

India Edghill evokes the powerful women of the past in the present

Bonnie Kieffer, *The Branch*, January, 2010

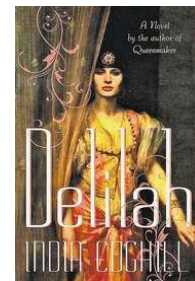
Women of power, strength, fortitude, and drive- are these qualities only of 21st century females? Not at all; these are the characteristics of women such as Delilah, the Queen of Sheba, and Michal in the historical fiction written by India Edghill, a local writer who will be featured at the AAUW Writers' Tea on April 18, 2010. Ms. Edghill was kind enough to respond to an e-mail interview for *The Branch* and share some insight into her genre preferences, her writing schedule, and her fascination with Biblical people.



When asked her preference for a particular genre, Ms Edghill responded, "I love historical novels, historical romances, science fiction, fantasy, thrillers, cozy mysteries, and chick lit." She said that the latter is her "genre of choice" when she is working "...because it is unlike what I write." Her love for the original television series STAR TREK compelled her to write STAR TREK fan fiction and she wrote much of this fan fiction for years.

She has a day job as a reference librarian, so her writing schedule is two to four hours of writing in the evenings. Her fascination with historical religious people developed from her reading the Bible and finding it fun to expand the stories there into a more "fully realized world." She said that any story may be revisited and looked at from a different viewpoint, as in the case of her novels. "Revisiting them gives writers a chance to investigate characters and motivations, fleshing out the bare bones of the Biblical accounts." This is what she calls "Biblical fanfic" - Biblical fan fiction.

Ms. Edghill's latest novel is *Delilah*, recently reviewed in the *Poughkeepsie Journal* [December 2, 2009] as "...a good read with a compelling plot and rich detail....Also a means for those of faith to take a second look at a popular tale." Her other novels of note are *Queenmaker* (2000), about Michal, the daughter of Saul and wife of King David, and *Wisdom's Daughter: a Novel of Solomon and Sheba* (2004). In these novels the strength of these women, the motivations behind their actions, and their stories are richly described and evocatively plotted. The qualities of women in our time are mirrored in the woman of the past and India Edghill will be a compelling author at our Writers' Tea.



About India Edghill

<http://www.indiaedghill.com/>

Author India Edghill's interest in history is long-standing; her father was a major history buff whose favorite authors were Will & Ariel Durant. India inherited his love of research and history. Her favorite areas are the Ancient Near East, Victorian England, and India at any period.

India lives in upstate New York, USA, with a comfort of spaniels, a lounge of cats, and a plethora of books.

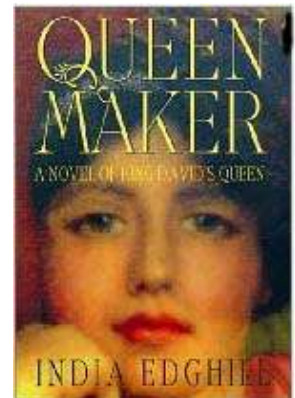
India's novels include *Queenmaker*, *Wisdom's Daughter*, *File M For Murder* and her latest, *Delilah*.

THE QUEENMAKER

<http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org/solander/queenmaker.htm>

India Edghill talks to Sarah Nesbeitt about the real King David, the two Anita Diamants, and the road to publication.

King David -- the heroic slayer of Goliath and the much-lauded successor to Saul, Israel's first king -- lives again in *Queenmaker*, India Edghill's beautifully rendered historical novel. While many novels have been written about David, none has taken as close a look at the man behind the myth. *Queenmaker* shows us the biblical champion of legend through the eyes of the woman who knew him best: Michal, his first wife and his queen.



Since its first appearance in print, *Queenmaker* has been winning rave reviews: Kirkus has called it "a riveting debut tale...an intriguing and colorful retelling that incandescently illuminates and interprets an old story." Reviewers from Library Journal and Romantic Times have echoed these comments, and the novel's success seems assured.

I met India Edghill at her home in upstate New York, a comfortable abode she shares with her sister, fellow author Rosemary Edghill, and a small menagerie of animals -- seven cats and three dogs, the latter all Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. With one dog sitting comfortably between us, we discussed India's fascination with biblical fiction, the real King David story, and the unusual route she took to get published.

"The Old Testament stories are a lot of fun," India confesses. Her interest in the past was encouraged by her father, a big history buff, and India grew up watching Cecil B. DeMille epics and reading classic historical novels such as those written by Margaret Irwin and Mary Renault. Although she had originally planned to write a

novel about several of David's women, India decided to focus on Michal because nobody else, aside from one children's book author, had written a novel about her. Readers of the Bible may remember Michal (pronounced "MichALL", with a guttural "ch") as the daughter of King Saul who loves David and marries him -- only to be parted from him shortly after their wedding because Saul sees David as a threat. Married off to another, Michal is recalled to David's side ten years later, after David becomes king.

From these bare facts, India spins a tale in which Michal's girlish infatuation for David turns to hatred as David refuses to return her to her beloved second husband. At first, she can do little but stand by while David murders and manipulates his way to power and prestige. With the help of Zhurleen, a beautiful Philistine concubine of David's who becomes her confidante, Michal learns the ways of the court. As time goes on, Michal gradually discovers how to beat David at his own game.

Where did India's view of David originate? "In the Bible," India explains. "What you realize when you start doing the research is that the entire David story is a succession document for Solomon. The entire scene was set up to show that Solomon was the main, legitimate, and only proper heir to the throne. And of course they were trying to keep the proper line of anointed succession without making Saul too important, and certainly without indicating in any way," she comments sarcastically, "that the fact that David married the previous king's daughter, and demanded her back, had anything to do with the fact that David was king."

As Saul's daughter, Michal is critical to David's claim to the throne, but she cannot give him an heir. "There are a number of authorities who feel that he deliberately brought her back and did not have her as a real wife because he did not want to have any sons by her," India points out. "If you take a look at the Bible in that section, by the middle of David's reign, just about all of the Saulite heirs are gone. Jonathan's son is left, but he's crippled, and Michal is left. All of the others, including Saul's sons by his concubine Rizpah, are killed. It's subtle, but when you read it straight through, it becomes extremely clear."

Looking at the reviews of *Queenmaker* on Amazon.com, it becomes apparent that people who have read it fall into two camps: those who love it, and those who are offended because it deviates from the view of David they remember from Sunday School. India finds this surprising, because she used the Bible as her outline.

"Everything I've got there except one murder, which was a reasonable extrapolation, actually is in the Bible. The very least you could say, as one author put it, is that David's enemies had a convenient way of dropping dead.

"Most people only seem to remember David and Goliath. I was really shocked when this book came out at the number of people who asked me if that was what

really happened, because I assumed everyone knew the basics of the Bible story. I'm not sure if these people have actually read Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, because all of these things are there in the King James version that I've got! They're frequently complaining that David is not portrayed as a hero. Well, every single thing in the Bible has been moved over to my novel...all the murders. And there's just no way to make the Bathsheba incident sound uplifting. It's one of David's least understandable actions. He violates all the Commandments and then says he's terribly sorry, and the next thing you know, he's got even more power. It's sort of amusing to see one-star reviews complaining about things that really are in the Bible."

On the subject of Bathsheba, the beautiful young wife whom David spies bathing on her rooftop, India took an unusual approach. In *Queenmaker*, Bathsheba is an innocent, almost simpleminded victim of David's lust, but through her friendship with Michal, she survives to become the mother of Solomon. India decided to downplay the traditional David-Bathsheba romance because she was looking for a new angle. "There are only two ways you can handle Bathsheba. Either the woman was bone stupid and didn't realize that the entire palace was overlooking her roof, or she was out there deliberately to seduce David. Eventually I came up with the method I used. She was up there deliberately, but [the result] wasn't exactly what she had in mind."

India also decided to change the traditional story of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon into a tale of forbidden romance. "In the Bible it's definitely a rape, but I was looking for a nice guy in this, and David is not exactly my favorite character. If you decide the facts are being distorted for the purposes of the person writing that section of the Bible, you can rewrite it any way you want, as long as you keep to the same basic sequence of events. In the Bible, after Amnon rapes Tamar and is about to throw her out, she says, 'Don't do this -- our father will let me marry you.' I was sort of hanging the way I handled the Amnon-Tamar affair on that statement, and on the fact that I really didn't want a rape. I wanted one nice relationship."

A reference librarian by profession, India had the training necessary for doing background research on *Queenmaker*. "I was working in interlibrary loan at Dutchess Community College at the time, and I think I sent all of our ILL statistics through the roof personally," she laughs. One tidbit she found was the reason the Philistines had so much power in David's time: they had a monopoly on iron technology. She also read as many novels about David as she could find, including Joseph Heller's *God Knows*, which now is one of her favorite books.

For a long time, biblical fiction was out of style; few publishers wanted to touch it. This all changed with the publication of Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*, a biblical novel of Dinah which is now enjoying great success. "I used it in our reading group here at the library," India remarks, "and I'm proud to say I bought it in 1997 in hardcover when it first came out because I like to support historical novels. The

Red Tent has really opened up the field for reexamining biblical women's stories and re-imagining them for the modern day. After all, without the matriarchs, the patriarchs would still be wandering around in the desert refusing to ask for directions!" Not coincidentally, Diane Higgins, the editor who acquired *Queenmaker* for St. Martin's, is the same editor who shot *The Red Tent* to the top of the charts after its trade paperback publication several years ago.

Queenmaker's path to publication wasn't nearly as straightforward as this suggests, however. After she finished writing the novel, India relates, "I had done up a proposal package, and an agent who, confusingly enough, was named Anita Diamant [not related to the author of *The Red Tent*] took it on. Her full name was Anita Diamant Berke, and she died in 1996. She was an old-line New York agent, and she really liked the book." This, however, was before *The Red Tent* became successful. "The usual reaction," India relates, "was something like, 'this is lovely, but we don't know how to sell a biblical novel in today's market.'"

Finally, in 1999, after trying unsuccessfully to find a commercial publisher, India decided to self-publish the book with Xlibris, a print-on-demand fulfillment house. Unlike many who choose to go this route, though, India had some prior knowledge of the publishing business, much of which came from her sister Rosemary's experience. "I sent out a bunch of free copies, it got some good reviews, and we advertised it in *Romantic Times*. I was also very lucky that we knew Judy York, who's been a cover artist for twenty years."

Because of its beautiful packaging and the favorable comments it had earned, Xlibris suggested that *The New York Times Book Review* take a closer look at *Queenmaker* for an article they were writing. The results were quite positive. Rosemary Edghill then ran the book past her agent, Russ Galen at Scovil Chichak Galen. Danny Baror, the SCG international rights agent, sold *Queenmaker* to Germany. And Anna Ghosh of SCG took it on and sold it to St. Martin's Press last year. As of today, *Queenmaker* has been picked up by several major book clubs, including the Literary Guild and the Book of the Month Club, and foreign rights have been sold to several countries. The new cover art for the St. Martin's edition, a re-imagining of a Victorian painting of a woman's face, is as attractive as the original Judy York cover and will surely help promote the book further.

Despite her accomplishment, India considers herself very, very lucky to have had *Queenmaker* selected by a major publisher, and she doesn't recommend self-publishing to writers in search of commercial success. She concedes that writers who are determined to tell their story, regardless of its market potential, may find that self-publishing is the way to go. For authors wanting more, though, India advises that they "take the advice of their writing friends, and their agent if they've got one, and write something more commercial."

India's current project is a sequel called *A Bed of Spices*, which will retell the Solomon and Sheba story. Although she is perfectly at home in the biblical arena,

she is a big M.M. Kaye fan, and her true love is 19th century India -- Kaye's preferred historical background. Not surprisingly, India has her own plans for this setting. "Since M.M. Kaye is in her nineties and not likely to write another romantic epic set in India, I started doing my own," she says. This novel, *A Tiger in the Garden*, is an epic novel of romance and adventure set in India in 1879. If historical fiction fans are lucky, both novels will appear in print within the next few years. For the time being, however, India Edghill has firmly established herself as the current queen regnant of the biblical historical novel. Long may she reign!

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Sarah L. Nesbeitt is Coordinating Editor (USA) for the Historical Novels Review and Historical Fiction Editor for *NoveList*, an electronic readers' advisory database used by public libraries. In her other life she is an academic librarian, though without the stereotypical bun, glasses, or sensible shoes.