

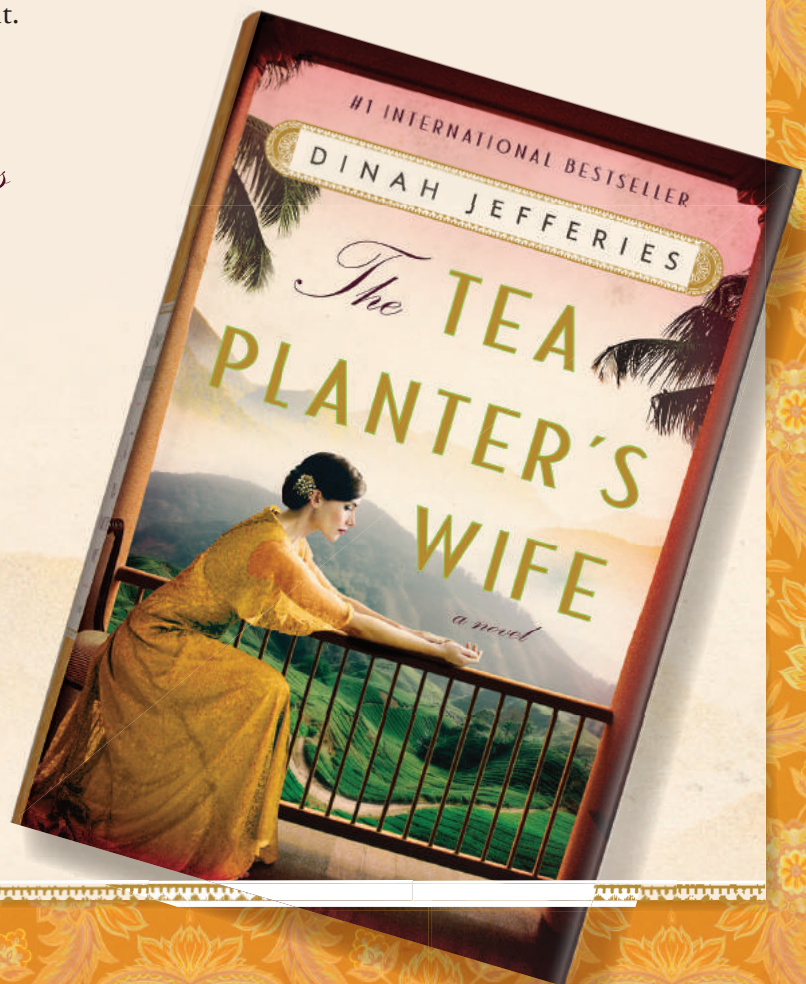
DEAR READER,

I'm delighted to present my novel, *The Tea Planter's Wife*, set in Sri Lanka when it was known as Ceylon. While typical of the period—1925 to 1934—Gwen's story could be something that might happen today, though I imagine our responses would be very different. Either way, her life on a luxurious tea plantation, beside a lake in the misty hill country, turns out not to be quite the idyllic scenario she had imagined. Her personal story is at the heart of the book though the pages are also infused with the scent of tea. That being the case, I've compiled a list of my favorite teas, and offer tempting ideas for when to drink them. I've also revealed the story behind the book and gathered together reading-group discussion points too.

Please dive into exotic, aromatic Ceylon. I hope you will enjoy Gwen's story as much as I loved writing it.

With very best wishes

Dinah Jefferies



TEA AND ME

D I N A H J E F F E R I E S

Tea was introduced to Ceylon in the 1800s by James Taylor, who began a tea plantation near Kandy and started manufacturing tea. When I was researching *The Tea Planter's Wife* I got to know the late Andrew Taylor, a descendent from a branch of James Taylor's family, who introduced me to the complex grades of fine Ceylon teas.

ENGLISH BREAKFAST TEA

Being a true Brit I can't start my day without a nice hot strong cup of English breakfast tea, for me with a splash of soy milk! My husband turns his nose up unless it's proper cow's milk. However, having mentioned about "being a true Brit," according to Wikipedia, "English breakfast tea" seems to have originated not in England but in the USA, possibly back in 1843 by a tea merchant named Richard Davies in New York. The blend varies, with Assam, Ceylon and Kenyan teas, and sometimes including Keemun (Chinese black tea) in the best blends. Mine just comes from the local supermarket.

BLACK CEYLON TEA

Later in the day I love a black Ceylon tea with a fine blend including lots of broken orange pekoe, which gives a fabulous strong flavor with citrus overtones. I love it lightly brewed, without milk or just with a slice of lemon. Alternatively, I'll brew it for longer and stronger and have it with milk. It's a real pick-me-up. I never put sugar into this tea. It's my afternoon tea of choice. (There are some lovely blends of black Ceylon teas that include ginger or cinnamon, perfect for a winter evening in front of the fire (milk, if you wish, and a small amount of sugar.)

LAPSANG SOUCHONG

We drink a lot of Lapsang Souchong in our house, as it's my husband's favorite. For him, it is the one for a mid-morning cuppa. Lapsang leaves are traditionally smoke-dried over pinewood fires, taking on a distinctive smoky flavor. I like it unsweetened with a slice of lemon or even a slice of lime.

EARL GRAY

Another of my favorite teas for any time of the day: straight, with lemon or just a splash of milk. I admit I buy Earl Grey tea bags but that is also because, if I'm brewing a pot of almost any of the other black teas I've mentioned, adding a single bag of Earl Grey to the rest of the tea seems to lift the brew without overpowering it.

GREEN TEA

While in Vietnam researching another of my novels, I got used to green tea, both hot and iced, often with lemon but best with lotus blossoms in the brew. Heavenly. And reputed to cure many an ill. India, China, and Vietnam all do great green teas but the best green teas for me also come from Ceylon. Ceylon green has a particularly rich pungent taste . . . my green tea of choice.

ICED LEMON TEA

On a hot day, an iced lemon tea always goes down well, but brew your own tea, don't buy ready-made in a bottle. They always have far too much sugar and that spoils the delicate flavor. Make a pot of tea with your favorite tea leaves, let it cool, and pour it through a strainer over ice and sliced lemons in a jug. Don't add too much sugar. Put it in the fridge for 10 minutes, then serve.

MY THREE FAVORITE HERBAL TEAS

My final three favorite teas are not teas but herbal . . . tisanes, really. When I lived in the Sierra de Aracena mountains in Southern Spain on the northern boundary of Andalucia near the border with Portugal, a large lime tree grew in one of the squares of our village. The locals would pick the blossoms and make a fragrant lime flower tea that, as it was slowly sipped while gazing across the forested mountains, seemed to relax you and wash your cares away. If you are having trouble sleeping or suffer from indigestion, then camomile tea seems to cure both. Warm but not too hot and unsweetened is my favorite way of drinking it. Finally, hibiscus flower tea. This intense crimson flower can be found growing throughout Southeast Asia and is used extensively in drinks and in cooking. You can buy the dried flowers made into a fabulous tea to drink hot or cold, but do try adding sugar and reducing it to a syrup to pour over a good vanilla ice cream. Magic.


THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

The idea for this book came about while talking with my late mother-in-law about her life in India. She was born in Calcutta but lived in Delhi and had colorful tales about the difficulties and challenges people faced at that time. While we were talking, I knew I had to set the book in the East and though I chose Ceylon rather than India, many of the issues would have been similar. I already knew that it would be a book about a life-changing secret that could never be told and gradually the ideas for the story developed from that.

I wrote the first draft before visiting Sri Lanka (once known as Ceylon), where I stayed in a colonial planter's "bungalow" on a tea plantation; bungalow doesn't convey the utter luxury of the place. The romantic location was almost exactly as I'd described it in the book, so it really couldn't have been more perfect for picking up detail and local color, with fireflies flitting at night and the sound of cicadas and the gently lapping water all around. I visited a tea factory, hardly changed since the 1930s, where I saw the entire sequence of processing the raw leaves into our familiar packets of tea. The bungalow boasted a vast library of old books about tea and about the lives of the planters and their families. One book gave me all the spelling and pronunciations of English words spoken by the Sinhalese in what used to be called "pidgin" English. I'd never have found that book anywhere else. Another told of how in the past brown babies had been used as bait by white hunters to lure crocodiles out of the water. The crocs were shot and the babies freed from where they had been tied, but just imagine if the hunter missed. Horrific practice and a horrific thought.

Two days before we were to leave for home, a cyclone farther north resulted in immense rainfall: half a meter fell within 24 hours and the air was so white you couldn't even see the lake. Then, on the final morning, it was discovered that the heavy rain had washed the road away, so we had no option but to leave our hotel by outrigger canoe. All the luggage was piled on one canoe, where it balanced precariously, and my husband and I climbed into another. It was still drizzling, so there we sat squashed in our tiny canoe with our umbrellas held up above our heads. We crossed the large lake and were deposited on the far shore where our ankles were checked for leeches. There the road had not been destroyed and we continued to Colombo by car just in time to catch our plane back home to the United Kingdom.

It was an amazing experience to witness the contrast between the lives of the planters and the lives of their workers. Although conditions are relatively better now, there is still a disparity and the sight of the shanty towns on the edges of Colombo were disturbing. I was born in Malaysia, when it was British Malaya, and love travelling in the East, as it reminds me of my childhood. I've been lucky enough to enjoy research trips to Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and India. And yet, when a trip is all over, it's great to come back home for a good cup of English breakfast tea and to get on with the writing. That's my great privilege and joy.



THE TEA PLANTER'S WIFE

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Who did you think the woman in the prologue was and where did you think she was going? Did your perception of this character change as you read the novel?
2. Discuss Gwen leaving her life behind to live on a tea plantation. Could you see yourself making this drastic lifestyle change?
3. Upon Gwen's arrival in Ceylon, Laurence is withdrawn and distant. Why did you think this was? Were you surprised that he was so different than how Gwen described him?
4. Dinah Jefferies creates a wonderful sense of time and place in the novel. Did you find it easy to picture Ceylon and the tea plantation?
5. Gwen and McGregor clash on how they think the plantation should be managed. Did you ever sympathize with McGregor's viewpoints? Did you ever think Gwen was overstepping?
6. What did you make of Gwen's attempt to re-create her childhood hobby of making cheese on the tea plantation?
7. What role do you think Verity serves in the novel? Discuss why you think she was so bitter and manipulative.
8. The night in the hotel after the party becomes a turning point in the novel. As the reader, we only get Gwen's interpretation of the truth. What did you think happened? Did you ever doubt Gwen's assumption as you continued reading?
9. Discuss the decision that Gwen makes immediately after childbirth. What do you think you would have done in her shoes?
10. Discuss the issues of race and colonialism in the novel. Do you think racism is a cultural stigma that is learned? The two children in the book get along well and don't care about the color of their skin. Do you think this is an argument that racism is not inherited?
11. Discuss the secrets that the characters kept from one another and how they impacted their lives. How could things have been different if the characters told one another the truth? Do you think there are times when hiding a secret is better than telling the truth? Is this decision easier or harder when it's someone you love?

A CONVERSATION WITH
DINAH JEFFERIES
AUTHOR OF *THE TEA PLANTER'S WIFE*

Q. In your own words, can you introduce readers to the premise of *The Tea Planter's Wife*?

A. The novel is set on a tea plantation beside a misty lake in 1920s Ceylon. It's almost the end of the colonial era, and all the certainties of British life are changing. Nineteen-year-old Gwendolyn Hooper is the new bride of the plantation owner, Laurence, a wealthy and charming widower. But her idyllic dreams of marriage are shaken by echoes from the past—an old trunk of musty dresses, a hidden gravestone in the grounds, and locked doors. Her new husband seems haunted by the past. When Gwen goes into labor, with Laurence away from the house, she is presented with a terrible choice—one she feels she must make without her husband's knowledge. Can she keep such a powerful secret? If not, can Laurence possibly forgive what she has done? As all the secrets unfold, her marriage to Laurence is threatened, as is the old colonial lifestyle. Ultimately, *The Tea Planter's Wife* is about what we feel we have to conceal from the people we love, and what happens when we do.

Q. Can you tell us about your early childhood years in Malaysia, and how those memories have affected your writing? How did you handle the transition to life in England?

A. My fondest memory of growing up in Malaya is of the gardener shinning up the palm trees in our garden to cut down the coconuts. I loved Malaya and when we left to come and live in England I felt as if I'd left a piece of my heart in the tropics. When I was writing my first book, I was surprised by how many memories of Malaya came racing back: the bright yellow ice cream, the Chinese circus, and our holidays on tiny semi-deserted islands. But most of all it was the colors, the exotic scents, and the feel of the heat on my skin. It took me a very long time to get over leaving Malaya, and though I love England now, I certainly didn't back then. Writing has helped me deal with the issue of loss in my life though that wasn't what drove me. You have to dig deep when you write and that's what I do, but the little piece of me that still belongs to the East will never fade. I can't see myself ever setting my novels anywhere else.

Q. You have lived all across the world. Can you tell us about some of your most memorable life experiences?

A. In the late 1960s I was an au pair for the Contessa Guicciardini Strozzi in San Gimignano, Tuscany, Italy. I also spent time living in a musicians' commune (which included a number of cousins of Queen Elizabeth), as I was married to the lead singer of a rock 'n' roll band.

Q. What prompted you to pursue a career in writing at this stage in your life?

A. I had no plans to be a writer, although I've always enjoyed reading and throughout my life have scribbled little bits and pieces. An entire novel seemed too vast a thing to undertake. But when we were living in a tiny mountain village in Southern Spain, I had time on my hands and it was too hot to go out. It was the ideal time to think about writing a novel, and so I worked out a plot and I began. It was as simple as that. I hadn't expected to fall in love with writing, but I did, and the discipline you need to write is not a problem for me. If you really want to write, you just do it. No excuses. If you find yourself continually not writing, then forget it.

Q. Where did you find the inspiration for this particular story?

A. My late mother-in-law was born in India and her family included tea planters in India and Ceylon. The book was initially inspired by stories she told. After finishing research for my first novel, *The Separation*, which is set in Malaysia, I looked across the Bay of Bengal and spotted a little pearl drop in the India ocean: Sri Lanka, once a British colony known as Ceylon, and chose it as the location for my second book. I already had the idea for the core story—a life-changing secret—so it was just a case of going to Sri Lanka.

Q. You visited a colonial tea plantation as part of your research for this novel. Can you tell us about that immersive experience?

A. In Sri Lanka, I fell in love with a misty tea plantation overlooking a lake in the central highlands. With evenings lit by fireflies and flaming torches, amidst a background of singing cicadas, it was so stunning I didn't want to leave. I spent my days fortified by endless cups of tea, and with my nose in a book from their extensive library. That reading gave me the detail that makes the book feel authentic. The colonial bungalows are not what you might imagine, but are unbelievably luxurious homes, sometimes with two floors. While there I was given a guided tour of a working tea factory. As for the food, I remember egg hoppers—strange thin biscuit cups with an egg inside. Also buffalo curd—a wonderfully thick yogurt, which you ate with jaggery, a syrup I'd never heard of before.

Most exciting was when a ferocious monsoon began two days before we left, intensified by a cyclone farther north. It was amazing; you couldn't see your hand in front of your face and it washed the road away. The gardeners carried our luggage on their heads! We had to leave to come back to the United Kingdom in two outrigger canoes—well, at least to the point where the road had not been destroyed—one piled high with our luggage and another for my husband and me.

A CONVERSATION WITH DINAH JEFFERIES, AUTHOR OF *THE TEAPLANTER'S WIFE* (CONT.)

Q. *The Tea Planter's Wife* tackles the issue of racism on several levels. How did you incorporate this topic into the novel, and how were you able to write from both sides of this complex issue?

A. I revealed it through the minor characters, partly because my heroine, Gwen, finds the racism hard to understand, and partly because her husband, Laurence, is more progressive than the other British colonials. It's a crucial aspect of the novel and impacts Gwen's life in the most tragic way. While I wanted to show the colonial racism that existed then, I had to make it palatable to a modern audience. So you're always balancing different needs: the need to be true to the past, the needs of a modern reader, and the needs of the story itself.

Q. How have your experiences as a wife and parent influenced your portrayal of family dynamics within the novel?

A. *The Tea Planter's Wife* is about why we feel we have to keep secrets from the people we love, and what happens when we do. It's also about love and loss, and I drew on the shocking accidental death of my teenage son to write this part of the book. You always draw on your own feelings and experiences when you write and, in a way, it was quite cathartic. And yet, although my own son died, I felt that even worse would be not knowing what has happened to your children, so I drew on that tension and emotion for the novel.

Q. What is your favorite kind of tea?

A. Oh dear! Good-quality builder's tea—but, of course, it must come from Ceylon!