

Interview with Michelle Shine: Homeopath and Author of *Mesmerised* (A Novel about the French Impressionist Artist -Dr. Paul Gachet). (First Part).

It was in the ladies' changing room at the gym that I first got chatting to Michelle, a dark haired woman in her middle years. I was struck by her integrity and sincerity. Later, someone pointed out to me that she was a homeopath. I was curious to meet a fellow homeopath in such an unlikely place and launched into deeper conversation with her when we next met. I learnt she was also a writer. The reader may be familiar with her textbook *What About the Potency?* She told me that she has written a novel about Dr. Paul Gachet - I remembered a famous painting by van Gogh called *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, but knew nothing else about him. It was obvious from the way she spoke that she was passionate about her subject and she infused me with such a keen interest that I felt inspired to invite her to be interviewed for HIP. We discussed the book, and a little about her life, over glasses of purple-berried fruit juice in the gym café. It has been a privilege. Michelle is a gracious writer with a keen talent. Below is the first part of our conversation. The second part will feature in the next edition of the journal.

E. I understand you were a practising homeopath for twenty years and then you gave it up to focus on your writing. Is that correct?

M. Kind of, but it was circumstances that forced the decision. In July 2009, my husband passed away and I did not have the emotional capacity to continue practising, so I took on a locum. After a few months I had to make a definite decision. I was still paying for my rooms in a serviced office block as well as a remote receptionist. I couldn't afford to continue doing that unless I went back to work. I wasn't ready, so I gave it all up.

I'd already completed the first year of a Masters in Creative Writing at Birkbeck University, and deferred the final year, but I went back to attending my critiquing group after only a few months of grieving, with the wonderful Nomads - fellow writers and students. When I returned, they had all begun working on their debut novels and cajoled me into starting mine.

I had an idea for a plot and made several attempts at writing a contemporary story about a modern-day homeopath, but the idea didn't seem to want to fly off the page. Several years previously, I'd read, *The Homeopathic Revolution* by Dana Ullman and became fascinated by Dr. Paul Gachet, artist, friend and homeopath to many of the Impressionists, and the subject of one of the most expensive paintings in the world, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* by Vincent van Gogh. I found myself casually researching him for years and, one morning, woke up with the idea of transporting said plot to his world in mid-nineteenth century Paris.

E. I was recently reading an article about the writer, Alice Walker. When questioned about her writing, she is quoted as saying 'It's often like following the thread of Ariadne, you never know which minotaur you're going to find. But you often find one - or two or three!' Can you relate to this in your case?

M. In Greek mythology a minotaur is a monster. My take on characters is that everyone is the hero in their own story and as a writer, I believe it is vital to remain sensitive to that premise, whoever they happen to be.

E. That is very generous of you. Can you tell me a little bit about your research for this book?

M. Yes, as I mentioned previously, it all started with reading *The Homeopathic Revolution* by Dana Ullman, a book that lists all the famous people who have used homeopathy

through the years. I became interested in the fact that the Impressionists used homeopathy and started to seek out any information I could about their physician, Dr. Gachet.

I began by scanning the internet and what struck me immediately was how the French webpages venerated Dr. Gachet, whilst anything written by an Englishman was of the opinion that he was a cheat and a fraudster, which is interesting when you consider the way homeopathy is treated here as opposed to the way it is embraced in France.

E. Why do you think the English are so scathing about Dr. Gachet in their write-ups on the net?

M. You have to remember that none of the Impressionists were revered as they are now. Most of them found it difficult to make ends meet and few sold many paintings at all during their whole lifetime. Giving Dr. Gachet a painting was the way that they paid for their homeopathic treatment, when he died many of these paintings came to light. His children wanted to sell them. The English question his right to ownership of these works and they denigrate the medicine he used to cure Alfred Pissarro, the brother of Camille Pissarro when the allopaths failed to heal him. Dr. Gachet and homeopathy saved his life.

One evening I stumbled upon a programme on Sky Arts about Edouard Manet and in particular, the painting *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*. It's such an extraordinary image of two clothed men sitting on the grass in the company of a naked woman who is looking, not at them, but challenging the onlooker with her stare. It is enigmatic like the man who painted it.

This set me on another journey, to find out as much as I could about Manet. I read several biographies but *Rebel in a Frock Coat* by Beth Archer Brombert was the one that influenced me most.

Consequently, *Mesmerised* (the title of my book) features Edouard Manet as one of the main characters, and attempts to unravel some of the mysteries that surround him. *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* also features in the book.

E. Can you tell me some more about your research?

M. Yes. Whilst I was writing the book I went to Paris many times, walked the streets Gachet walked, went to visit the place that he lived, and where Manet lived, and where Victorine Meurent lived, the model Edouard used in the aforementioned painting. I hung out in Montmatre, Pigalle, and the Boulevard des Italiens where many of the cafés were situated. I visited the hospital La Salpêtrière where Gachet worked, as well as museums and galleries, especially the Musee D'Orsay which exhibits a wealth of Impressionist art. I also visited the Louvre, where the Impressionists would copy-sketch Michaelangelo's and other magnificent works of their forebears.

It's strange because I'd actually written many scenes in locations that I hadn't seen before and was convinced that I'd have to re-write some of them, maybe even all of them, to add authenticity to the sense of place. But, what was so amazing was that I didn't have to re-write any of them. I discovered that everywhere I went was exactly as I imagined it to be, even down to a tree in the grounds of Salpêtrière, which I've nicknamed 'Gachet's tree'. When you read the book, you'll recognise it.

E. What is your impression of Dr. Gachet as an artist?

M. He is not considered by connoisseurs to be as great as his peers: Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Paul Cezanne, Henri Fantain-Latour, I could go on. However, he did have work exhibited at the Salon at one time and one of his paintings hangs in the Musee d'Orsay. His

house in Auvers, where he entertained Cezanne and treated van Gogh before he shot himself, is open to the public, and many of his paintings hang there too.

E. On another note, would you like the book to be translated into French, or even a film to be made of the book, or are those ideas too ambitious?

M. I would love that, yes.

E. Tell me about your writing discipline.

M. When I wrote this particular book, my writing was my lifeline. It's how I survived my grief. I had pictures of all the artists, photos of many of the places and an old map of Paris in a collage on a wall in my study. I had a whole stream of notes pinned to my desk. Apart from going to the gym to swim every day, I lived, slept, ate, and breathed this book. I became Dr. Gachet. His life as I've depicted it - which was not without misadventure - was much more seductive than my own. Consequently, I wrote the first draft in six months.

E. I would like to enquire about the title of the book. I find it quite compelling.

M. The book's working title was *The Medical Detective*, chosen because the homeopath's role is to investigate each case in search of a curative remedy, like a detective but hunting for a cure. The title was misleading because it suggested a crime detective novel which is a completely different genre. *Mesmerised* came about because Dr Charcot practised hypnotism at La Salpêtrière and this had an affect on Gachet. He mentions the word 'mesmerised' several times throughout the book.

E. I consider you have been 'mesmerised' by the topic since writing this book.

M. Yes, and It would be wonderful to think that others might be 'mesmerised' by it too!

E. Tell me about your visit to the Manet exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art in London. I understand you went there recently.

M. As soon as I walked in there was this enormous portraiture of many of the artists I had written about in the book. It felt like these men, who I had spent so much time with in my imagination, were welcoming me in and that was a very emotional experience for me. And the exhibition was wonderful. Immersing myself in Manet's work brings me joy. I stayed there for hours and I would have gone back there every day if only I had the time.

E. You draw a comparison between homeopathy and Impressionist art in the book. Please expand on this?

M. At the time, both were rebellious. They both challenged old and accepted ways that were contrived in favour of attempting to mirror the true nature of what they saw before them.

E. Thank you so much. I look forward to continuing our conversation.

M. Thank you.