

Her early childhood

I was born in Winchester in England on 2nd February 1970. My parents live on a farm in the country so my upbringing was free, innocent and idyllic. I remember warm summer evenings watching the combine harvesters or cold frosty mornings rising early to watch the cows being milked up at the Manor. I was a dreamy child - in fact all my early school reports lamented the fact that I stared out of the window all the time instead of concentrating on my studies. I composed songs on the piano from a very early age and wrote children's stories for my small cousins. I had a penchant for storybooks that came with a corresponding tape and much to my embarrassment I came across an old one I had recorded about twenty years ago, complete with musical interludes of me trilling out unsteadily on the flute or recorder!



Her years at school

I went to Hanford School in Dorset from the age of 8-12. A rambling 500 year old mansion deep in the countryside with fields of ponies, packs of dogs and eccentric school teachers who taught while their dogs sat on their desks chewing the chalk. It was a boarding school which meant we went home on occasional weekend but otherwise but otherwise only for the holidays. I didn't question it at that stage although I did miss my parents dreadfully. In fact, I do remember being taken back after the holidays and sitting at the dormitory window watching the headlights of their car disappearing up the long drive until they were lost in the night. But those moments of acute misery were fleeting and once the homesickness was swallowed I'd rush around playing with my friends and forget all about it. My memories of that time are like honey. We used to ride up on the hills in the early morning before breakfast having been awoken in the dormitory by a matron who would tap you on the shoulder and whisper the pony's name into your ear. It was immensely exciting and you'd lie in bed longing to be chosen. There was also the house ghost called "The Brown Lady" who would apparently tidy up the dormitory. I never saw her and my bed was always a mess! Library Loo was also said to be haunted and we'd make solo trips to it in the middle of the night only for dares. The house was filled with long, creaking corridors and narrow staircases. The dormitories on the second floor were large and airy whereas those on the third floor, which were once used to house the servants in the days when it was a private home, were small with low ceilings. I was often on that floor and it was rather creepy but better for midnight feasts as you were further away from the matrons. There was a vast cedar tree we used to climb where every branch had a name until someone fell off and it was banned. The headmaster, Mr Sharp, who was one of England's brightest gems, wrote a school play every year in which every girl had a part. My first year I was a cannibal and I remember the entire summer term was taken up with rehearsals. In fact, I barely remember doing any work at all. At that stage I was useless at most academic work but good at essay writing. In fact, I was accepted into Sherborne School for Girls on account of the essay I'd written. I must also mention that while I was in my final year the school took part in a film for television called Schoolgirl Chums. Because I was tall and looked older than my years I was allowed to be an extra. IN spite of being the only member of the cast to look directly at the camera I donned my 1930s costume with delight and made friends with the star of the film - none other than Patsy Kensit. I doubt she'd remember me and that film is probably one she'd rather forget she had ever made. But I still have it on video and it never fails to fill me with nostalgia.

Her adolescence

Also in Dorset, Sherborne School for Girls was much bigger and not as charming as Hanford. I questioned boarding school and went through an insecure adolescent phase where I was incredibly homesick. In spite of that I played the flute and guitar, sang in the choir, played lacrosse not only for the school and county but in the Junior England team. I was fit in those days so please don't ask me to gallop up a lacrosse pitch now, I'd probably pass out after ten paces! I was head of house and vice head of school. Never far from my pencil and pad I wrote lots of short romances for my girlfriends, usually about the boy they fancied at the boys' school. I had a penchant for sweltering jungles complete with mosquitoes and waterfalls, having had no experience of the romantic variety I also wrote steamy love scenes on beaches which I later realised was just as uncomfortable as humid, insect infested jungles! They were usually along the lines of the other then a third party puts the cat among the pigeons so they hate each other again before the final, passionate moment where they unite for the last time and live happily ever after. If any of my friends still has one of the

manuscripts I'll pay them to burn it!

Argentina

After leaving school I went to live in Argentina for a year. My mother was born in Argentina to an Anglo Argentine mother and Irish father so it seemed as a natural place to go and I had always been enchanted by stories of her childhood in Buenos Aires. The trip was set up by my Mexican godfather who had connections in Argentina. (My mother's family had long since moved to Chile). I taught English to the three children of an Argentine family who lived on an estancia deep in the pampa, not unlike the estancia in my novel. They were a large family who spent weekends in the country returning to Buenos Aires during the week. I fell in love with the place immediately. I have tried to explain this great love of mine as I have never felt so connected with a country and I have been to quite a few.



I was brought up in the English countryside, also a big family of uncles and aunts, and educated at boarding schools. Suddenly at nineteen years old I found myself in a new country, thousands of miles away from home. I spoke little Spanish and had never been on my own in a foreign country before. For the first time in my life I was independent. I made my own choices. I was welcomed into the warm, enthusiastic arms of this fabulous family and treated as one of them. I had never lived in a city before and I found it immensely exciting. The 'austral' which was the currency then was so weak against the dollar that I earned a fortune and had the luxury of two hours private tuition of Spanish every day for the entire year that I was there. One or two people spoke to me in English but soon my Spanish was good enough to join in and it just got better and better. There's nothing like living in the country to really get to grips with the language. I remember my delight when I had my first dream in Spanish.

The family was vast and we moved around in a large pack of cousins and friends. I arrived on the 2nd February 1989, the summer in Argentina, and spent the entire month on the estancia. My memories of that time are very strong. Everything was new and exhilarating. The scents of eucalyptus and honeysuckle, the flat pampa, the vast sky, the smell of ponies and the sounds of dogs barking and children playing and the thunder of the polo matches that were played most afternoons. The food was rich and bountiful, especially the meat, which the Argentines are famous for and the dulce de leche, which I still crave for from time to time. I remember my first pair of alartagas, which are like espadrilles but with rubber soles, they were not only comfortable but my first attempt at being like anyone else. I threw away my horrid English shoes and skipped about it in the sunshine feeling like an Argentine. The children were adorable and their parents became like parents to me. What struck me also was everyone's willingness to embrace me into their family. I suddenly had so many friends who all made time for me, were patient in showing me their country and hearing about mine. There was no rivalry, no suspicion - I have never come across a warmer nation in all my life.

Buenos Aires was noisy and exciting. The mother of the children immediately drew me a map of the area where we lived and I took time to walk up and down the boulevards and get to know the people in the shops who all talked to me. After a few months I knew all the shopkeepers and waiters and felt a strong sense of belonging. I was in the unique position of being employed by the lady of the house but also a friend so I moved from the maid's quarters into the private side of the house claiming both the family and their staff as my friends.

Because I was a stranger and spoke with a foreign accent no one could box me. I could be anyone I wanted to be and that gave me enormous confidence. My family weren't around to comment and judge and I could be reckless without raising eyebrows. I talked to taxi drivers, who were extremely friendly and a wonderful source of information on everything from politics to gossip, and I never wasted a moment when I could be practising my new language.

I was suddenly asked out on dates by young men who were not only handsome but chivalrous - a quality which was rare in my own country especially as all the boys I met in England were mere schoolboys. The Argentine men I met were very confident, tanned, dressed casually but with flair and I remember noticing that they wore very smart leather belts with brass buckles and leather moccasins on their feet. They always wore open neck shirts and sat on sofas like lazy lions with their legs stretched out in front of them. They were immensely attractive and very forward. Of course they all assumed that as I was European I would be 'easy', so I spent a lot of time rebuffing their advances and their heavy declarations of love when they called by telephone. I was

immensely flattered and I think I grew up very quickly. I made mistakes too. I led some of them a merry dance bruising their egos when I turned them down. But I did enjoy a romance with a polo player - one can hardly live in Argentina and resist. He was handsome and confident and treated me very badly, but I loved every minute of it and if I could go back I would do it all over again. That was my first experience of romance. I fell in love twice, with him and with his country; the latter is the love that has endured.

Back to England

At the end of the year I had to return to England to attend University in Exeter. It was terrible leaving, I felt I would never see them all again. In those days there were no direct flights, I had only telephoned my parents twice otherwise I wrote letters, so Argentina felt like it was really the other side of the world. As a leaving present I had written and painted a story for the three children about a magical adventure. They were the stars and I spent weeks painting their bedroom and their faces as realistically as I could. They still have it. After all I'm happy that they've kept it.



I was miserable leaving. After seeing my friends and family again and telling them all my stories and showing them all the photographs I wanted nothing more than to go back again. I attended University, studying Spanish and Italian, and dreamed of saving enough money to return. Fortunately the university holidays are long and a year later I flew out again. I expected I would slot right back again. I imagined that nothing would have changed. I was to be deeply disappointed. I had belonged, I had felt Argentine. I had believed I was one of them. Yet, suddenly, I didn't belong anymore. Everyone had moved on a year. It's much more prevalent in young people because their lives change so quickly - they leave school, go to university, marry, work, have children - I found that the grown-ups hadn't changed at all but my friends had all moved on and after talking to them for a while and catching up I realised that we didn't have our lives in common anymore. I stayed three weeks. Three wonderful yet somehow wistful weeks and then I returned home. It was only then that I took Argentina down from the pedestal I had put her on and embraced my own country again.

About writing

I always knew that one day I would write about Argentina. When I was older and wiser and had experienced life. In the meantime I wrote the children's book about a family who lived in a 500-year-old house full of ghosts, witches and magic. It was rejected on the basis that it was too 'upper-class'! Reading it now I realise that it just wasn't good enough. I married a writer, Simon Sebag-Montefiore, in 1998. When I started going out with him I put my writing in a drawer. I felt there was only room for one writer in the relationship and I didn't want people to think that I had started writing only because of him. But it was he who encouraged me to write and he gave me some very good advice. He told me not to write for any specific market and to write for myself and not in a view to publishing it. That prevented me from worrying about what people might think and from making the narrative too contrived. So I bought myself a laptop computer and started. I had no plans, just the themes and the core story, otherwise it just evolved as I wrote it and later added more dimensions and characters layer by layer.

The themes are autobiographical : belonging and nostalgia and the story is more of an allegory of my love affair with Argentina than the shallow, fleeting love affair I had. I loved Argentina and felt I belonged then I left her only to return later to find that I no longer belonged. I tried to find her but she was lost - I ended up learning to love her in a different way. My characters, Santi and Sofia, also love each other, leave each other, and find each other again years later and attempt to recapture the past. It cannot be done. The relationship has to change. Sofia, who has lived the past 24 years in England, discovers that she does not belong in the land of her childhood anymore. That sense of loss I too experienced. The ombu tree is the only tree indigenous to Argentina, it is the only tree that really belongs there, so I use that as a symbol around which to create my story. All the characters I forged from my imagination and the story was organic - I just let my mind wander and followed it.

I didn't know how it was going to end. I placed my mind in the mind of my characters and worried about it as much as they did. But realistically there was only one way it could end and besides,

sometimes the Hollywood ending when they disappear happily off into the sunset, undermines the depth and emotion of the book. I want the story to stay with the reader for a while after they've finished it.

When Jo Franck at AP Watt agreed to represent me, the book was only 50,000 words long, because she loved it so much she gave me the confidence to expand. At that stage I didn't think I was capable of writing a novel with many characters. I went home to find the story just spilled out. I would sit in front of a blank sheet and it would just happen. I find that element of writing exciting and stimulating. I thought if I don't know what's going to happen next then my reader surely won't either. By the time it was bought by Hodder & Stoughton it was 170,000 words long.

I wrote *Meet Me Under the Ombu Tree* because I have to write. I gaze out of windows on buses and my mind fantasises about other lives. I'm a born dreamer. I write for myself but also to entertain. It gives me great pleasure when someone likes what I've written. Initially I didn't write with a view to having the book published, I didn't know whether anyone would want it. Of course, it is a dream to have one's work in print, in a bookshop with a glossy cover but I never dared to hope as much.

Author's comments

"ARGENTINA is a land fit for fables. A land where passions run as hot as the steaming tangoed floorboards off the backstreets of San Telmo. A land where the sheer mountains of the Andes meet the flat plains of the pampas. It is a country of extremes and that is how I loved it. Like a lover does, possessively, jealously, madly. Last month, 10 years after I had first gazed over those humid plains, I sold my first novel, "Meet Me Under the Ombu Tree", a sweeping epic of forbidden love set against an Argentine landscape. This is the story of why I wrote it.



[...]

I always knew that one day when I was older and wiser, I would write a book about this country that had claim to my heart. After university I hopped from job to job- two months at Rock Circus, three at Smallbone designing kitchens. The one consistent factor in my life was writing. I filled my spare time attempting romances or children's books. It wasn't until much later that I felt ready to write about Argentina, about my sense of belonging and loss, expressing those feelings through the characters of two ill-fated lovers. An illicit love, a traumatic parting and finally an attempt years later to bring back their past and relieve it all again.

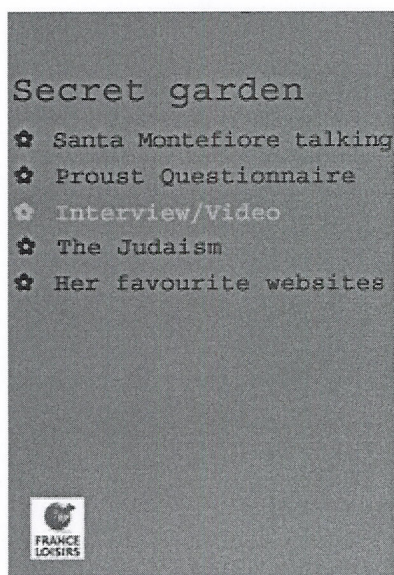
"Meet Me Under The Ombu Tree" took the best part of three years to write. By that time I had a full time job for a Chelsea jewellery company, and I also spent a year converting to Judaism and learning Hebrew, so I wrote on weekends and evenings. I wrote not for a specific market, not even with a view to publishing, but for myself. I based it on the hot siestas of the Argentine campo but not on the family I knew. When I started writing I remembered sitting beneath the shade of the ombu tree, the only tree indigenous to Argentina, the perfect symbol around which to create the story.

[...]

I still love Argentina, but relationships change with the years and though initially I felt shocked and bereft, I now find I can love her in a different way. I can inhale her scent of eucalyptus and bathe in the sweet nostalgia of my memories and even enjoy the melancholia they bring in their wake. I have learned that one must make the most of the present moment because once it is gone, it is gone forever.

Santa Montefiore, The Daily Telegraph, 27/11/99
"How I Lost My Head In Argentina"

Entre los inmigrantes q. llegaron a la Argentina entre 1850 y 1950, vivieron los miloneros, lugares, irlandeses, escoceses y galles re afincaron en varios pais y se dedicaron a hacer vinulos



Santa Montefiore talking

My mother is Anglo-Argentine and grew up in Buenos Aires. Initially I lost my heart to Argentina when as a nineteen year old. I spent a year working for an Argentine family before returning to study Spanish and Italian at Exeter University in England. I fell in love with everything about the country, the vast flat pampa, the smells of eucalyptus and gardenia, the horses, the very feel of the place. I then returned to Argentina a year later to find that I didn't belong there any more. I was a tourist where before I had lived and worked as all of them, kicking my heels around Buenos Aires as if I owned the place. So I decided to channel my feelings of nostalgia and regret into a novel about two people who love each other, leave each other, then twenty-four years later find themselves together again and attempt to recapture the past by reviving their affair. I chose the ombu tree as the main symbol in the book because it is the only tree that truly belongs on those flat plains.



- We've all experienced a magical moment in our lives, a holiday, a romance or even just a day that we long to relive again if only we could. Of course, one can never bring back the past, but what I have learned through writing my novel is that one can only endeavour to live in the present moment and savour every second, because the here and now is the only reality and there are always new memories to be made.

Santa Montefiore

The Judaism



"Being Jewish has changed me. My life is richer and has acquired a depth it didn't have before. I feel I have left a cove to a wider sea. I'm surprised at how little I knew about Judaism before I converted and I am much aware now of how ignorant people are. Ignorance breeds fear. The people who challenged me about converting were typically the most ignorant.

I love my new Jewish life. I relish the austerity of the religion and the rich whimsy of the Jewish culture. Now I go to the synagogue instead of church, I celebrate Yom Kippour, Rosh Hashanah and Passover. I feel I have lived two lives and have learnt an enormous amount from both of them.

There are two clichés about Jews that are true, I discovered. One is that Jewish men are cosier and more sensual than public school educated English men. I have yet to find a Jewish man discussing the

latest football score or drinking a glass of beer. The second is that they have a tremendous respect for learning. My Jewish friends are always arguing about books and ideas. I'm constantly stimulated. I also feel more cosmopolitan. It used to be said that Jews were too cosmopolitan, but, now, it's no longer frowned upon to be international. I feel English and Jewish and am loyal to both. There is a big debate about whether being Jewish is a race, a culture or a religion, but the main definition is that a Jew is someone who lives as a Jew - therefore, I'm Jewish.

[...]

Jerusalem has given me a greater understanding of what it means to be Jewish. The Wailing Wall is more than just the ruin of a long vanished Temple steeped in the legends of antiquity. Now I can see how it reverberates with history, faith and memory, which I have come to feel too. I have discovered Israel for myself and love it in my own way.

I'm happy that I converted. Not only do I have a deeper understanding of the religion but also of my husband. I can now share his spiritual home with him and understand why it is so important not to lose it. At Passover, along with other Jews, I can now say, "Next year in Jerusalem". "

Santa Montefiore, "Now I Am A Jew".

"I'm going to Jerusalem for the first time", I told a friend.

"How appropriate", she exclaimed. "The Millennium is the most incredible time to make the trip".

"Not if you're Jewish", I replied, to her embarrassment.

She had forgotten that almost two years ago I converted to Judaism and married the writer Simon Sebag-Montefiore in the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in St John's Wood. It was my choice to convert from the Church of England, because if we are fortunate enough to have children I should like them to be brought up in one faith, as opposed to being torn between two ; because I knew how much being Jewish meant to my husband ; and because I have always been drawn to the simplicity and culture of the Jewish religion.

My conversion took a year of studying Jewish history, Hebrew and the 4,000 year old religion. It didn't require courage - as people often assume - but dedication and an open-mind. It was like a university course, with essays and a final viva in front of a board of four rabbis.

I grew up in a small village in Hampshire. I went to Church on Sundays and always believed I would one day marry there. At school we attended morning pray-ers and Sunday services in Sherborne Abbey. When we went skiing in Klosters every Christmas my father often took the service if an English-speaking vicar couldn't be found : From the village green to country tennis tournaments, it couldn't have been a more English upbringing. "

Santa Montefiore, Sunday Telegraph, 11/06/2000

Biography

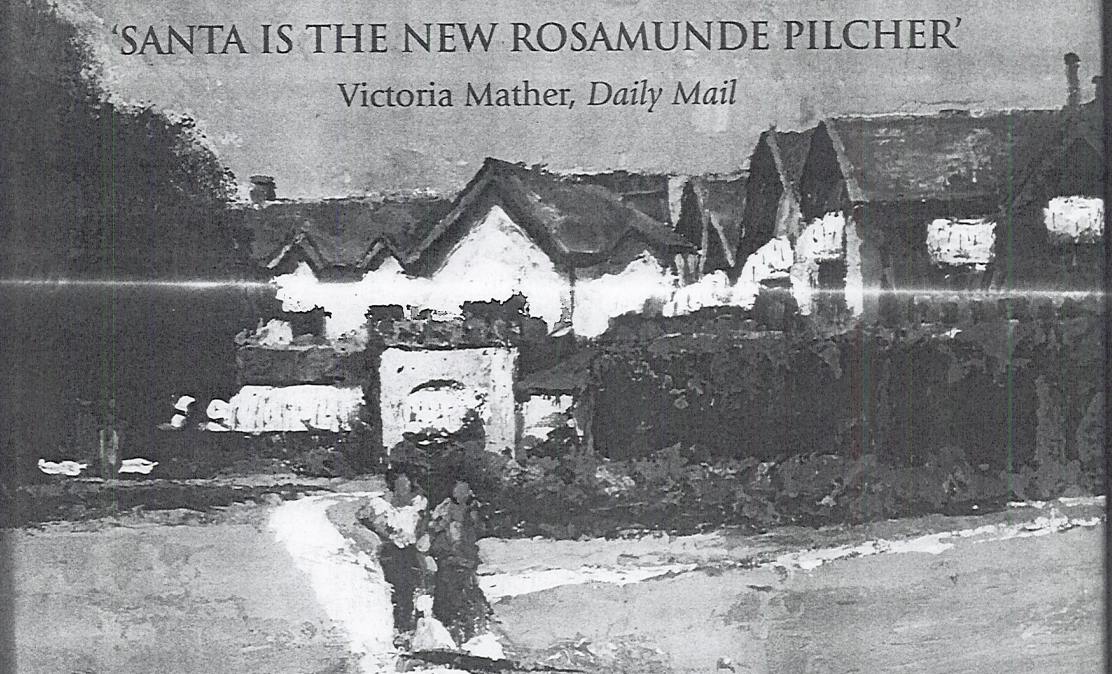
- ✧ Her early childhood
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SANTA MONTEFIORE

'SANTA IS THE NEW ROSAMUNDE PILCHER'

Victoria Mather, *Daily Mail*



THE
*Forget-Me-Not
Sonata*

Also by Santa Montefiore

Meet Me Under the Ombu Tree

The Butterfly Box

SANTA MONTEFIORE

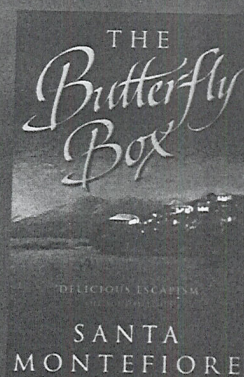
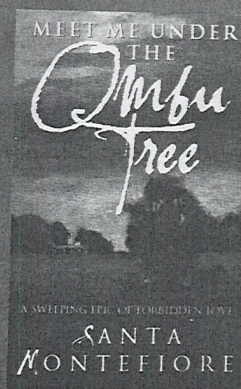
The Forget-Me-Not Sonata

Hodder & Stoughton



SANTA MONTEFIORE


was born in England to an Anglo-Argentine mother, and read Spanish and Italian at Exeter University. After a year teaching English on an Argentine estancia, she spent much of the nineties in Buenos Aires. She lives in London with her husband, the historian Simon Sebag Montefiore and their daughter, Lily. Her previous novels, *Meet Me Under the Ombu Tree* and *The Butterfly Box*, are available in Coronet paperback.



Cover painting: Ben Warner/Artist Partners
Author photograph: © Adam Brown

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'The steps aren't so important at this level,' he began, rolling up the sleeves of the white shirt that he wore beneath a black waistcoat. 'You have to feel the music and let it lead you.' He beat his chest with his fist to illustrate his point and emphasised the word 'feel' by closing his eyes. Audrey grinned up at Louis, who smiled back, understanding from her expression that they had mastered that step already. 'Now hold each other close,' he instructed, as Louis pulled Audrey into his arms. 'Closer, the tango is a dance of passion. It is like making love.' Audrey blushed and tried to hide her face in Louis's neck. 'Don't be bashful, Señorita, the tango is a sensual dance, so release all those inhibitions and follow your heart.' He pounded his chest again with his fist. Louis chuckled and kissed her temple reassuringly. 'I'm following your heart, Audrey, because it's ensnared mine,' he whispered into her ear.

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