

Authors on *The Sheik*: A conversation with Liz Fielding

Elizabeth Cole

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Abstract: Liz Fielding is an award-winning romance author of several sheik romances. In this interview with Elizabeth Cole, Fielding discusses her influences and views on *The Sheik* and sheikh romance.

About the Author: Elizabeth Cole recently graduated from the University of Birmingham with a BA (Hons) in English Literature. Over the summer of 2019, she worked with Dr Amy Burge and Professor Deborah Longworth on an Undergraduate Research Scholarship, during which time she undertook this interview.

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Liz Fielding is an award-winning author of romance. She has published over seventy romance novels since the early 1980s, as well as a guide to writing romance called *Liz Fielding's Little Book of Romance* (2012). Winner of the RITA Best Traditional Romance and Best Short Contemporary Romance as well as the RNA Romance Prize, Fielding has written several sheik romances, the most recent of which, *The Sheik's Convenient Princess* (2017), was nominated for a RITA award. In this interview, Fielding discusses how living in the Middle East affected her views of sheik romance and how she brings realism to her sheik novels.

Elizabeth Cole: *What were your first interactions with The Sheik or the sheik genre? What did you think about the book/genre?*

Liz Fielding: When I hoped to write for Mills and Boon, I read one of Penny Jordan's early books that was published in the 1980s.[1] I had lived in the Middle East for a number of years, so I accepted that it was pure fantasy. In real terms, the hero had acted in a barbaric way, kidnapping a young woman and forcing her to marry him (with the connivance of her family, which was a lot worse!). The ending was, however, emotional and the whole book sizzled. Sometime later, I bought the Virago edition of E. M. Hull's *The Sheik*. Equally barbaric,

but very compelling and the change in both hero and heroine was totally believable. In my own first sheik romance, *His Desert Rose*, Hassan, my sheik hero also kidnapped Rose, my “Kate Adie” style heroine, but only to save her from being used as a political pawn and with no ulterior sexual motives. I then turned *The Sheik* on its head and it was my heroine who seduced the hero, which was a lot of fun.

EC: *Why do you think The Sheik has been so influential? Why is it still compelling for readers?*

LF: Even if we’ve never seen the film, we are all familiar with the smouldering image of Rudolph Valentino, the powerful and incredibly sexy man dominating a helpless woman. The fact that he raped her repeatedly is appalling, but it gave a vicarious thrill to Hull’s audience. Diana was in a situation where she was helpless and the sex was totally guilt free. The 1930s reader was able to safely enjoy that shocking thrill at second hand. Why it still resonates with the #metoo generation is difficult to say, but the incredible success of E. L. James’ “Grey” trilogy suggests that we still enjoy fantasy sex within the safety of our own heads.

EC: *How would you describe the sheik hero?*

LF: The sheik, in romance fiction, is all-powerful, a ruler of vast empty spaces that mean more to him than all the world’s riches: a man apart, alone. In my own books, he is often a man who has taken himself out of the centre of power, either for the good of his country or for someone he loves. He may be in mourning, lost or torn between doing the right thing for his family and the woman he loves. Honour is everything. Karin Stoecker, the former Editorial Director of Mills and Boon, once described the sheik as a cowboy in another hat and he does have elements of “Shane”. In my books he is never a seducer, would never use his power to force a woman into his bed. It takes a strong woman to save him.

I have read sheik romances where the hero is not someone I’d ever want to meet. The same could be said for some [of] the billionaires that appear in romantic fiction series. My own sheiks are never violent. Their innate gentleness is what I love about them. My sheiks are, mostly, westernized by education in America or the UK. This does, I think, chime with reality, at least at college level. It also makes them more relatable to readers. I don’t think this is essential. Some readers do still love an old-fashioned, unreconstructed tyrant!

EC: *Who is your favourite sheik hero and why?*

LF: I love all my sheik heroes. They have the wonderful qualities of my western heroes, but they have something extra. They have an otherness, a distance, the thousand yard stare, and a kind of glamour – sadly lacking in the real thing – that comes with the power to change the world at the click of their fingers. And I love the fact that they are all distantly related, or allies, so that I can bring them back into new stories, so that readers can keep up with their lives!

EC: *What do you think about the more “problematic” elements of sheik romance? Do you agree with the criticisms?*

LF: I am well aware that some readers do not like sheik romances, particularly in the US. I fully understand and respect that response. I've never had any personal criticism because the people who don't like them don't read them. I was stunned when my last sheik romance, *The Sheikh's Convenient Princess*, was nominated for a Rita last year. I know – and I'm sure my readers understand – that my sheiks bear little or no resemblance to the real thing. Neither do the Greek and Sicilian billionaires, or the endless supply of dukes and earls that are so beloved of readers. I do know that a sheik book will always be one of my top selling titles.

I always set my books in fictional places for the simple reason that this is fantasy and I have no wish for political reality to intrude. I do research fauna and flora, but since I am familiar with the area – I've lived in Qatar, Bahrain and the UAE – I don't have to do much more than that. A genre romance is not the place for "issues", but the touch of reality lends an extra dimension to the stories, which I hope will appeal to readers. And yes, I like my sheiks to accept that women have rights, and give their women a part to play in leading their country forward.

EC: *Would you ever write a sheik romance with a Middle Eastern heroine?*

LF: I haven't yet. Never say never!

EC: *What do you think are the essential components of sheik romance?*

LF: They are the same components that work in any genre romance. A powerful man in a difficult situation. In the case of the sheik, this will almost certainly mean that he has to act outside the normal rules that govern the society in which he lives, which gives an extra edge to the story. He has to have an undeniable reason for not marrying the woman chosen for him or for actions that cause him to be disinherited. The sheik romance stands out because the hero is larger than life. The average billionaire might summon a helicopter to carry an injured woman to hospital. He doesn't risk his life riding down a sand dune and carry her away to safety on his horse – and then summon the helicopter.

EC: *Why do you write sheik romance?*

LF: I don't write many – a handful out of more than seventy books – but I know the region, having lived there for quite a few years. I find the culture fascinating, the landscape extraordinary and the power of the sheik makes him the perfect hero. And readers all over the world love them.

EC: *How do you think the sheik romance has changed over time?*

LF: All series romance has changed with the times. It's subtle, so gradual that it's barely noticed, but heroines no longer wear fur coats, heroes don't smoke cheroots, divorce is no longer taboo and single mothers are not objects of scandal. We have the hero viewpoint, and the heroines are holding down good careers. We no longer see the older hero marrying the ingénue. *The Sheik* would not be published now. He might have been raping Diana night after night until she liked it, but the reader was kept firmly outside the tent. What happened was

all in her imagination. I cannot comment on modern sheik romances as – like Penny Jordan – I read very little romance to avoid picking up other author’s phrases.

EC: *What is the future for sheik romance? Do you think it has a future?*

LF: Like everything else in publishing these things go in cycles. No sheik romances were published after the first Iraq war – I know, I tried to persuade my editor to let me write one – but more recent conflicts don’t appear to have affected their popularity. While the readers buy them, we will write them.

[1] Penny Jordan (1946-2011) was a novelist of regency and contemporary romance.

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