maltatoday | SUNDAY • 28 JUNE 2026 BOOKS 3

Connecting to history through fiction

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MALTESE-CANADIAN author Marthese Fenech has reconnected with her Maltese roots through writing the Siege of Malta trilogy, a series heavily inspired by 16 century Maltese history.

During a visit to Malta in her early 20s, Fenech caught a bus to Valletta and bought a ticket for The Malta Experience. It was there that she became "enthralled" by the Great Siege of 1565. Seeing the event played out on screen brought the past to life for her in a way it never had before.

"My parents laid the foundation for my interest in Maltese history and identity. I grew up listening to their fascinating and colourful stories, speaking Maltese before I spoke English, and spending much of my childhood travelling back and forth between Malta and Canada."

The pivotal event, which she says "helped shape the future of the Mediterranean and, arguably, Europe itself," became the launching point for her deeper research into the siege and eventually, the trilogy was born.

Speaking to MaltaToday, Fenech says that as a Maltese-Canadian, she learnt about the Great Siege from a young age. "It has always been part of my heritage. It's woven into our identity and our collective memory."

She says she became acquainted with the siege and its significance early on, but as she grew older and began exploring the history for herself, she realised just how monumental the story was for Malta. However, it was not until that fateful trip to Malta as an adult that her inspiration was truly sparked.

Bringing the siege to life

The Siege of Malta trilogy consists of The Eight Pointed Cross, Falcon's Shadow, and Ash Fall. The story begins by exploring the hostility between the Ottoman Sultan and the Knights of St John, and how the fates of two powerful forces become intertwined.

Beyond the conflict, the characters must confront "perceived enemies as well as corruption and oppression, deceit and disaster" during this turbulent period.

When Fenech returned to Canada, she began researching further and quickly became captivated by the island's history.

"Malta sits at the crossroads of empires, faiths, and cultures, and in the 16 century, it was a place where the ambitions of some of the world's most powerful figures collided. Yet behind the famous battles, power struggles, and historical figures were ordinary people trying to survive extraordinary circumstances."

Photos of Marthese Fenech during her travels to Malta

It was the human element which drew her to historical fiction. "The genre allows us to bridge the gap between the history we study and the history people actually lived…"

Fenech says she wanted readers to feel immersed in the world she was creating. "I wanted readers to feel the heat of a Maltese summer, hear the church bells and cannon fire, walk the narrow lanes of Birgu and Mdina, smell the limestone dust and salt air, listen to the wildly entertaining Maltese banter, and experience the uncertainty, fear, courage, and of course, humour, of the people who called Malta home."

A connection across two worlds

Living outside of Malta has only strengthened Fenech's connection to the island.

"When you're surrounded by something every day, it's easy to take it for granted. Distance has given me a tremendous appreciation for Malta's history, culture, and the spirit of its people."

Growing up in a Maltese family in Canada, Fenech says she was always conscious of having roots in two worlds.

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Her father, Alfred Fenech, was deeply involved in Toronto's Maltese community, serving as the organist of St Paul the Apostle Church and as the anchor of his Maltese television programme serving the local diaspora. "Watching his commitment to preserving our culture left a lasting impression on me," she says.

"I've received lovely messages from readers across Canada, England, Ireland, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and beyond, many of whom have told me that my novels helped them reconnect with their roots…"

Fenech says that this dual perspective has been invaluable as a writer. "On the one hand, I feel a responsibility to honour the history and portray Malta authentically. On the other, I can approach the story much as an international reader would by asking the questions, exploring the details, and finding ways to make the setting accessible to those who may never have heard of Birgu, Mdina, or even the Great Siege."

Connecting with the diaspora

The response from the Maltese diaspora, Fenech says, has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the journey.

"I've received lovely messages from readers across Canada, England, Ireland, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and beyond, many of whom have told me that my novels helped them reconnect with their roots, inspired them to dig into Malta's history, or sparked conversations with family members about their ancestry."

She says she has also heard from readers who felt represented by the books, those who found an escape in the story, and others who were inspired by the underdogs.

A few even told her they were upset she had killed off a character they liked. "And those are probably my favourite to receive!"

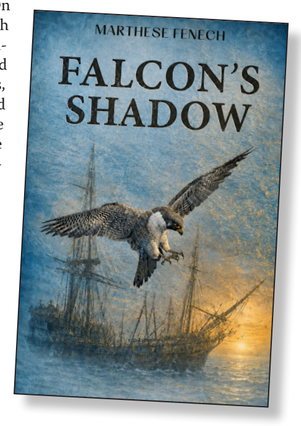
Balancing history and fiction

Historical fiction can be a difficult genre to crack, as it combines a fictional plot with a specific and real period of history. Fenech says writing it can feel like walking a "tightrope."

"This is actually a topic I've spoken about at conferences because it's one of the central challenges of writing historical fiction. As authors, we have a responsibility to respect the historical record, but we also have a responsibility to tell a compelling story. The challenge is finding the balance."

Fenech says she wants to represent real events and individuals faithfully, while ensuring readers remain emotionally connected rather than overwhelmed by facts.

"Historical fiction works best when it makes the past feel alive rather than academic."



Keeping Malta's story alive

When asked about the role she plays in keeping Maltese history alive, Fenech says communal memory survives because "each generation chooses to carry it forward."

"Historical fiction is one of the ways we can pass those stories on, not merely as facts, but as living narratives that continue to reverberate."

For Fenech, if her novels help even a small number of readers feel connected to Malta and the people who "came before them," she will consider that one of the most meaningful accomplishments of her writing career.

The Great Siege trilogy can be purchased from https://marthesefenech.com/books/