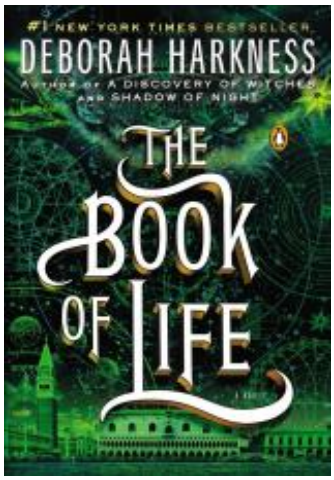
The Book of Life

by Deborah Harkness



About the Book

The #1 *New York Times* bestselling series finale and sequel to A DISCOVERY OF WITCHES and SHADOW OF NIGHT

Fans of the *All Souls Trilogy* sent this highly anticipated finale straight to #1 on the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list. Bringing the series? magic and suspense to a deeply satisfying conclusion, THE BOOK OF LIFE is poised to become an even bigger phenomenon in paperback.

Diana and Matthew time-travel back from Elizabethan London to make a dramatic return to the present --- facing new crises and old enemies. At Matthew?s ancestral home, Sept-Tours, they reunite with the beloved cast of characters from A DISCOVERY OF WITCHES --- with one significant exception. But the real threat to their future has yet to be revealed, and when it is, the search for Ashmole 782 and its missing pages takes on even more urgency.

Discussion Guide

In lieu of a guide, we offer a conversation with Deborah Harkness. We hope this enriches your discussion of THE BOOK OF LIFE, the third book in the bestselling All Souls Trilogy.

Question: In your day job, you are a professor of history and science at the University of Southern California and have focused on alchemy in your research. What aspects of this intersection between science and magic do you hope readers will pick up on while reading THE BOOK OF LIFE? There?s quite a bit more lab work in this book!

Deborah Harkness: There is. Welcome back to the present! What I hope readers come to appreciate is that science ---

past or present --- is nothing more than a method for asking and answering questions about the world and our place in it. Once, some of those questions were answered alchemically. Today, they might be answered biochemically and genetically. In the future? Who knows? But Matthew is right in suggesting that there are really remarkably few scientific questions, and we have been posing them for a very long time. Two of them are: Who am I? Why am I here?

Q: Much of the conflict in the book seems to mirror issues of race and sexuality in our society, and there seems to be a definite moral conclusion to THE BOOK OF LIFE. Could you discuss this? Do you find that a strength of fantasy novels is their ability not only to allow readers to escape, but also to challenge them to face important moral issues?

DH: Human beings like to sort and categorize. We have done this since the beginnings of recorded history, and probably well back beyond that point. One of the most common ways to do that is to group things that are ?alike? and things that are ?different.? Often, we fear what is not like us. Many of the world?s ills have stemmed from someone (or a group of someones) deciding what is different is also dangerous. Witches, women, people of color, people of different faiths, people of different sexual orientations --- all have been targets of this process of singling others out and labeling them different and therefore undesirable. Like my interest in exploring what a family is, the issue of difference and respect for difference (rather than fear) informed every page of the *All Souls Trilogy*. And yes, I do think that dealing with fantastic creatures like daemons, vampires and witches, rather than confronting issues of race or sexuality directly, can enable readers to think through these issues in a useful way and perhaps come to different conclusions about members of their own families and communities. As I often say when people ask me why supernatural creatures are so popular these days: Witches and vampires are monsters to think with.

Q: From the moment Matthew and a pregnant Diana arrive back at Sept-Tours and reinstate themselves back into a sprawling family of witches and vampires, it becomes clear that the meaning of family will be an important idea for THE BOOK OF LIFE. How does this unify the whole series? Did you draw on your own life?

DH: Since time immemorial the family has been an important way for people to organize themselves in the world. In the past, the ?traditional? family was a sprawling and blended unit that embraced immediate relatives, in-laws and their immediate families, servants, orphaned children, the children your partner might bring into a family from a previous relationship and other dependents. Marriage was an equally flexible and elastic concept in many places and times. Given how old my vampires are, and the fact that witches are the keepers of tradition, I wanted to explore from the very first page of the series the truly traditional basis of family: unqualified love and mutual responsibility. That is certainly the meaning of family that my parents taught me.

Q: While there are entire genres devoted to stories of witches, vampires and ghosts, the idea of a weaver --- a witch who weaves original spells --- feels very unique to THE BOOK OF LIFE. What resources helped you gain inspiration for Diana?s uniqueness?

DH: Believe it or not, my inspiration for weaving came from a branch of mathematics called topology. I became intrigued by mathematical theories of mutability to go along with my alchemical theories of mutability and change. Topology is a mathematical study of shapes and spaces that theorizes how far something can be stretched or twisted without breaking. You could say it?s a mathematical theory of connectivity and continuity (two familiar themes to any reader of the *All Souls Trilogy*). I wondered if I could come up with a theory of magic that could be comfortably

contained within mathematics, one in which magic could be seen to shape and twist reality without breaking it. I used fabric as a metaphor for this worldview, with threads and colors shaping human perceptions. Weavers became the witches who were talented at seeing and manipulating the underlying fabric. In topology, mathematicians study knots --- unbreakable knots with their ends fused together that can be twisted and shaped. Soon the mathematics and mechanics of Diana?s magic came into focus.

Q: A DISCOVERY OF WITCHES debuted at # 2 on the *New York Times* bestseller list and SHADOW OF NIGHTdebuted at #1. What has been your reaction to the outpouring of love for the *All Souls Trilogy*? Was it surprising how taken fans were with Diana and Matthew?s story?

DH: It has been amazing --- and a bit overwhelming. I was surprised by how quickly readers embraced two central characters who have a considerable number of quirks and challenge our typical notion of what a heroine or hero should be. And I continue to be amazed whenever a new reader pops up, whether one in the US or somewhere like Finland or Japan --- to tell me how much they enjoyed being caught up in the world of the Bishops and de Clemonts. Sometimes when I meet readers they ask me how their friends are doing --- meaning Diana, or Matthew, or Miriam. That?s an extraordinary experience for a writer.

Q: Diana and Matthew, once again, move around to quite a number of locations in THE BOOK OF LIFE, including New Haven, New Orleans and a few of our favorite old haunts like Oxford, Madison and Sept-Tours. What inspired you to place your characters in these locations? Have you visited them yourself?

DH: As a writer, I really need to experience the places I write about in my books. I want to know what it smells like, how the air feels when it changes direction, the way the sunlight strikes the windowsill in the morning, the sound of birds and insects. Not every writer may require this, but I do. So I spent time not only in New Haven but undertaking research at the Beinecke Library so that I could understand the rhythms of Diana?s day there. I visited New Orleans several times to imagine my vampires into it. All of the locations I pick are steeped in history and stories about past inhabitants --- perfect fuel for any writer?s creative fire.

Q: Did you know back when you wrote A DISCOVERY OF WITCHEShow the story would conclude in THE BOOK OF LIFE? Did the direction change once you began the writing process?

DH: I knew how the trilogy would end, but I didn?t know exactly how we would get there. The story was well thought out through the beginning of what became THE BOOK OF LIFE, but the chunk between that beginning and the ending (which is as I envisioned it) did change. In part that was because what I had sketched out was too ambitious and complicated --- the perils of being not only a first-time trilogy writer but also a first-time author. It was very important to me that I resolve and tie up all the threads already in the story so readers had a satisfying conclusion. Early in the writing of THE BOOK OF LIFE,it became clear that this wasn?t going to give me much time to introduce new characters or plot twists. I now understand why so many trilogies have four, five, six --- or more --- books in them. Finishing the trilogy as a trilogy required a lot of determination and a very thick pair of blinders as I left behind characters and storylines that would take me too far from the central story of Diana, Matthew and the *Book of Life*.

Q: A DISCOVERY OF WITCHES begins with Diana Bishop stumbling across a lost, enchanted manuscript called Ashmole 782 in Oxford?s Bodleian Library, and the secrets contained in the manuscript are at long last revealed in THE BOOK OF LIFE. You had a similar experience while you were completing your dissertation. What was the story behind your discovery? And how did it inspire the creation of these novels?

DH: I did discover a manuscript --- not an enchanted one, alas --- in the Bodleian Library. It was a manuscript owned by Queen Elizabeth?s astrologer, the mathematician and alchemist John Dee. In the 1570s and 1580s he became interested in using a crystal ball to talk to angels. The angels gave him all kinds of instructions on how to manage his life at home, his work --- they even told him to pack up his family and belongings and go to far-away Poland and Prague. In the conversations, Dee asked the angels about a mysterious book in his library called ?the Book of Soyga? or ?Aldaraia.? No one had ever been able to find it, even though many of Dee?s other books survive in libraries throughout the world. In the summer of 1994, I was spending time in Oxford between finishing my doctorate and starting my first job. It was a wonderfully creative time, since I had no deadlines to worry about, and my dissertation on Dee?s angel conversations was complete. As with most discoveries, this discovery of a ?lost? manuscript was entirely accidental. I was looking for something else in the Bodleian?s catalogue, and in the upper corner of the page was a reference to a book called ?Aldaraia.? I knew it couldn?t be Dee?s book, but I called it up anyway. And it turned out it WAS the book (or at least a copy of it). With the help of the Bodleian?s Keeper of Rare Books, I located another copy in the British Library.

Q: Are there other lost books like this in the world?

DH: Absolutely! Entire books have been written about famous lost volumes --- including works by Plato, Aristotle and Shakespeare to name just a few. Libraries are full of such treasures, some of them unrecognized, and others simply misfiled or mislabeled. And we find lost books outside of libraries, too. In January 2006, a completely unknown manuscript belonging to one of the 17th century?s most prominent scientists, Robert Hooke, was discovered when someone was having the contents of their house valued for auction. The manuscript included minutes of early Royal Society meetings that we presumed were lost forever.

Q: SHADOW OF NIGHTand A DISCOVERY OF WITCHEShave often been compared to young adult fantasy like TWILIGHT, with the caveat that this series is for adults interested in history, science and academics. Unlike Bella and Edward, Matthew and Diana are card-carrying members of academia who meet in the library of one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Are these characters based on something you found missing in the fantasy genre?

DH: There are a lot of adults reading young adult books, and for good reason. Authors who specialize in the young adult market are writing original, compelling stories that can make even the most cynical grownups believe in magic. In writing A DISCOVERY OF WITCHES, I wanted to give adult readers a world no less magical, no less surprising and delightful, but one that included grown-up concerns and activities. These are not your children?s vampires and witches.

Author Bio

Deborah Harkness is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of A DISCOVERY OF WITCHES, SHADOW OF NIGHT, THE BOOK OF LIFE, TIME'S CONVERT and THE BLACK BIRD ORACLE. A history professor at the University of Southern California, Harkness has received Fulbright, Guggenheim, and National Humanities Center

fellowships. She lives in Los Angeles.

Critical Praise

?Juicy and action-packed.?

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