

Deborah Harkness Opens Book Of Life, Ends Trilogy

By Jedd Beaudoin/Published 1 June 2015

When Deborah Harkness's first novel, *A Discovery of Witches*, appeared in 2011 it met with almost universal critical acclaim. The roar over her charming characters and playful narratives hasn't died down just yet, even as the final installment of the trilogy has now entered the paperback market. The story has so far lived beyond what its author could have expected, especially since she first suspected that she was really only writing one book.

"I hit about page 422 of the beginning and realized it wasn't all going to fit in one binding," she says. "And that was when I realized it was probably beginning, middle, end, book one, book two, book three. I think it would have been quite terrifying if I didn't have a fixed endpoint."

Fixed endpoint or not Harkness couldn't have predicted what would have happened to the books upon their publication. With witches, vampires, time travel and the like, the novels filled a certain void in the market—smart, literary, fantasy for adults that expanded the parameters of genre fiction. But the major elements of the story might have looked a little too familiar to some.

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"People had a certain amount of vampire fatigue when the books came out. The publisher was enormously supportive, and the early readings from booksellers was enormously supportive, so that gave me a real boost of confidence," she says. "But, in the end, none of us ever knows what's going to happen when the book is released—whether the public is going to embrace it. And I was very fortunate that the readers really responded so positively."

Some might say that it was Harkness' playfulness and humor—the fact that books didn't take themselves too seriously—that account for a major portion of their success. Harkness herself felt it was of utmost importance that the books were as fun to read as possible.

"For me life requires a balance of tears and laughter. I wanted these books to feel very real. I didn't want adults to feel challenged because I think that sometimes it's harder for us as grown-ups to throw all of our notions out and be able to fall into a world of fantasy easily," she says. "So I really wanted it to ring true and to feel real, like you might actually know someone who is a demon or a vampire or a witch. Maybe this explained a lot about your neighbor. And humor was a huge part of that because most of us can't get away, in life, with taking ourselves too seriously all the time."

Like many authors, Harkness came to inhabit the world of her characters and she says that even though she knew from the start where the story was going and that it had to come to an end, it wasn't any easier.

“I found it very difficult to begin the third book,” she recalls. “I think it was because of the sense that I really did know where I was going. I wasn’t going to do any last minute calling my editor and saying, ‘Oh, by the way, there’s three more books!’ I was really committed to doing what I’d set out to do. There were moments when it was quite bittersweet.”

Harkness was also aware that fans and critics had their expectations of how the series would end, but she didn’t let that sway her.

“Most of the things that fans would say to me on Facebook, on Twitter or in person were either so horrifically convoluted or so tied up neatly in a bow with a happy ending that I started to feel very much like, ‘No, the plan you have is the right one. It’s been the plan since the beginning. Is it going to make everybody happy? Absolutely not. But it’s the story that needs to be told,” she says. “But when I wrote *Discovery of Witches* I had no readers—except for my mom. By the time I wrote *Book of Life*, I had a lot of readers. It take me a little bit of time to kind of quiet the voices—the very involved and well-meaning voices of my readers—down just enough that so that I could actually get on with my job which is telling the story.”

With this trilogy over, Harkness says that the day is coming when she’ll have to sit down and write something new. But, she adds, she’s confident that there will be something.

“I’ve got lots of stories to tell.”

Interview link: <http://kmuw.org/post/deborah-harkness-opens-book-life-ends-trilogy>