

TLC Showcase

CHERRY RADFORD

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Introduction to *The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter*

The *Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter* was inspired by my unlikely friendship with a well-known Spanish flamenco guitarist – that all started with a tweet. I couldn't get his new album on Amazon, so I tweeted to ask him where I could buy it. He came back with a friendly reply and a website address. We then Tweeted about the track on which Paco de Lucía had played, my Spanish and his English, our teenage boys... and a year of tweets, emails, and Skypes later, we met for the first time when I was invited to be on a bilingual radio programme with him in Madrid.

This experience, as well as other online friendships, have made me wonder how I can sometimes feel closer to people in my phone than I do to friends I've known for years. What happens when two very different and distant people develop an irresistible connection? I wanted to write a novel about communication: our difficulties with it (personal, linguistic, cultural), but also the miracle – or maybe tragedy – of chance encounters.

I put my protagonists in highly contrasting settings: actor-musician Santiago is surrounded by family, friends in land-locked Madrid, while Imogen, like me, is in a coastal location – but surrounded by emotional and physical barriers (she's borrowing her aunt's converted lighthouse on a Beachy Head cliff).

Staying at the converted Belle Tout lighthouse 'being' Imogen, I got the inspiration for the second story in the novel. From her window, you can see the Beachy Head lighthouse, automated since 1982. What if her father used to be a lighthouse keeper there, and he too had been intensely corresponding with someone? Imogen could be looking into what happened to her father before he mysteriously drowned there, and start seeing similarities in their lives.

I couldn't write a story about communication using only Imogen's viewpoint. Thanks mainly to the late Tony Parker's wonderful book *Lighthouse*, in which he interviews lighthouse keepers and their wives, it wasn't difficult to write as a 1980s keeper. Getting into the mind of a flamenco guitarist turned diffident soap actor, however, was only possible after spending a lot of time in Madrid hanging out with wonderful *músicos*, an actress, and other Spanish friends. Luckily, I trained as a musician, already spoke the language, and did a flamenco course in Granada for a previous novel!

Unfortunately, however, I ended up grappling with a three-headed whale of a novel; *The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter* (previously under a succession of dire titles) was not only three novels trying to be one, but it/they didn't know what type of novel to be. Help! Enter TLC. The report from Sam Mills was necessarily critical – but galvanized me out of my women's fiction comfort zone, encouraged me to write the novel I *wanted* to write, and showed me how to weave everything together. I'm extremely grateful to Sam for making my novel publishable, and highly recommend TLC.

The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter by Cherry Radford

She sets up the speaker on her desk and puts her iPod on to Santiago's album. Twists the volume up until it sounds like his guitar is in the little round room. Lovely. It might be fun to read her father's diary pages in the lantern room, glancing over at his lighthouse, so she puts the volume up even further.

She pulls open the heavy door and climbs the steps, round and round, her feet in time to Track One. Then there she is, squinting in the sun; there's so much light up here, it's as if the long-gone Argand lamps have left an afterglow.

Inside the envelope there is one piece of folded A4. Nothing else. No 'isn't this funny/sad/ interesting?' or 'I'll look through and send you something else soon, love, Aunt Dorothy'. She unfolds the sheet. Her mouth opens at the sight of the neat loopy handwriting; she can almost hear the scratching of one of his skinny yellow BIC biros.

'Fri 14th Aug.'81

So they've given us a date. 28th June 1982 she'll be fully automated and we won't be needed anymore. Heck knows how they can be so precise, but that's the Corporation of Trinity House for you.

And the day we get this news, it has to be my turn for the Middle watch, doesn't it. I get a pat from Len, an egg sandwich using the last fresh tomato from Bill – because we all know if there's anything on your mind, it's bloody hard staring out alone from the top of a lighthouse for four hours in the middle of the night.

Just checked the light, then found myself out on the gallery, leaning over and listening to the crash and hiss of the waves in the darkness below, walking round with my hand on the cold wet glass of the lantern room like I'm stroking her or something.

Then it was downstairs to do the 3am weather log (without touching Bill's polished handrails): visibility poor, gallery temp 52 but barometer's dropping, overcast / drizzle, weather-vane NW, wind on cheek Force 5. All the time wondering how I'll compare to the automated readings. This is how it'll be from now on, everything we do seeming too little or too much.

Len says block it out and carry on, but he's been a Principal for 23 years and happy to retire, looking forward to joining the amateur dramatics group. But Bill's got a kid on the way and doesn't know what to do – so he's spent the day joking and calculating: 152 more days on duty, 21 more times watching Columbo from our Parker Knolls, possibly 3 more chuck-ups over the side of the relief boat.

Trinity might find us other posts of course, but it's the beginning of the end, they'll all be automated soon, so why play a game of musical lighthouses? Better to go out on a high, the three of us together. Start looking at other things. Maybe something at Newhaven port. But oh God.'

She looks over at the lighthouse and imagines him standing there with a battered leather logbook in hand. Poor chaps, can't have been easy.

'Back upstairs, looking out at the flashes of water. The thing is, I need the sea. I need the sea between me and others. Somehow the sea creates a distance that's more than physical. Yet sometimes it can draw you closer, like the magical refraction of light.'

What? It certainly didn't draw him and Mum closer; she hated 'that bloody Channel.'

'Done my letters:

BERYL - Giving her the news. She'll already have had it from the other wives of course, but I need to look like I'm sharing it with her on the day it arrived. The news that is, not my horror of the idea of going ashore for good.

IMOGEN - Asked how her birthday went, told her next year I'll be there for it. Eleven! Seems like only yesterday that she was switching her bedroom lamp on and off, convinced I was signalling back to her when she could see the lighthouse beam from her window.

DOROTHY – So happy for sis, it's all gone through, they now own the old cliff lighthouse – we'll almost be able to wave to each other!

S - While writing the letter, beginning to understand what I have to do.

How will it be, the 28th June? Balmy summer evening, sea like a lake. A last look out from the gallery, then winding down through the service room, to the bedroom with the banana bunks we'll never sleep in again, to the kitchen where nobody will get on

to the r/t anymore to report people in trouble on the cliffs or trapped by the tides on the beach, through the store rooms to the lobby, and out down the dog-steps to the set-off – with somebody turning to shove that heavy door closed for the last time. But it won't be me. I'll already be gone.'

The horror of coming ashore for good. God. A punch in the gut, and an irritation that has her glaring back at his lighthouse for an explanation. Were she and her mother really so awful? Mum was a bit of a nag, but did everything she could for him when he was home. And as for her... well, by that age, she was sitting around daydreaming or curled up with a book most of the time – not exactly a nightmare. Maybe he was just dreading leaving a life he'd known for so many years.

But then there's the all-important letter to 'S'. Who the hell is that? And why did they seem to be advising that he should already be gone before the last day at the lighthouse? S. She doesn't recall any of his friends – all in the lighthouse service – having a name beginning with S. And anyway, why just 'S'? Surely there are only two reasons for putting an initial instead of someone's name in a private diary: they are either a close family member, or a person you're too embarrassed or scared to name, even to yourself... Ha! No. This was her sensible Dad.

She stands up. Grass, sea, horizon. She waits until the green-grey-blue feels as harmless as a child's painting. Then, humming along with Track 3, she unlocks the door and goes out on to the gallery for the first time, walking right round it, not holding the metal rail, but running her hand along the wet glass walls. Like her father did at his lighthouse. Did he like its curved perfection, or just the hours he could devote to reading and listening to music inside it? Can you love a lighthouse? Maybe it felt like an impending bereavement. Maybe 'S' was some kind of counsellor – if they had such things in those days. Or someone somehow fulfilling that role, like... a penfriend. Nothing wrong with that, if it was helping.

She goes back down to her guitar-filled room and wonders if Santiago has answered her. He has. You can get it here, English flamenco lady, he's said in Spanish, giving a website address.

'Thank you,' she writes, but then notices that he was on here just ten minutes ago; maybe he's still at his computer or looking at his phone.

She turns off the music so she can concentrate, Googles some words and then writes in Spanish: 'Your second track puts me on a new level. But today in the car it put me on the wrong road – look what you made me do!' She's sounding a bit star-struck, but it's completely true; music like this shouldn't accompany the operation of machinery.

She jumps as a '*jajaja*' laughter appears, followed by something like 'Of course, because the track is called Two Roads!'

'I didn't know! At the moment I've only got the CD, not the box!'

She types in the next box that she's sorry, she forgot to write in Spanish, did he understand?

'No!!!' comes back at her, so she translates.

Then he seems to be suggesting that whenever she says something to him, she could always write it in both languages, to help his English.

An invitation to send further messages. She feels her cheeks burn. 'Of course! / *Claro!*' she writes with a smile.

The narrow window above her desk has a perfect view of her father's lighthouse, now forlorn in a flat low tide, no boats in sight. Nothing wrong with having a penfriend.

About the Writer

Cherry Radford was a keyboard player in a pop band, a piano teacher at the Royal Ballet Junior School and an optometrist/post-doctoral researcher at Moorfields Eye Hospital in London before suddenly starting her first novel in the middle of a scientific conference in 2009. She left Moorfields in 2017 to have more time to write, teach piano part-time, and jump between little homes minutes from the sea in Eastbourne and Almería (Spain).



Cherry's inspirations for writing include music, dance, the coast, and – having been raised by a half-Spanish mother – Spanish language and culture. She has an ex-scientist's passion for research, and puts herself through heaven (a flamenco course in Granada, a night in a lighthouse, a day on a 1946 sea-going paddle steamer) and hell (an acting audition for a Spanish television series) to get what she needs. As the title of her blog post *My Potholed Path to Publication* suggests, however, inspiration and research have been the easier parts of her novelist career. Her first two novels, *Men Dancing* (2011) and *Flamenco Baby* (2013), were published by a tiny Brighton-based independent that went bust. The self-publishing company that took on most of the publisher's floundering authors promptly did the same. She is now delighted to have been signed by the wonderful Urbane Publications, and *The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter* came out on 5th April, 2018. She is currently writing an historical saga about a family who owned a pier.

Cherry chats about writing, lighthouses, piers and whatever else floats her boat on her BLA BLA LAND blog (<https://blablalands.org/>), Twitter (@CherryRad), Instagram (cherry_radford), Facebook (Cherry Radford – Author) and her website (<http://cherryradford.co.uk/>). She would love to hear from you!

The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter is out now and can be purchased [here](#).