

# TLC Showcase

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## REBECCA SWIRSKY

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## Introduction to The House with Eight Windows

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My introduction to TLC came with being awarded a Free Read bursary by Spread the Word. I wasn't sure what to expect from my TLC report, but Rachel Trezise's critique demonstrated a genuine passion to help. It was potent to have my particular world-view 'got', and to have further reading suggested. It felt like I was being invited to see how my work connected with others - in an ongoing conversation. Rachel also made great concrete, practical suggestions, gave reasons why those suggestions were being made, and concluded the TLC report by kindly stating that my manuscript had something 'very special that needed to be seen more clearly.' The impact of this support to a writer cannot be underestimated. Rachel also addressed questions originally posed in my report, a canny part of the process, and that too, was useful. Overall, the TLC Free Read report bolstered my confidence, dealt with practical issues and re-orientated me in (I believe!) the right direction, as not soon after, I won an apprenticeship with the writer Stella Duffy, through the Word Factory. I'm looking forward to submitting my manuscript to agents once it's ready. Although writing is a personal process, I believe we are all in a community together. Being awarded a Free Read demonstrated that perfectly.

The House of Eight Windows explores the choices a couple have made not to allow guilt to enter their relationship. The house, in this story, is as much a character as Celia and John. There are more ways than one of living a life, none of them wholly imperfect or perfect, and I kept this in mind while writing the story. When I read The House of Eight Windows at the Word Factory's Waterstone's Salon with Stella Duffy, I was delighted to be asked the question: What came first, the house or the characters? The connection and understanding that came with that question made the process worth it, a journey that, as the writer David Almond says, involves 'beating the words out on the page', to get cadence, tone, sound, all absolutely right. I hope you enjoy reading The House of Eight Windows here.

## The House with Eight Windows, by Rebecca Swirsky

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Night curls like smoke around the House with Eight Windows.

At 6pm sharp, Celia and John sit at their scrubbed wooden table to eat boiled eggs and buttered toast. Each loves the other with the vagueness of years of cohabitation, of temporary sharing of toothbrushes when the other needs replacing, of reciprocal nursing through winter flu and summer colds. They neither mind nor are excited by the years which have amassed like dust-balls behind the guest room furniture. The House with Eight Windows is big enough to hold Celia and John both.

This evening, Celia will watch a play written by her friend and lover. She is alert with anticipation. The play tells the tale of a young man who loses his leg in the Crimean War. Celia has little knowledge of the Crimean War, nor of what it would mean to lose a limb. But it is her friend and lover who has written the play, and so she will travel across town to see it, making sure to place her ticket and bus pass safely in her purse. Having hollowed out the last of her egg-white, she leaves the egg-cup and plate on the table for John to clear. Once her coat has been fetched from the stand in the hallway, she is ready. Celia has no need of lipstick, nor adornment of any kind.

John rubs his forehead with one calloused thumb. He has not been invited, and thinks with pleasure on a BBC documentary of the building of Egyptian pyramids scheduled for that evening. Still, smooth lips are placed on Celia's forehead in much the same way a child deposits two-pence in a piggy-bank. With care, but soon forgotten. A silence filled with plays and pyramids and boiled eggs passes between Celia and John. They often silences often, like the many cups of tea they make for each other.

When Celia closes the front door, the two bottom windows shudder and sigh in her wake. John returns to the table to butter the last slice of toast on both sides. He feels only steady satisfaction. The evening ahead will be a slow unfurling of waves pushing him from shore to shore. All around the house, the wind can be heard looking for old, forgotten cracks where it might steal its way in and warm itself by the radiators. As always, it will be unsuccessful.

Pushing his chair from the table, John leaves the kitchen. Through the living-room's modest bay window, the television can be seen as a blue-tinged fire with images flickering at its centre. When John sits down, the old couch whistles, telling a breathy story of many evenings

spent this way. The House of Eight Windows is very probably a house meant for children, filling its rooms and corridors with shrieks of laughter and spilled sugary drinks. But Celia and John have no children, and the House of Eight Windows is a concrete and mortar boat built of brick, moored securely in its jetty, sailing nowhere.

Having watched the documentary on the building of pyramids, John draws heavy green curtains and checks the radiators are turned up for the cleaner, sharper hours dawn will surely bring. Celia likes being warm at night. He clears the kitchen table, stripping its pockmarked surface of spoons stained with egg yolk and plates smeared with globs of butter. Having brushed his teeth and washed his face, John now settles himself in the big double bed to wait for Celia. It has been a fine evening. Nothing more, nothing else, could have been asked of it, other than Celia be returned to him safely. He closes his eyes and prepares to wait.

Celia, on the other side of town, is kissing the tiny, sweet brown moles which dot her lover's chin like a constellation. It was a thoughtful play that her lover has written, and although it will make her lover neither rich or famous, the playwright and Celia don't mind. They lie in each other's arms having received an orgasm each, bodies trembling with fine gifts. Celia has also learnt much she did not know about the Crimean War, and as she strokes her lover's forehead and smooths her lover's rumpled shirt-front, she tells her so. Adjusting tights over thighs, she invites her lover for afternoon tea and banana cake the following week. Celia's lover nods as she plaits long, fine hair. Celia looks on admiringly. Gradually, Celia's lover is becoming John's friend too. Guilt has not been allowed to enter the House with Eight Windows. Like the wind, it fends for itself under the watchful moon, tapping for ways to enter through hidden cracks and gaps.

Perhaps John will recognise Celia's friend for what she is. Perhaps he will not. Whatever his thoughts, nestled inside the softly shining dome of his head, he will be a genial host, discussing the challenges of researching, writing and directing a play. If the tea goes well, as it almost certainly will, John will invite Celia's friend and lover to watch a well-reviewed documentary with him. If Celia's lover refuses, he will not be affronted, for the pleasure in watching will remain the same.

Now, leaving her lover's flat on the other side of town, Celia feels a certain safety that soon she, too, will be tucked in bed, hot water bottle cuddled between her feet, she and John in matching flannel pyjamas. It would be foolish to imagine a world beyond the House with Eight Windows. Celia is too old to find another to spread itself around her with arms of crumbling brick and mortar, creaking wooden joists and mismatching crockery. She will

turn 75 this July, and is looking forward to the frosted icing chocolate cake John traditionally bakes for her birthday.

By the orange-sodium flare of the street lamps, Celia notices the honeysuckle and jasmine need cutting, and the front door could do with another coat of paint. In the morning she will discuss these tasks with John, whom will do what, and when. But now, under the hallway mirror, Celia hangs her keys on the little yellow hook. Steadying a hand against the flocked-papered wall, she eases shoes from stockinged feet. Her shoes, made of good leather, have a dainty heel like a secret. Slowly, enjoyably, Celia climbs the stairs. John, having heard the front door close from his bed, falls into a light sleep which deepens as he registers Celia sliding under the covers. He is safe to wander in his dreams because Celia has returned. Soon, Celia too is adrift. Dentures removed, she snores gently into the darkness, mouth slack with release.

Throughout the night, the wind pushes against The House With Eight Windows, inspecting for cracks, howling its frustration at the moon. Yet the House with Eight Windows holds tight, allowing its occupants to sleep soundly, with no dreams to interrupt them.

## About the Writer

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Rebecca Swirsky graduated from her MA in Creative Writing and was awarded the A.M. Heath Prize for her short fiction. She was recently mentored by the writer Stella Duffy through winning the Word Factory Apprenticeship for her novel-of-stories, *A History of Symmetry*. Rebecca's fiction has featured in *Matter*, *Ambit*, *The View From Here*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *The Pygmy Giant*, *Stories for Homes* anthology for *Shelter*, *Cease*, *Cows* and a number of British anthologies, including the *Bridport* anthology. Her work has been placed or shortlisted for The Manchester Fiction Award, *Fish*, *Bath*, *Bristol*, *Sean O' Faolin* and both the *Bridport Flash Fiction* and *Short Story Prizes*. In a former life, she used to be a Play Development Worker in Dalston and a boat club support worker for children with learning and physical challenges. In May she is looking forward to running adult Life Writing and Flash Fiction workshops as part of Haringey Literature Live, as well as children's creative writing workshops at Pickled Pepper Books. She likes to night-dream. And day-dream. A lot.

