

Deeanne Gist

BESTSELLING, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

FALLING IN LOVE WITH HISTORY

An Exclusive Interview with Deeanne Gist on Writing *Tiffany Girl*

Sometimes, a great story is hidden in plain sight. That was certainly the case with the events on which best-selling author Deeanne Gist based her latest novel, the forthcoming *Tiffany Girl*, due out in May. In fact, the idea for the novel was actually sparked by some long lost letters found in an attic more than 110 years after they were written. But that spark was only the beginning. For Gist, bringing an idea to life is all about falling head over heels in love with the history behind her books. This means spending long periods of time in the locations where her stories are set, reading every historical document she can get her hands on, and truly immersing herself in information about the topics, time period and people she plans to write about.

Interviewer Brittany Benson spoke with Deeanne Gist about the discovery of the Tiffany Girls, research travel, and the fun process of commingling real life historical figures with the fictional characters in her work.

BB: How did you find out about the Tiffany Girls?

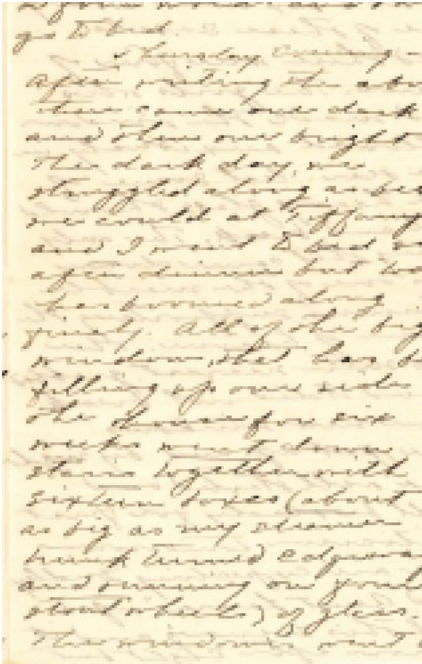
DG: The discovery of the Tiffany Girls is very new. Until recently, Louis Comfort Tiffany was credited as the creative force behind all the iconic glasswork Tiffany Studios produced during Louis' life. Then, in 2005, scholars discovered letters written by Clara Driscoll, the director of the Women's Glass Cutting Department at Tiffany Studios at the turn of the century. In her letters, Clara discussed with her family the design ideas she and the other Tiffany Girls had created for various lamps and windows. While many of these letters between Clara and her family were saved and treasured, they were ultimately lost over time. Until, that is, 100 years later, when a distant relative found some letters thrown into a box and stored in an attic. These letters left no room for doubt, Clara and the other Tiffany Girls were responsible for some of the most famous design work to ever come out of Tiffany Studios.

I first found out about the Tiffany Girls in an email from my mother. She'd learned about them from watching a PBS History Detectives episode that mentioned a strike organized by Tiffany Studios' male employees, followed by Louis Comfort Tiffany's decision to hire female art students in place of the men. Mom sent me an email immediately after the program ended, and after reading it, I knew I'd be telling the Tiffany Girls' story.

BB: Writing historical fiction requires a lot of research. What kind of preparation did you do before beginning the first page of *Tiffany Girl*?

DG: I confess to having a passion for all things historical. Because of that, I make sure to do my due-diligence during each of my book's research periods. That usually means reading books, newspapers and letters from the time period, visiting museums and historical societies, traveling to the city I'm writing about and so, so much more. With *Tiffany Girl*, I began by arranging a visit to the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum in Winter Park, Florida, which houses the biggest collection of Louis Comfort Tiffany's glass designs—including the chapel built for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.





An original letter from Clara Driscoll that Deeanne used in her research.

I also took stock of the historical society where Clara Driscoll's letters were stored. I then read all of her letters from the 1890's and found that Clara didn't dwell much on the personalities of her co-workers, but she did give wonderful insights into the lifestyles of herself, Mr. Tiffany and the other women working for him.

After reading these first-hand accounts, I dove into other books. I read everything from scholarly books on Mr. Tiffany to books about New York City, the political and economic climate of the 1890s, and the Chi-

cago World's Fair. When I'm reading these books, I make notes in the margins beside each paragraph. To keep track of my notes, I create an index system, which is a computerized spreadsheet, where I can search for a specific term and find which book gives that information. Admittedly, this process takes hours and hours on the frontend of my research, but I'd much rather spend the time indexing than searching for information while I'm in the middle of writing. That break in focus can really kill my writing groove, and no author wants that!

BB: Do you travel to each of the places you write about?

DG: Absolutely. I do this because writing description is my weakness. If all I had to do was write dialogue, I'd have my books out MUCH faster. I've discovered, however, that if I spend about ten days on location, it can make my descriptive passages stronger and more authentic, and really enrich the overall book. In the case of *Tiffany Girl*, I got to spend time in New York City, and I confess, I fell in love with it. What a city! Don't misunderstand, I don't spend all my days playing and going to shows. I hit the pavement with a long list of things that need to be accomplished--not all of them particularly glamorous..

That said, I do start out by doing the touristy things--like carriage rides and visiting landmarks--so I can get a flavor of the

city. Then, it's on to the historical societies and museums. Visiting these sites is important because I never know what I'll find! When I visited the Museum of the City of New York, I found a children's exhibit that displayed The Board Game of Old Maid and it was such a hoot. It had squares on the game board that said things like: "Uncongenial. Go Back 3 Spaces." Ha! Right in the middle of the museum, I plopped down cross-legged, pulled out a notepad, and drew the entire game board, what was written on each square, sketched the spinner, counted the tokens, etc. Later, when I was writing *Tiffany Girl*, I had my characters play The Board Game of Old Maid, something that wouldn't have been possible had I not gone to that museum!

I also like to physically go to the places I plan for my characters to live, work and play. Even though these places have changed dramatically over time, it's so helpful to see the streets and buildings where Clara and the Tiffany Girls spent time. Having a clear picture in my head makes it easier to translate over to you, my readers. A great example is when, in Clara's letters, she writes about spending a lot of time on her building's rooftop. In order to better describe the view that she enjoyed so often, I found the exact spot of her former residence and went up to the rooftop too! Okay, maybe it was three houses down the street because where she used to live is now a Holiday Inn Express and they wouldn't let me on their roof, but it still counts!

Another part of my traveling research involves ransacking the local section of a used bookstore. While I'm there, I pull every title on the city, read the back and ship the worthy ones back to my home in Texas. Once I'm home, I have a hefty pile of books to sift through. Depending on when my deadline is, I might not get through them all, but once I've read enough to feel comfortable, I start writing.

BB: Some of your characters, Mr. Tiffany and Clara Driscoll for example, are real people. How do you go about creating the characters that aren't real?

DG: I much prefer for my hero and heroine to be fictional because then I get a lot more creative freedom with them! But, before I begin writing or even plotting the book, I have to start from scratch with these characters. In the case of Reeve and Flossie (the main characters in *Tiffany Girl*), I begin to get ideas for them while researching the time period. I read biographies for adults and children (the children's biographies have so many fun details!) about people who grew up during the 1890's to get a feel for what their lives were like. It's important for me to understand what hardships they faced, and what kind of lifestyle was typical for people of this era.

Once I have that framework in place, I create an entire life for my characters--from their birth to the first page of my book. I create their families and backstories so they come to the book with baggage, which then determines how they handle the challenges they face throughout the course of the novel. Sometimes I even have to research my fictional characters' baggage! In *Tiffany Girl*, Flossie is an only child. Because I don't know much about being an only child, I did diligent research on what only children are like and how that family structure impacts them.

A lot of this research gives me ideas for plot points. In one of the used books I read on loneliness, there was a scribbled, hand-written note on the very last page that read: "In the middle of a dance is one of the few times I feel connected to another person." It was signed: "Afraid to be alone." After reading that, I just knew Reeve and Flossie (my hero and heroine) had to dance in *Tiffany Girl*, and when they did, a connection would be made.

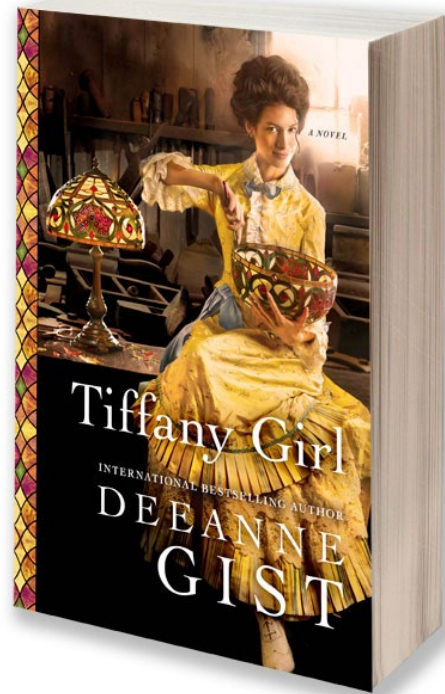
BB: So, you've got the premise for *Tiffany Girl*, you've done extensive research, you've traveled and built out your characters. What happens next?

DG: The writing begins! Well, not exactly. First I plan out how many pages need to be written each work day, then I build in days for emergencies (always have to have those, just in case!). After that, I write and write and write. At the end of each week, I send my critique partner, author Meg Moseley (who has been with me since my second book, bless her), the pages I completed that week. She's the only person in the world who sees my book in "raw" form. She critiques my pages and sends back her edits, which I print out and slip into a binder. (I do the same for her.) As soon as my entire first draft has been complete, the first order of business is to go through Meg's suggestions and incorporate all the ones I think are worthy--which is about 99.9% of them. Meg is so good!

Next up: Self-editing! I read *Tiffany Girl* over and over and over again until I am able to go through it and make very few changes. This process normally takes me about two months. With *Tiffany Girl*, I turned the manuscript in on September 1st, 2014. Within a few weeks, it is back on my desk with revision requests from the publisher. After that come line-by-line edits, and eventually the proofreaders' corrections. In February, I receive a final Xerox copy which is the formal typeset version of the book. I read through it one last time to make sure there aren't any typos or minor tweaks. Once I sign off on it and send *Tiffany Girl* back to the publisher, I don't see it again until it hits the shelves!

Whew! I sometimes think I'd rather have another baby--nah. Maybe not. LOL. In any event, I can hardly wait for *Tiffany Girl* to come out. I have May 5th marked on my calendar as my official "Delivery Date." No epidural required.

For more of Deeanne's insights and work, visit her online at www.IWantHerBook.com or on Facebook at www.Facebook.com/DeesFriends.



Tiffany Girl hits shelves May 5th, 2015.

Read an excerpt at www.iWantHerBook.com