

Author Spotlight on Elaine Scott

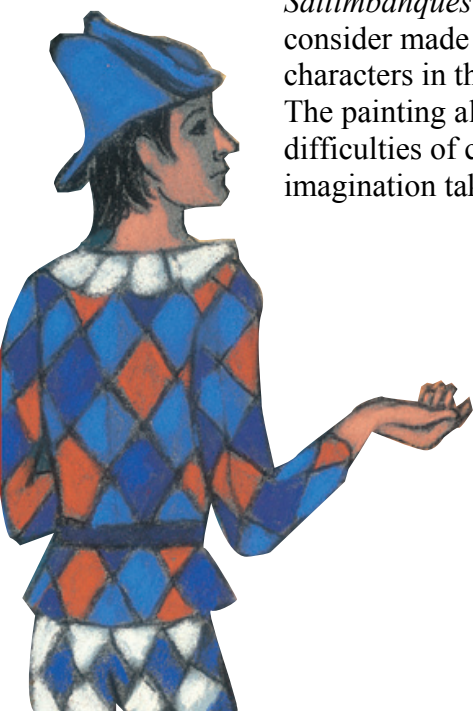


***The Secrets of the Cirque Medrano* is your first middle grade novel. What inspired you to change genres?**

It's true that *Secrets* is the first novel I've written for this slightly younger age group. It's also the first novel I've written in over twenty years. I was just ready to give my imagination free rein—something that is not allowed in nonfiction, other than, perhaps, its structure.

Even though this book is fictional, it is based on historical facts and includes the historical character of Pablo Picasso. Do you think this made it easier or more difficult to write the novel?

In nonfiction, facts always control the story, but the great freedom in historical fiction is that story can control the facts—at least, to an extent. Picasso's painting, *The Family of Saltimbanques*, was the genesis of the novel. Having something concrete, like the art, to consider made the task of storytelling a bit easier for me. I found several of my characters in that painting—Paco, Manuel, Anna Maria, and their mother, to be specific. The painting also suggested a few of the themes that weave through the book—the difficulties of circus life, its isolation and lack of roots. I studied the painting and let my imagination take me into those figures' heads.



Picasso, on the other hand, presented a different challenge. His life and times in Montmartre during the period of 1904–905 are well-documented in several sources. My nonfiction background exerted itself when it came to writing about Picasso. All of the anecdotes about him—his love of the circus and the *saltimbanques*, his friends, the fact that he paid for meals with his paintings and often drew on napkins—all of these bits of information are true and documentable, but this is a novel, not a biography of Picasso. Therefore, Picasso never speaks in the book. Instead, he is revealed through the eyes of the other characters.

How extensive was your research for this book?

I did enormous research for this book, perhaps more than what I have done for some of my nonfiction titles. For one thing, I had to learn a great deal about Picasso's life and work during this time frame, when he was moving from his blue period into his rose period. And I had to research where he was in his personal life, too, which is where his group of friends, Apollinaire, Max Jacob, and his love interest, Fernande, came into the story. There was much to learn about Nineteenth-century circuses in general and the Cirque Medrano in particular. And I dug into the social history of the times, too. The Russian Revolution was fomenting, and the tsar's hold on his throne was precarious. During research I stumbled upon declassified CIA files that revealed the forerunner of today's KGB, the Okhrana, had established a headquarters in Paris under the guise of being a consulate, to spy on suspected revolutionaries. That bit of information was integral to the plot of the book, though the only thing that is factual about the Okhrana in the story is its address at 97 Rue de Grenelle.

Brigitte is an independent young girl who does not always follow the rules set for her by grown-ups. Do you think it's important for children to question the authority of adults?

I believe that learning to think independently is part of the task of growing up. Although it's present to a degree from the time a two-year-old says "no," the process begins in earnest as children move from older childhood into young adulthood—almost as if it's hardwired into our species. Brigitte went through the typical adolescent period when she challenged the value systems that surrounded her. However, by challenging Aunt Dominique's values, Brigitte came to understand that those values were her values, too. But she had to accept those values for herself, and the only way she came to accept them was to question and—for a time—reject them.

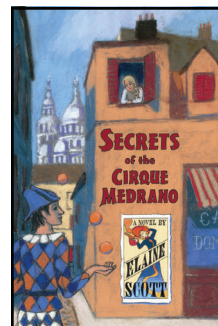
Why did you choose this time period to write about? In what ways do you think children will find it relevant?

Well, Picasso's painting dictated the time period, but I found the time period fascinating. Society was changing, and value systems were changing, too. People were questioning the rights of royalty, and the rights of the individual. That questioning of the status quo was reflected in the art and writing and culture of bohemian Paris and reflected questions such as: What is the proper way to work for change? Does freedom have limits? Is anything at all acceptable? A century ago in Paris folks were wrestling with those questions, and I think we still wrestle with them today.

Books by Elaine Scott

Secrets of the Cirque Medrano

When her mother dies, Brigitte is sent to live in Paris where she helps her aunt and uncle in their café. Her new life seems strange and interesting. When Brigitte befriends Paco, the young circus performer from the Cirque Medrano who poses from the temperamental Spanish artist Pablo Picasso, she is drawn into a web of international intrigue.



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