimic busts loose is less about which voice Leo uses and more about the powerful effect she can achieve on her listener(s) via her mimicry. I particularly enjoyed writing the moments when Mimic pierces through Tom’s gentlemanly reserve (there are a few of these!).

I hadn’t thought about Mimic as a mental health issue in the contemporary sense, although in the novel that’s certainly how others regard Leo’s mimicry. Because she can’t control *when* she falls into mimicry or *whose* voice she imitates, people assume she’s the victim either of haunting or hysteria (thus the name “Mad Miss Mimic”). Personally, I see Mimic as a kind of adaptive strategy that Leo has invented to cope with her stuttering, a performative workaround that allows her to express something, *anything*, when she’s tongue-tied. It’s not a perfect strategy, of course; it gets her into all kinds of social trouble. But the people who truly care about Leo as a person—Aunt Emma, Archie, and eventually Tom—are also the ones least bothered by her mimicry. And it was an important point for me that in the end, it’s not that Mimic disappears or is banished but the opposite: Leo’s mimicry skills extend to her “own” voice, too, so that she can perform her own identity (stutter-free) and take on other roles interchangeably.

Sarah Henstra is a professor of English at Ryerson University, where she teaches courses in gothic literature, fairy tales, creative writing, and women in fiction. She lives in Toronto with her husband, two sons (one teen, one tween) and a poodle named Nora. *Mad Miss Mimic* is her first novel.