

Tracy Chevalier, FRSL, Hon DLitt

Monday 21 July 2025

Orator: Professor Rachel Moseley, Vice Provost and Chair, Faculty of Arts

Vice-Chancellor,

It is a great pleasure to introduce this morning's honorary graduand, the internationally acclaimed novelist: TRACY CHEVALIER.

Tracy writes historical novels read and celebrated around the world. She achieved global recognition with *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, published in 1999, in which she created a character and a story for the unknown girl in Vermeer's 17th century painting.

The novel has sold over 5 million copies, has been translated into 43 languages, and was made into a successful film starring Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth. It speaks of the endlessly inquiring mind of a writer, that Tracy says that when she looks at the girl in Vermeer's painting, she still wonders what she's thinking!

In her subsequent nine novels, she has brought to life historical subjects including the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries of the late medieval period; the 19th century palaeontologist, Mary Anning, and, most recently, glass making in 15th century Venice.

Her work has illuminated works of art and the labour and lives of women in history through carefully researched and evocatively written stories, imagining and narrativizing the complex intersections of gender, politics, power and everyday life.

In her writing, Tracy transports readers to another time and place, whether a canal-side house in 17th century Amsterdam, a nineteenth-century farm in Ohio, or a middle-class home in Edwardian London. Her work is based on meticulous research, for example she learned how to quilt in preparation for writing about it in *The Runaway*. She went fossil hunting on the Jurassic coast, following in Mary Anning's footsteps, before writing *Remarkable Creatures*, and, before sending her protagonist in *A Single Thread* on a walking holiday between Winchester and Salisbury cathedrals, she walked the route herself.

Tracy consistently places women's stories at the forefront of her novels; her re-telling of Shakespeare's *Othello*, for instance, is done through Dee, the character based upon Desdemona.

Her protagonists are often women living in eras where their roles were limited by social and economic constraints, and their stories show the impact of their creative labour, both in their lifetime and in their legacy: their existence is memorialised in the endurance of a quilt, an embroidered cathedral cushion, in a necklace of handmade glass beads. The immediacy with which Tracy's work has portrayed women's historical experiences and the value of female creativity and

artistry have resonated internationally and continue to inspire discussion and scholarship around questions of gender and representation in contemporary literature.

Tracy has been a passionate advocate for literacy and creative writing: she has been a trustee of the British Library and is an ambassador for First Story, a charity that sends writers into schools to teach creative writing outside of the curriculum. She takes part in literary festivals around the world. A graduate of the University of East Anglia's well-known creative writing programme, she is an inspiration to teachers, students, and readers alike.

She has made a lasting impact on the literary world and the reading public, ensuring her place as a leading figure in contemporary historical fiction. Tracy has won many awards and prizes and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. We are delighted to add our own award today.

Vice-Chancellor: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, TRACY CHEVALIER.