



SIREN SAYS

A conversation with Jennifer Michelle Herrera

In your own words, tell us what *Siren Says* is about.

Siren Says is the story of young woman who is afraid of her own power. She's out-of-touch with her intuition as well as the gifts she's inherited from the women in her family. This is a story about how, by listening to nature (i.e. using plant magic), she learns to find herself. In doing so, becomes the person she was always meant to be.

Your debut novel, *The Hunter*, is a crime thriller, while *Siren Says* takes you into the world of fantasy with a hint of romance. What inspired you to explore the genre, and how did your writing process differ from your first book?

Frankly, we've all been through enough this year. I really felt that we didn't need another realistic murder and corrupt people with too much power. What we need—no, what we deserve—is a magical escape. We deserve sentient plants who gossip but in the best way. We deserve a hot man who plays the harp. We deserve sex so good that flowers bloom in congratulations. We deserve poetry and nature and transformation and a magical place where we can feel totally immersed. So when I realized what I wanted to create, it was obvious that the book couldn't be a thriller. It needed to be a fantasy.

With my thriller, the task was pretty straightforward. Start with a dead body and figure out how they got dead. With fantasy, however, the task was infinitely



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more complex. My first question was: what is Raven's magic? Then: what are the rules of her magic? Then: how does her magic affect the setting? Does anyone else have magic? Is their magic different from Raven's magic? How does that magic affect the plot? Because the story still needs a plot!

If writing a thriller was like designing a bedframe, writing fantasy was like designing a whole bedroom set. There's just so much more that has to go into it. But the work paid off because I was able to make this totally inviting space.

***Siren Says* is filled with Celtic-inspired mythology and botanical magic. Can you talk a little more about your research process and how you approached weaving these elements into the story?**

So much of *Siren Says* is about the wisdom that we inherit. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that I was pulled to write about both Celtic mythology and botanical magic as each draws on ancient knowledge to help us figure out how to live.

I did a huge amount of research in these areas because I needed the world to feel as real as possible to me so I could write about it effectively.

I read probably a dozen books about plant medicine and magic. See, for many plant alchemists (as they're called), they believe that every living thing is composed of three parts: a body, a soul, and a spirit. In fact, that's where alcohol gets its name—it was actually thought to be a distilling of the "spirit" of a plant. And when we make something like an essential oil? We're distilling a plant's essence. That is, we are drawing out its soul. This idea was the basis of the plant magic used in the book. There are three branches of magic: soul magic, which Raven has and which relies on plant extracts; body magic, which manipulates physical properties; and spirit magic, which is the magic used by the spirits that haunt Cynefin, Pennsylvania.

The spirits were based on Welsh mythology, mostly from this book *The Mabinogion*, which is the oldest collection of Welsh stories on

record. Many of the "spirits" from my book were illustrated in another book *Welsh Monsters & Mythical Beasts* by CCJ Ellis, which was hugely helpful.

Because the main character's family immigrated to Pennsylvania from Wales, I wanted the creatures that haunted the town to have to do with the family's past. So it was natural to bring these ancient mythological creatures to life in this story.

On the surface, *Siren Says* is a story about witches, crystals, and plant-based magic, but at its heart it's a story about self-discovery and generational trauma. Why was it important for you to explore trauma through a fantasy lens?

I was in the middle of writing this book when my mom died in a car crash. It completely tore me apart, and it changed the book that came out of me. On the surface I was telling this lush, velvety story of witchy magic and plants and power, but beneath the surface, I was struggling. My world had been shattered, and I didn't know how to put the pieces back together. And then, inexplicably, in the ancient stories I'd been reading, I found my answer.

There's this story of a woman named Mis and a harpist named Dubh Ruis, and I won't ruin it for you, but that story was my beacon and my answer and ultimately something more.

There really is so much wisdom in the ancient stories, so long as we have eyes to see it.

The world of *Siren Says* feels lush and immersive. How did you approach worldbuilding in this novel, and why was it important for it to feel like more than just a backdrop?

From the minute I knew that Raven was going to have plant magic, I knew that plants needed to play a big part in the scenery. And then I really took that idea and ran with it. English ivy winds up the banisters, and there are garlands of moonflowers. There are wisteria chandeliers

and massive willow trees and walnut trees that poison any other plants that try to grow too close. I wanted the reader to feel totally immersed in this world. I wanted to be totally immersed so I wasn't thinking about anything else.

The women in *Siren Says* are complex, deeply flawed, and compelling all at the same time. How do you approach writing female characters with that kind of depth and nuance?

I don't try to write complex female characters. I just always just try to write with honesty. No one is ever just one thing. No one is ever all good or ever all bad. Even in nature, we see that the same plant that is beneficial to one species is poisonous to another. How we choose to characterize those traits is always a matter of perspective. I write complex women because we are complex. And we are flawed. And we are really freaking compelling.

Who are some of your favorite fantasy authors and did you draw inspiration from their books for *Siren Says*?

Rebecca Ross is a huge inspiration. I love how she never lets the worldbuilding dominate the story, even though the worldbuilding is always top notch. Her stories are always about the humans at the center of them.

I also love Queen Diana Gabaldon, Adrienne Young, Alix E. Harrow, V.E. Schwab, Sabaa Tahir, Deborah Harkness, Diane Marie Brown, Alice Hoffman, Leigh Bardugo, Sarah Addison Allen, Holly Black . . . I could go on and on.

I love it when fantasy becomes the lens through which we see ourselves. It's an escape but it's not *escapist*. In the same way that ancient myths were never escapist, these stories were knowledge passed down over generations, giving us insight as to how to live.

***Raven and Idris* share a deliciously spicy enemies-to-lovers dynamic. Is there a romance trope you especially love writing?**

I do love enemies-to-lovers because sometimes when we feel so strongly about someone, we don't know how to categorize it. The safest thing to do with strong emotion can be to dismiss it as hatred.

What I'm really interested in next is turning tropes on their head a bit more. I think with my next book I'd love to do a lovers-to-enemies situation, which has my brain turning in all sorts of delightful ways.

If *Siren Says* were a spell, what ingredients would it require? Why?

I love this question! Every good spell has a base of hawthorn powder because hawthorn is a sacred tree and every spell is sacred. From there I'd add some linden because it's calming. Motherwort because it eases pain. Capsicum because there is absolutely some spice! A touch of ginseng for energy. And rosemary for clarity of purpose.

Discussion Questions

1. When *Siren Says* opens, Raven spots dozens of crows outside her window. She recalls having seen another gathering of crows right before her mother died. Crows appear again when Delilah visits and offers Raven a deal. What purpose are crows serving in this story? Have you ever seen crows during a pivotal moment in your own life? What did that mean to you?

2. In the beginning, when Raven looks back on her family lineage, she's very focused on the trauma that she has inherited and is rather dismissive of the gifts the women in her family have left for her. How is her initiation into magic a kind of reclamation of those gifts? How do those gifts literally connect her with all the powerful women who came before her?

3. When Idris arrives on the scene, Raven is on the floor, looking up at him. She's in sweatpants and he's in a fine suit. She's the paid help and he's the commissioned artist. How does this power dynamic play out over the course of the book? How does it change by the end of the story, when Idris is literally washing the dirt off of Raven's body? What does this tell us about love?

4. The story of Mis plays a big role in Raven's journey. (It is in fact a real Celtic myth!) Raven sees Mis first in a dream and then later discovers that Mis's story might be important for her life. What does Mis's story mean to you? What does it tell you about how we manage grief? How does this go against how we're usually socially programmed to

dismiss our own suffering? What does it mean that Mis is finally captured not by a warrior but by a harpist?

5. Plants are the basis of Raven's magic. The plants take care of Raven just as she takes care of them. They are an extension of her intuition. Have you ever felt connected to any plant? If you were one of Raven's spells, what botanical ingredients would you be made of?

6. Raven's ancestors each chose to continue using the Gwyllion to gain power despite knowing the damage they were causing. Why do you think Raven was finally ready to break the cycle? Do you think she would have ever been able to do that if she'd kept distancing herself from her past? What does Raven have to sacrifice in order to be the person she was meant to become? Was it worth it?

7. *Siren Says* works toward a climax that arrives on the night before Calan Mai, May 1. In Gaelic cultures, this is called Beltane. In English, this is called May Day. In Welsh, Calan Mai marks the halfway point between the spring equinox and the summer solstice and the official end of winter. In fact, traditional Welsh ceremonies included a physical battle between two "warriors," one representing winter and the other representing spring. What does it mean to you that Raven's transformation happens on the eve of this big day? Why do you think that the Welsh believed that the spirits could enter our world on Nos Calan Mai? How do you honor the thresholds of your own life? What rituals ground you as the world around you shifts?