hoopla digital: What was the research like for this novel? Were you familiar with the fashion industry or the craft of embroidery? What sources were most influential in the creation of this story?

Jennifer Robson: I went about the initial stages of research in my usual fashion, which is no different than that of any historian: I begin with secondary sources and then move to primary sources. With *The Gown*, I was already well versed in the history of the period, since my doctoral research focused in part on clothes rationing in Britain during and after WWII. Where I ran into difficulties was in connecting with anyone who had worked at Hartnell while the gown was being made. I had pretty much given up when I was connected—by pure coincidence—with an amazing lady called Betty Foster. Betty is the last surviving seamstress who worked on the gown, and my conversations with her were the making of the book. I honestly think, looking back, that I would not have been able to complete it without her help.

hd: The World War II era is fascinating, and books on this subject have been hugely popular with hoopla readers. What about this time period do you think is so particularly engaging for readers, and what makes it interesting to you as a writer?

JR: I think it's the sheer depth and breadth of the subject matter. There are so many stories to be told, and so many aspects of the war that have yet to be explored in any depth. In terms of my own interest in the period, I think it speaks to the novelist's need for high stakes in a story—you get readers to care by putting your characters in perilous situations. In this sense, the Second World War is an unbeatable canvas.

hd: As mentioned, historical fiction is an immensely popular genre. What is it about the genre in general that you feel is so powerful for readers? What does using the history and looking at the people behind it, or hidden by it, offer you as a writer? As a reader?

JR: Speaking as a reader, I have always loved the experience of being transported to another world—even if that different world is a dangerous and frightening place. As a writer, I love the challenge of building a world and populating it with characters who are true to the time in which they live, but whose struggles and triumphs are identifiable to modern readers.

hd: The novel develops split storylines occurring in 1947 and 2016 that heighten the drama of the novel as the past is eventually unraveled in the present day. Can you tell us about your decision to structure the novel this way? Did you always know you wanted to have a present-day point-of-view?

JR: I began work on *The Gown* with the expectation that it would take place entirely in 1947 and be told from the alternating points of view of Ann and Miriam. The farther along I got, however, the more I realized that I needed a modern-day storyline to answer the question of what happened to Ann and Miriam after their work on the gown was complete. It also gave me the chance to set part of the story in Toronto, where I live now, and have a Canadian heroine!

hd: In the novel, we see various points of view on the royal family. Where do you fall? What might we have seen you doing during the wedding of either Prince William and Kate Middleton or Prince Harry and Meghan Markle? Is there a particular member of the family—past or present—that fascinates or moves you most?

JR: I have a tremendous fondness for the queen, and I hold her in real reverence, and I also love the younger royals. I am happy to confess that I was up at the crack of dawn for both recent royal weddings and held parties for my friends—we watched the ceremonies while wearing our PJs and fascinators! At the same time, part of me is uncomfortable with the notion of an inherited monarchy, though I do recognize that William and Harry are working to keep the royal family relevant and a force for real good.
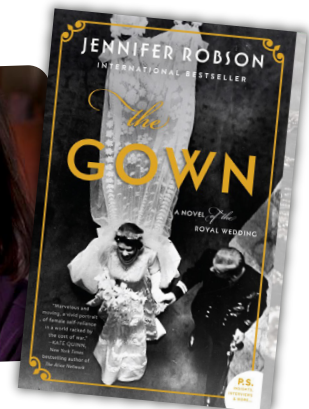
hd: *The Gown* is your fifth novel, all of which feature women striving, loving, and surviving against the gears of history. Can you talk a bit about the development of your main characters, and what inspires and compels you to write about these women?

JR: I think I'm just interested in writing about people whose stories might otherwise be overlooked. The history many of us are taught tends to focus on a small handful of figures, most of them men, most of them white, and leaves out nearly everyone else. I want to know about everyone else.

hd: Regarding the characters in this book, which—aside from the obvious ones in the royal family—are based on real-life individuals, and which are entirely fiction?

JR: My central characters—Ann, Miriam, Heather, and their families and friends—are products of my imagination. Known historical figures such as Norman Hartnell, who appears in a number of key scenes in the book, are portraits based on the available evidence I had. There's also a third category of character in the book: people such as Miss Duley, whose name I uncovered while doing my research, and of whom there is a single photograph in a *Picture Post* article on Norman Hartnell from 1947, but whose life story I was unable to discover in spite of months of research. In the case of Miss Duley, as well as Mam'selle and some other figures from Hartnell, I created fictional characters to go along with their names.

hd: Which book of your own do you think readers should dive into next if they enjoy *The Gown*?

JR: I would suggest they go back to *Goodnight from London*, my previous book, because they will recognize some of its characters, most notably Walter.

hd: We are excited to share *The Gown* with hoopla book club readers! What do you hope they will take away from this novel?

JR: I hope they will get a sense of how difficult life was for the people of Britain after the war, and how courageous they were in spite of their hardships. And I also hope they will come away with an understanding of how much work goes into the creation of one of those royal wedding gowns!