



hoopla digital: What inspired you to write *Widowland*? Were you influenced by any particular books or other media?

C.J. Carey: I've written a number of novels set in wartime Berlin under my other name, Jane Thynne, so I've read a vast array of books about the Third Reich. As I was researching the conditions of German women toward the end of the war, I discovered that one group—women aged over fifty, with no children or men—were awarded the lowest rations. These women, who were mostly widows, were nicknamed Friedhofsfrauen, or cemetery women, because they were deemed useless to society and merited the least food. What a thought! In my alternative history, where Britain and Germany have formed an alliance, women are divided into castes and the lowest are nicknamed Friedas. These women are given the least food and rights and relegated to rundown areas on the edge of cities, called Widowlands.

hd: As part of Rose's work, she is tasked with "editing" classic works of fiction like *Pride & Prejudice* and *Middlemarch* to adjust the ideology to align with the Alliance. Book banning and burning were pretty commonplace in history, but I've never heard of rewriting books. Was this an idea you invented, or has this actually occurred?

CC: Everyone has seen photographs of Nazis burning books, but the reality went even further. During the war, a senior figure in the Third Reich called Alfred Rosenberg formed an SS taskforce that went into homes and libraries seizing history books. These books were then rewritten by SS scholars until their presentation of the past accorded with Nazi ideology. I took an imaginative leap and thought, what would it be like if the Nazis decided to rewrite the classics of English literature?

hd: How did you choose the books Rose works on?

CC: One of the preoccupations of the Nazi regime that has interested me most has been their attitude to women. In their eyes, women should be deferential to men, obedient, supportive, and unchallenging. Yet so many of the great novels of English literature are concerned with women discovering their own voice, finding agency and independence. *Jane Eyre*, *Middlemarch*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Wuthering Heights* are all novels by women that feature female heroines who challenge male authority and the established order. They were all obvious contenders to be rewritten!

hd: The setting and classification system in your book are imagined but based on very real history. How did you approach your research of major historical moments and figures to write *Widowland*? What were some of the more shocking discoveries you made in your research?

CC: To me, *Widowland* is a 'sliding doors' novel. It's an example of how Britain could have been if it had submitted to Nazi rule and become a German protectorate. I was already immersed in the history of the Third Reich for my other novels, so it was simple to insert real figures like



Himmler, Goebbels, and Hess into the story. For me, this is a world that might really have happened with just a twitch of the tiller, and it was fascinating to explore how every little detail of life in Britain might have changed. Everything about the Third Reich is shocking, but one endlessly astonishing thing is how easily they persuaded a population to perpetrate atrocities, or at the very least condone them.

- hd:** Even though the book is clearly based on the Nazis in Germany, you never once refer to them as Nazis or mention Hitler. What was your reasoning for this?
- CC:** In *Widowland*, Hitler is referred to only as 'The Leader' and the word Nazi doesn't appear. I deliberately wanted this authoritarian regime to have a generic quality. The Nazis had their unique horror, but they shared aspects of all totalitarian societies: fear, anxiety, and the constant feeling of surveillance. All these regimes rely on a 'divide and rule' management of the population, and the weakening of the family and personal relationships.
- hd:** Do you think anything like this could happen today?
- CC:** It is happening! The undermining and oppression of women is ongoing. And don't get me going on the censorship of all types of culture to fit various ideological agendas.
- hd:** What did you find the biggest challenge of writing this speculative historical novel as opposed to a strictly historical novel?
- CC:** At first, having written historical novels which strove to be very faithful to dates and events, I was daunted by the idea of writing a counterfactual. So much so that I actually decided to write under a pen name, which was how C.J.Carey came about. But once I started writing, I realized that it was a glorious liberation to throw off the shackles of exact history and explore what might have been, while all the time projecting from a background of deep factual research.
- hd:** What's next for you?
- CC:** This is so hard to explain without spoilers! However, Rose Ransom's story does continue in *Queen Wallis*. The novel is set in 1955, two years after the events of *Widowland*. Alliance Britain is still a land of spies, and Wallis Simpson, the widowed queen, is unhappy and paranoid, certain that the regime is conspiring against her. She is desperate to defect to America, the land of her birth, and she has an explosive document that might just help her escape.



C. J. CAREY is a novelist, journalist, and broadcaster. She has worked at the *Sunday Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the BBC, among others. She also writes novels under the name Jane Thynne and lives in London. *Widowland* is the first novel she has written as C. J. Carey. The sequel, *Queen Wallis*, will be released in the US in July 2023.