

**10 Questions with Nicole Evelina**  
**About her historical fiction novel *Madame Presidentess***

**1. Victoria Woodhull is relatively unknown. What inspired you to write about her? How did you find out about her?**

I learned about her by seeing a picture of her with an alluring caption on Pinterest, of all places. The caption said, “Known by her detractors as ‘Mrs. Satan,’ Victoria Claflin Woodhull, born in 1838, married at age fifteen to an alcoholic and womanizer. She became the first woman to establish a brokerage firm on Wall Street and played an active role in the woman’s suffrage movement. She became the first woman to run for President of the United States in 1872. Her name is largely lost in history. Few recognize her name and accomplishments.” I immediately had to know more and began my research. I mean, any woman called “Mrs. Satan” is someone I have to get to know!

**2. Why did you choose to write about her in particular?**

Not only is Victoria fascinating, but the fact that she’s been nearly forgotten motivated me. As a historical fiction author, I’m attracted to the stories of people, especially women, who are in danger of being lost to the pages of history. Bringing those stories to light and making sure their heroines are remembered by future generations is my personal mission. I wanted to help get Victoria’s name back in the history books where it belongs. I also wanted to help people envision her as a living, breathing person in a way you can’t typically do in a historical text. Plus, it doesn’t hurt that she called my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, home for a while as well – in fact, it is where she met her second husband.

**3. What is the most unusual thing you learned about Victoria in your research?**

There are a lot of unusual things about her, from her upbringing to her family’s antics (things you couldn’t make up) and her unconventional attitudes toward sex, marriage and the role of women. But what most fascinated me is that she was a Spiritualist and believed she had clairvoyant and healing powers. Victoria’s mother encouraged her and her sister Tennie in this belief and her father used these gifts to make money even when the girls were very young. Victoria maintained her whole life that she was guided by the spirits, especially that of the Greek orator Demosthenes, whom she identified as her spirit guide. She claims he predicted her success in New York as well as her candidacy. She said she consulted the spirits regularly and was even President of the national Spiritualist’s association at one point.

**4. What’s one interesting thing you learned while researching this novel?**

That the suffrage movement wasn’t all roses and sisterhood like I expected. That was the picture Hollywood and my high school textbooks painted. But the suffrage movement was actually broken into two competing factions in the mid-1800s, the American Womans Suffrage Association, led by Lucy Stone, that endorsed suffrage state by state and were more conservative, and the more radical National Woman Suffrage Association, led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, which advocated for federal women’s suffrage. Victoria was a member of the later for several years. In addition to being split ideologically, the women often disagreed and fought with

one another more than you would think, penning unflattering articles and messages about one another and speaking out publically against each other. The rift between the two major groups wasn't mended until 1890, when they joined as the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

**5. How long did it take you to write *Madame Presidentess*?**

I did about six months worth of research before writing. The writing itself took about nine months and I edited for another several months. So in total, about a year and a half.

**6. How closely does your novel mirror history?**

It's as close as I could make it without this being creative non-fiction. I'd say it's about 70% accurate. I made up some secondary characters and one of Victoria's affairs is fictional (but it was inspired by a rumored affair). Of course, as with all historical fiction, most of the dialog and details are made up, but all of her speeches, courtroom testimony, articles and even a few lines of dialog are taken from historical evidence. We even have descriptions of her home in Murray Hill and her brokerage office. Thanks to the biographers, we also have records of actual words from Cornelius Vanderbilt, Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, Catharine Beecher and Susan B. Anthony, all of which were used in the novel where possible. The authors notes at the end of the book go into great detail on what is accurate and what is not and why.

**7. What kind of research did you do to make this book come to life?**

My main references were newspaper articles from the time and biographies of Victoria, starting with the fanciful one she commissioned from Theodore Tilton during her lifetime and Emanie Sachs' scathing account published just after Victoria's death, through more recent works such as *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* by the recently deceased biographer Barbara Goldsmith, *Notorious Victoria* by Mary Gabriel and *The Woman Who Ran for President* by Lois Beachey Underhill.

I also read quite a few books on women's lives in mid-to-late-19<sup>th</sup> century America, as well as the on suffrage movement and electoral politics at the time (voting was very different and not nearly as anonymous then as it is now).

For those who are interested in my sources, I have a complete reference list on my website here: <https://nicoleevelina.com/the-books/madame-presidentess/research/>.

**8. If Victoria were alive today, what do you she would think of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump?**

I think she would view Hillary as a political daughter of sorts and get along very well with her. Both women are intelligent, ambitious and tenacious. They have both been through extremely personal attacks in the media (the newspapers of Victoria's day were as vicious as our news media is today), been caught up in family scandal and underestimated because of their sex. I don't think Hillary's email scandal would have bothered Victoria in the least because she was accused of blackmail several times

throughout her life. (We can't know if it was ever true of her, but we do know her mother and her sister Polly were serial offenders.)

Having no political background, but a strong reputation in business and a lot of money, I think Victoria could probably relate to Donald Trump more than you might think on first glance. However, she was not one to suffer a fool, so she would not put up with his anti-female, anti-name-the-group rhetoric. She was a suffragist and a Communist (in the sense of being for worker's rights) so she would tell him where to step off very quickly. She was also surprisingly learned for a woman without much formal education, so she'd be quick to rebuff his emotional attacks with logic and facts. Plus, she was a great speaker and I have no doubt could hold her own in a debate with him.

**9. Who was your favorite character after Victoria?**

I had a ton of fun writing Victoria's larger-than-life parents, but my favorite has to be Victoria's sister, Tennie. As Mr. Vanderbilt would say she "has spunk." She was so authentic and didn't care what anyone thought. If you told her a woman couldn't do something (like smoke cigars or curse, both of which Tennie did), she'd go and do it in style a) because she wanted to and b) to prove you wrong – and she'd do it in public. The one thing that irritated me about her was her co-dependence on her parents, especially her mother, and how she could be so incredibly loyal to them after all they put her through. I'm guessing it has to do with how she was raised and probably kind of brainwashed by them. But there's not a lot of historical evidence about her mindset, so that's one of the places where I had to make a writer's leap.

**10. Do you have another project in the works? If so, what is it?**

Once *Madame Presidentess* is out and the election is over, I am going to concentrate on writing *Mistress of Legend*, the third and final book in my Guinevere trilogy. This book will cover the end of Guinevere's life, including the fall of Camelot and what happens after. In my version, she certainly doesn't live out her days in a convent!

I will also begin research for a WWII-era historical novel about a Catholic nun who helped hide Jews and aided the resistance in France. She was a victim of the concentration camps and should be on the path to sainthood, but few people outside of her native country know her name. As far as I can tell, there is only one book written about her in the world.