



Caption: here?

A LIFE IN *50 shades* of paint

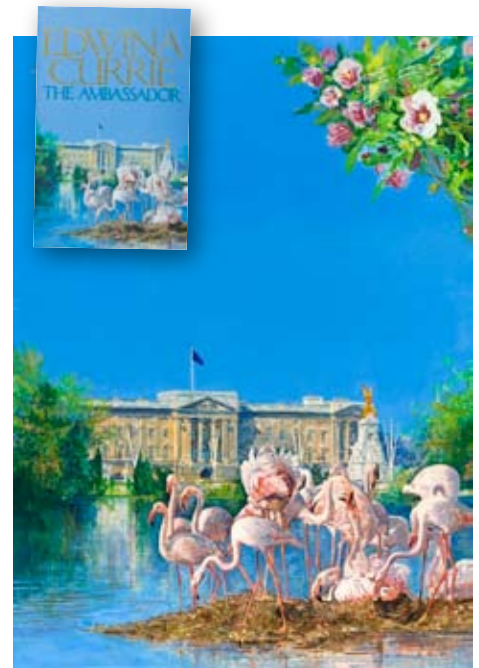


Inspiration for artist Melvyn Warren-Smith's forthcoming exhibition came from a certain best-selling novel. But don't expect whips and chains – instead think Venetian masks, birds, trees and sweets

BY: JANE SULLIVAN

Fifty Shades of Grey is a worldwide 'literary' sensation but for Melvyn Warren-Smith the idea is nothing new. Melvyn's paintings have appeared on the covers of thousands of novels by writers such as Catherine Cookson, Rosamunde Pilcher, Claire Rayner and Emma Blair. And he's read thousands of books and short stories over the course of his career.

"I read Fifty Shades but it's all been done before. It's back to the old heroine thing – about him giving her wonderful things and making her feel good," says Melvyn who lives and works in Warwickshire. The story did, however, inspire a series of paintings. "I was doing the illustrations for a serial in a Scandinavian magazine, using Venetian masks as a prop and decided to take the idea further. I love the mystery and theatre of masks. I was playing around with some ideas with one of the models



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I work with – trying to do something provocative and mischievous,” he says. The resulting pictures are both sexy and seductive and a complete contrast to many of his other paintings – of wildlife, landscapes and his grandchildren.

Melvyn, from Leamington Hastings, paints anything and everything – gannets flying off the seashore in Tenerife, sugar mice bought on a trip to Brighton, wheat fields in the Warwickshire countryside. “I love painting out in the landscape,”

says Melvyn. “I’m not what you might call a ‘craft’ painter where every single blade of grass is drawn in. I like to capture the scene but give the viewer a reason to ‘get into’ the picture – use their imagination. I sometimes see these very technically detailed paintings and I think ‘the artist has done all the work for you, there’s nothing left to imagine.’ It’s craft not art.”

Using the imagination is something he feels strongly about and he mourns the passing of painted book illustrations in this country – although he has a steady stream of work from abroad. “Book covers nowadays are often photographs and I think it’s limiting. You can’t use your imagination in a photograph but with an illustration you can allow yourself to believe that this story could be about you,” he says.

Creating the illustrations for book covers involves a huge amount of work. “I read the story and I can see visually

what the characters look like, what they’d wear, the room they’re in.” Melvyn hires models, costumes and props to set up scenes in a photography studio in Rugby. He and photographer Paul Lapsley shoot the scenes and then it takes around a week to paint the pictures. “The trick is not to spoil the story by revealing too much in the illustration but capture enough of the story to make the reader want to read on,” he says. And millions of readers the world over have read on, tempted into the story by Melvyn’s paintings. ■

Melvyn Warren-Smith’s annual exhibition is open to the public from Saturday 4th to Monday 6th May (12-6pm) at his gallery in Leamington Hastings (directions are signposted from the centre of the village). For further details visit www.melvyn-warren-smith.com A limited collection of original book cover paintings is for sale on Amazon or direct from the artist.