Once Upon a River

by Diane Setterfield



About the Book

From the instant #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the ?eerie and fascinating? (*USA TODAY*) THE THIRTEENTH TALE comes a richly imagined, powerful new novel about how we explain the world to ourselves, ourselves to others, and the meaning of our lives in a universe that remains impenetrably mysterious.

On a dark midwinter?s night in an ancient inn on the river Thames, an extraordinary event takes place. The regulars are telling stories to while away the dark hours, when the door bursts open on a grievously wounded stranger. In his arms is the lifeless body of a small child. Hours later, the girl stirs, takes a breath and returns to life. Is it a miracle? Is it magic? Or can science provide an explanation? These questions have many answers, some of them quite dark indeed.

Those who dwell on the river bank apply all their ingenuity to solving the puzzle of the girl who died and lived again, yet as the days pass the mystery only deepens. The child herself is mute and unable to answer the essential questions: Who is she? Where did she come from? And to whom does she belong? But answers proliferate nonetheless.

Three families are keen to claim her. A wealthy young mother *knows* the girl is her kidnapped daughter, missing for two years. A farming family reeling from the discovery of their son?s secret liaison stand ready to welcome their granddaughter. The parson?s housekeeper, humble and isolated, sees in the child the image of her younger sister. But the return of a lost child is not without complications, and no matter how heartbreaking the past losses, no matter how precious the child herself, this girl cannot be everyone?s. Each family has mysteries of its own, and many secrets must be revealed before the girl?s identity can be known.

ONCE UPON A RIVER is a glorious tapestry of a book that combines folklore and science, magic and myth. Suspenseful, romantic and richly atmospheric, the beginning of this novel will sweep you away on a powerful current of storytelling, transporting you through worlds both real and imagined, to the triumphant conclusion whose depths will continue to give up their treasures long after the last page is turned.

Discussion Guide

1. The Swan Inn, Buscot Lodge, and the towns and villages along the river Thames create a very specific atmosphere for the story that unfolds. What role does the Swan itself play? Could this story have taken place anywhere else?

2. To judge by such details as photography and transport as described in the novel, the events appear to be set in the 1870s or thereabouts. Could the novel have been set at another time in history? What would have had to be different if the author had chosen another period?

3. What is the significance of the river?

4. By the time Vaughan had written a concise two-page account of Amelia?s kidnapping to his father in New Zealand, ?the horror of it was quite excised.? What effect does the act of storytelling have on Vaughan? What about the other characters?

5. A wedge is driven between the Vaughans as they struggle to come to terms with the loss of Amelia. In the end, what brings them together? How?

6. How does Robert Armstrong, raised outside family life in circumstances of financially cushioned neglect, turn out to be such a good man?

7. ?Sometimes I think there is nothing more a man can do. A child is not an empty vessel, Fleet, to be formed in whatever way the parent thinks fit. They are born with their own hearts and they cannot be made otherwise, no matter what love a man lavishes on them.? Do you agree with Armstrong?s lament at the end of the book? Is it possible if he had been a different kind of father things might have turned out differently for Robin?

8. Is Lily White responsible for her actions?

9. Consider the importance of family in the novel. What does it mean to Robert Armstrong? What does family mean to Daunt and Rita? And Victor? What about Lily?

10. It?s easy to get carried away talking about the key families in the plot, the Vaughans, the Armstrongs, and Lily and her brother, but what about the family at the inn? What important functions do they perform? And what do the drinkers --- largely unnamed --- add?

11. Storytelling is central to ONCE UPON A RIVER. The story of Quietly the ferryman is an invention of the author, but it contains many elements from traditional or mythological tales. Does it remind you of any other stories in particular?

12. How many types or styles of story are told in ONCE UPON A RIVER? Be as wide in your interpretation of ?story? as you like!

13. Folk beliefs are still alive on the riverbank --- changelings, witches and dragons are all still real to some, and the Armstrongs believe Bess has a Seeing eye. What are the real-life consequences of these stories? Which characters have faith in these stories, and which do not? How does it affect their actions?

14. In the context of women?s lives in the 19th century, what do you make of Rita?s reluctance to marry? What brings her to reconsider?

15. Is the fortune-telling pig mere light relief or something more?

16. The identity of the girl is one of the driving mysteries of ONCE UPON A RIVER. What were your early thoughts about who she really was, and did they alter as the story developed? What did you think of the way this question was resolved at the end?

17. The ending elaborates on the ?return to life? of children apparently drowned. Did this come as a surprise to you?

Author Bio

Diane Setterfield is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of THE THIRTEENTH TALE and BELLMAN & BLACK, and a former academic, specializing in 20th century French Literature, particularly the works of Andre Gide. She lives in England.

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