



'IN THE SPOTLIGHT'

Each month we put a different person 'in the spotlight' and pose 12 wide-ranging questions to them. This month, we feature Droitwich based author, **Alison Lester**.

1. Tell us an interesting fact about yourself that not many people know.

Few of my newer friends know that I was an accomplished martial artist in my teens. I was introduced to kung-fu by a high-school friend and fell in love with it. At sixteen, I was the women's green-belt champion of New England. Although I went to university to study music, I took a Mandarin class because of the interest in China that kung-fu initiated, and I fell in love with that too. I ended up studying for a year in China, doing my Bachelor's degree in Mandarin, and also getting a Master's degree in Chinese studies. The only trophy I have kept from my days of competing is four feet tall. It is here by my desk and I hang my beaded necklaces off it.

2. What book made most impact on you as a child?

I've often wondered this. It's such a natural question, and so many people know the answer. I know I was frightened by *Watership Down*. My parents read it to my brother and me when I was about seven. Too early! I loved my Ladybird 'Easy-Reading' book of *Snow White and Rose Red*, published in 1969 when I was three. They were so brave and so kind, those girls, no matter what came their way. I also loved my mother's already-loved copy of *The Story of Cinderella*, told by Muriel Levy and published in 1945 when my mother was six. Again, Cinderella was very kind, and also rigorous. I was particularly impressed that "Her skin was like the bloom on a peach, and her hair shone and glistened because she brushed it fifty times every night." I tried that, but it was so boring, I never got to fifty. My hair never glistened, but I have had more fun than Cinders ever did.

3. What is your favourite film, and why?

This changes and changes again. The ones I feel have left the most residue are probably *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), *Tootsie* (1982), *A Room with a View* (1985), *Tampopo* (1985) and *The Last King of Scotland* (2006). I'm not surprised I saw four of the five when I was under 20, and very impressionable. I believe *The Year of Living Dangerously* played a role in my decision to go and study in China, as it opened a window on modern Asian history for me and blew my mind. But it's possible that my favourite film is one I can't name for you. It is a short, quiet, Swedish film, and I saw it on an airplane. It concerns two elderly men and begins with one of them, in a suit and tie, parking his car on some railroad tracks in a large clearing in some woods, and just sitting there. After a long while, the other man comes along in his very old truck, passes the car, slows down, stops, gets out, and speaks to the man on the tracks, inviting him to his house for coffee. (I'm getting an ache in my heart just typing this.) So little is said, so much is meant. I'll only tell you how it ends if you ask me. I don't want to ruin it for you in case you are lucky enough to happen across it one day.



4. What are your main hobbies/interests, apart from reading, of course?

I always want to be doing something with my hands. I'm in the middle of crocheting a scarf for my niece and am nearly finished with a quilt for my daughter. My mother-in-law often gives me beads that come with the vintage sewing thread and equipment she buys and sells at fairs, and I string them for myself and others. I make collages with things I find. All of this patching, sticking, sewing, twisting and threading into useful, meaningful or attractive pieces feels akin to storytelling.

5. What would be the three things you would like to have if you were stranded on a desert island?

- *Little Dorrit*, by Charles Dickens, because it is very, very long; because it is both meaningful and funny; and because it was illustrated by my great-great-great grandfather, Hablot Knight Browne, aka Phiz. It would be nice to have a family connection along.
- Paper.
- Pens.

6. What would a look at your bookshelves tell us about you?

None of my bookshelves are merely shelves for books. So you would learn that I'm a fan of both old and new writing, that I love and miss my children, that I'm interested in Asia, that I'm a magpie, that I write, and that I sometimes sing and sometimes play the clarinet, but haven't lately (see the dust?).

7. If you could invite any three people, dead or alive, to a dinner party, who would they be, and why?

The first two I would like to invite are Elsie Higgins and Edith Gorham. Don't rack your brains; you won't have heard of them. But I'm on their trail, and I hope one day to write a book about them. Elsie was my great-great aunt. Born in Birkenhead, Cheshire (now Merseyside), she studied painting in Paris and Bushey, and exhibited 11 times at the Royal Academy between 1895 and 1916. She made Bushey her home and shared a house with Edith for decades. It's possible that they were simply kindred spirits, lifelong spinsters because they walked unusual roads and missed out on husbands because of the wars. I wonder if they were in fact a couple, however. There would have existed a special intimacy between them, I'm convinced, because Edith was deaf from birth. Did Elsie learn sign language? Or did they have their own language with each other? This is what I would like to learn, in a conversation over dinner. But, since I can't know, I will imagine it, and perhaps write it. As for the third guest, I think I'd ask the opera singer Shu-Cheen Yu. I met her on a train in China in 1985, when she was a folk singer with her country's Eastern Song and Dance Troupe. We became friends, and I visited her from time to time at her and her violinist-husband's apartment in Beijing. She taught me Chinese folk songs that I still sing. In 1987 she defected to Australia. The troupe were touring the country, and she decided not to go home. I received a letter from her when she first arrived and was working in a care home



and learning to speak English. Now she is a highly acclaimed classical singer in many languages. I'm trying to contact her, but haven't yet succeeded.

8. What kind of music do you like, and is there one favourite soundtrack?

My father was a jazz pianist and trombonist, and my parents also listened to thought-provoking classical music and the great American musicals, so I was brought up in a varied musical environment, and that still suits me. That said, I listen to podcasts more than music now, when I'm walking or sewing. The time I listen to music most is when I'm writing, and in the last several years my brain has insisted on only two writing soundtracks, depending on the way it wants to clear the space for thought and feeling. One is Bach's *Suites for Unaccompanied Cello*. They make it feel like my synapses will connect smoothly, and then lift my heart into the conversation. The other is *Chopin: Les Brilliantes*, a jazz interpretation of 14 Chopin compositions by the Andrzej Jagodzinski Trio. That one gets to my heart first, in a tender way, and the mind follows.

9. What are your favourite charities/good causes, and why?

- Compassion & Choices, because I believe so strongly that people suffering from a terminal illness should have the right to medical aid in dying.
- Operation Smile, because I heard the founder on the radio when travelling in a taxi in Singapore and was so impressed by how the organization was offering operations to fix cleft palates, offering a huge impact on lives with a relatively easy operation.
- CandleAid Lanka, which is run by a friend - a retired airline captain in Sri Lanka, and supports schoolchildren in dire straits. Managed by volunteers, all the proceeds benefit their programs.
- The Red Cross, Mercy Corps and Médecins Sans Frontières, for the way they rush to disaster-ravaged communities.

10. Who is the person who has influenced you most/you most admire?

My mother, without question. Her lust for life and her curiosity were enormous, and when I was growing up I had the privilege of watching her become highly educated as well. She had been sent to a middling boarding school aged 11, and then finishing school at 17, secretarial school at 18. And that was it. She could work, and then she could find a husband. She did both, but when I was little she often took art classes, and then when I was a teenager she started taking classes in the continuing education program at Harvard, able to do so for free because she was working as a secretary at the university. I wrote in my memoir, *Absolutely Delicious: A Chronicle of Extraordinary Dying*, 'She flirted with the idea of a degree in the history of science. I think it was when the words started flowing that she shifted to taking classes in English literature, and especially poetry. It was Mum who taught me to take rejection as a writer, back in those pre-Internet days. "You've got to have the envelope all ready and waiting for the next place you want to send your work to," she said. "When the poem comes back, you just put it in that envelope and send it right back out.'" She went on to become a lecturer in humanities at George Washington University in Washington, DC, and then a biographer and novelist. You can see all about her at www.valerielester.com.



11. What is your connection to Evesham?

I don't have a connection to Evesham other than the festival. I'm on the festival email list, but I can't remember how I found out about it – perhaps via Writing West Midlands? No idea. I live not far away, in Droitwich Spa, and have been keeping an eye on it. When I published my memoir last year, I pounced, and asked if I might do a talk. How lovely that the answer was yes, and on 20 August I was able to speak in person with a great gang of listeners.

12. What would you list as your greatest achievement to date?

I overrode my fear of facing the music and separated from my first husband.