

Vanessa Diffenbaugh Interview

Where an ordinary person sees a flower bouquet, you see emotions and reactions. When did you become interested in translating the Victorian language of flowers?

I've always loved the language of flowers. I discovered Kate Greenaway's *Language of Flowers* in a used bookstore when I was 16, and couldn't believe it was such a well-kept secret. How could something so beautiful and romantic be virtually unknown? I began to write poetry (terrible poetry!), and I occasionally translated my poems into flowers. I gave my high school boyfriend a poem on Valentine's Day that consisted of dozens of flowers attached to a long piece of twine and interspersed with single words, in the same way Elizabeth sends messages to Catherine in her youth. I don't write floral poetry anymore, but when I give someone flowers (which is often) I choose them carefully. Once I learned the language of flowers I could never look at a bouquet in the same way again.

I send you, virtually, the hugest bouquet of Lisianthus for this book. I think it's an inspiring reading for a teenager girl but also for an adult woman. Have you had in mind any "portrait" of your reader?

I did, actually. I thought I would like to write for smart, thoughtful women that love to read. I wanted to write a book that was well written but hard to put down. I have fans in every age group, from teenagers to great-grandmothers, and I love this.

I know that *The Language of the Flowers* is your debut novel. How did you become involved in writing fiction?

I have wanted to be a writer ever since I was a small child. I started writing seriously after my biological children were born. I was home full time with my babies (ages newborn and 16 months) and my foster teenagers (ages 15 and 17) and though I was very busy caring for children, I found I had plenty of mental space to think and write.

For how long did you research for this book?

It took about a year and a half to write and research the book. research process was very similar to Victoria's: I went to the library, I went to used and new bookstores, I gathered all the flower dictionaries I could find and spread them out on the dining room table. Then, like Victoria, I compared the definitions in each

dictionary and choose the one I thought best fit the biology of the plant, or, on the rare occasions I couldn't find a connection to biology or poetry or literature or history, I just picked the definition I liked best!

You put in this book your experience as a teenager looking for answers related to adulthood, as a mother and as a foster parent. But what was the sparkle that led you to write it?

When I started writing *The Language of Flowers*, it was because I wanted to try to understand what it feels like to be inside the head of someone who has never been loved and does not know how to love or to attach. I had been working with young people in foster care for many years, and I began to wonder what it would feel like to go through life without love as your guiding star. You see for me, every decision I've ever made in my life has had something to do with love: looking for it, earning it, or trying to keep it. But for many young people who grow up without a family, everyday decisions are made without love as a factor. It was this psychological orientation that I wanted to explore in my novel.

This book is Victoria's journey from a troubled childhood to an adult age that has to be different for her to survive. It's the fictional story of a social phenomenon - the foster parents and solitary children, and I know you have much to say on this, as founder of Camellia Network.

Yes, I am very proud of the work we are doing at Camellia Network. Our mission is to activate networks of citizens in every community to provide the critical support young people need to transition from foster care to adulthood. We do through three pillars of service: fulfilling registries, making connections, and forming communities.

We are the only national non-profit engaging citizen donors and social networks to support young people aging out of care. There has been interest from the UK (where the foster care system is very similar to ours) and in other European countries, but right now we are focusing on establishing our network in the United States.

You are a foster mom. What is your relationship with your foster son and which are the ingredients of your good partnership?

One of the keys to my success with Tre'ven was the dedication I had to making sure he was able to see his biological mother, and respecting the bond that they shared. His mother and I developed a wonderful relationship and he never had to feel like there was competition or issues of loyalty between us. We were each

able to support him in different ways, and he was able to really thrive because of it.

What is your history as a foster mom? (I ask because we have a different system in Romania and I want people to understand how demanding and how difficult it is to become a foster parent).

My husband and I have been involved with foster youth since our early twenties. Right out of college we spent weekends mentoring a family of young girls in East Palo Alto, California. We knew their mother had a drug problem—but being young and inexperienced, we didn't understand the extent of her addiction nor did we catch the signs of an escalating situation. Then, one Sunday afternoon when we went to bring the girls home, their mother had disappeared and we had to take them to the county offices where they entered foster care. This experience changed our lives forever. My husband and I vowed that after we married and settled down we would become foster parents—a vow we kept and one that has enriched our lives greatly. Our son Tre'veon came to us his freshman year in high school and stayed with us until we dropped him off at NYU last fall. Donovan never lived with us, but became part of our family when he turned eighteen and found himself suddenly with nowhere to go. He now comes home to stay with us when he is on vacation from the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, where he is training to be a weight lifter.

Victoria is a strong character, her feelings and reactions are very realistic. How did you “build” her?

People often ask me if I drew inspiration for the character of Victoria from our foster son Tre'veon, but Victoria is about as different from Tre'veon as two people could ever be. Tre'veon's strength is his openness—he has a quick smile, a big heart, and a social grace that puts everyone around him at ease. At fourteen, running away from home barefoot on a cold January night, he had the wisdom and sense of self-preservation to knock on the door of the nearest fire station. When he was placed in foster care, he immediately began to reach out to his teachers and his principal, creating around himself a protective community of love and support. Victoria is clearly different. She is angry and afraid, yet desperately hopeful; qualities I saw in many of the young people I worked with throughout the years. Though Victoria is entirely fictional, I did draw inspiration in bits and pieces from foster children I have known. One young woman in particular, who my husband and I mentored many years ago, was fiery and focused and distrusting and unpredictable in a manner similar to Victoria. Her history was intense: a number on her birth certificate where a name should have been; more foster homes than she could count. Still, she was resilient, beautiful, smart, and funny. We loved her completely, and she did her best to sabotage it,

over and over again. To this day my husband and I regret that we couldn't find a way to connect with her and become the stable parents she deserved.

Why is the language of flowers so important in Victoria's re-connection with the world and people around?

After Victoria receives mistletoe ("I surmount all obstacles") from the mysterious flower vendor, she lies in the comfort of the empty flower shop, thinking about the meaning of the flower she has been given. In this moment it becomes clear to her that the language of flowers has become an obsession of hers not only because it is her last remaining connection to Elizabeth—the person who loved her the most—but also because speaking in a language that no one understands is emotionally safe. Passion, connection, disagreement, rejection—none of these are possible in a language that does not elicit a response. By choosing to continue her conversation with the flower vendor, Victoria is choosing to open herself up to an entire range of emotions and experiences she has to this point spent years protecting herself from.

Victoria meets Elizabeth, her mirror-personality, they connect and communicate, but they can't live together. How hard is it for a foster parent to reach to a strange and estranged child's soul?

Very hard. My husband I had a similar experience with a young woman. She was sixteen when we met her, and we wanted to adopt her, but she was distrusting and unpredictable and extremely hard to get to know. Her history was intense: a number on her birth certificate where a name should have been; more foster homes than she could count. Still, she was resilient, beautiful, smart, and funny. We loved her completely, and she did her best to sabotage it, over and over again. To this day my husband and I regret that we couldn't find a way to connect with her and become the stable parents she deserved.

Grant is Victoria's best secret – she opens to others because of him, she chooses to be a mother instead of a wanderer because of him, she makes peace with Elizabeth because of him. How far can love take us?

Very far! As I mentioned, I started this book thinking about attachment disorder, and love and attachment of any kind—romantic included, is one of the best ways to overcome a attachment disorder. Learning to securely attach at any time in one's life—to a caregiver (as Victoria does with Elizabeth), or even to a partner (as Victoria does with Grant)—has the ability to "rewire" circuits in the brain. This is hopeful research for those like Victoria who are determined to overcome the trauma they have experienced and to learn to love themselves and others.

“As a foster care survivor, I feel a kinship with Victoria Jones as she battles loss and risk and her own thorny demons to find redemption”, said the writer Paula McLain, author of *The Paris Wife*. Have you expected or dreamed of the huge success of your *début* novel?

It has taken me some time just to get over the shock! When you are writing your first book, people tell you over and over again how hard it is to sell a novel. They recite statistics of how many authors ever find agents (I’ve heard 2%! No idea if this is true) and tell you that even if you do sell your book you’ll never be able to “make it” financially as a writer. But I did sell my book, and now people all over the world are reading and responding to it. It is very humbling to have created a story that has touched so many people from such vastly different worlds and experiences.

You made your own language of flowers dictionary. Which flowers describe you the best, and which flowers would you associate to your husband and your children?

If I could make a bouquet for our family it would be: ! If I could make a bouquet I would choose: Heliotrope (*devoted affection*), Black-Eyed Susan (*justice*), Hawthorn (*hope*), Liatris (*I will try again*), Lisianthus (*appreciation*), and Moss (*maternal love*). These flowers represent how we am—devoted, affectionate, focused on family, and grateful—and also how I want to be—hopeful, determined, and constantly working for justice.

The success of your book brought you many encounters with readers from Europe and US. Please share with us some of the most touching moments of your book promotion tours.

At a reading in California a ninety-year old woman came up to me and said that she had driven three hours in order to meet me and talk to me about her book. She had spent her childhood in the system and she had never read anything that described the emotional experience so accurately—this was the best compliment I have ever received.

You’re a very busy woman, so I have to ask you: what do you do when you want to relax, to pamper yourself or to spend some time just for you?

My favorite thing is to get a massage and then go out on a date with my husband.