

Interview with Joanne Harris, author of *Blackberry Wine*

Joanne Harris, author of the bestseller, *Chocolat* has now written *Blackberry Wine*, another story of magic and dreams. The main character, Jay Mackintosh is a writer with “writer’s block” who buys a derelict farmhouse in the French village of Lansquenet. There he meets not only a ghost from the past but also the haunted and mysterious Marise who hides a deep secret behind her closed shutters. A bottle of home-brewed wine helps Jay discover the key to an old mystery, as well as, a doorway into another world.

Below is an exclusive interview between Joanne Harris and Country Bookshop’s Marla Addison.

MA) Magic features prominently in both *Chocolat* and *Blackberry Wine*. Is it an important aspect of your personal life?

JH) It depends what you mean by magic. I mistrust anything which relies too much upon fanfare, mysticism and rites (religious ones included) but I do tend to perform little good-luck rituals as I go around the house and garden (most of these are superstitions I picked up from various relatives, rather than what you’d call magic) but whether these are for my own comfort or whether they are in any other way meaningful is a debatable matter. I still cast the runes when I feel like it, and I enjoy making my own incense and growing and using herbs. I like to observe the traditional celebrations at Yule and at other significant times of the year. When I feel that the house needs more than just fresh air to clean out the atmosphere, I do a purification ritual with my daughter, involving a lot of incense and shouting and banging of drums. Needless to say, Anouchka loves this! I think that magic can be as simple or as complicated, as everyday or as hermetic as you like. I like to keep mine very simple, very basic, very clear.

MA) Did you already know a great deal about magic before writing the novels or did you need to research the topic?

JH) I have long been fascinated by folklore and alternative beliefs, so I didn’t have to do a great deal of research for my books. I’m really rather lazy when it comes to researching things; it’s so much easier for me to write about what already interests me!

MA) Are the ‘magical’ remedies or protective measures based on folk remedies or are they all created for the purpose of the story line?

JH) They have all been used by someone; either by my great-grandmother, who was a great believer in all kinds of folk remedies, or by my grandfather, or gleaned by me from books or conversation with other people. None of them are merely invented, although they don’t all come from one source, or even one country.

MA) *Chocolat* was written from a woman’s point of view. Did that influence your decision to write *Blackberry Wine* from a man’s point of view?

JH) *Chocolat* is actually written from two points of view, one that of a man, the other that of a woman. I don’t think the gender of the narrator really matters in either case, although I wouldn’t like to be categorised as a “woman’s writer”. I try to write what comes most naturally to me, because otherwise I find it difficult to maintain my own interest in the characters. In “*Blackberry Wine*” the main character had to be male because of the real-life people I based him on; there really wasn’t a choice. In retrospect I’m glad I did decide on a male protagonist, because thematically “*Blackberry Wine*” is quite close to *Chocolat*, besides being partly set in the same place, and I wouldn’t have wanted the books to be too similar...

MA) What makes *Blackberry Wine* and *Chocolat* different from your other two books *Sleep, Pale Sister* and *The Evil Seed*?

JH) My first books were much closer to category fiction than my recent ones. At the time I was aiming for a kind of literary horror/gothic genre, but my publishers had difficulty marketing them. Predictably they ended up in the horror section, largely unread. I don't feel bad about this; I learned a lot from writing them, and I think I've improved because of that. However, *Chocolat* and *Blackberry Wine* are not really as far removed from my first books as people might think; obviously the darker aspect is not as apparent (though it is present even now), but the style is recognizably mine, the preoccupation with certain aspects of the occult is still there, as are a lot of the literary references. I think I write on a lighter, more optimistic note now, but maybe this is just because I have matured. I'm still fond of my early books, though; I'm glad I wrote them, and in spite of their faults, I'd love to see them in print again.

MA) Are any of the characters from *Blackberry Wine* based on real life characters?

JH) Nearly all my characters contain elements of people I know. Joe is the most obvious; he is based very strongly on my grandfather, to whom the book is dedicated. Jay is an amalgam of several people (including myself), but is loosely based on my friend Paul. No character in any of my books is ever a completely true depiction of a real person; I prefer to borrow characteristics and to filter them for the sake of the story. I'd hate to think that anyone had been offended by my borrowing from them like this, or that readers had taken my characterisations too seriously. It is fiction, after all.

MA) After the huge success of *Chocolat*, have you experienced any of "Kerry's world" i.e. the book publishing world of glittering parties, name dropping, etc.?

JH) The great thing about not living in London is that you can monitor your intake of these things. Of course I have had experience of parties, book awards, premieres and the rest, but because these events are infrequent I don't feel they are taking over my life. It's actually great fun - as long as I can go home afterwards!

MA) Are there any similarities between yourself and any of the characters in your stories?

JH) I don't think it could be otherwise. I prefer to write in the first person, and however much I try, parts of my personality infiltrate the characters. Fortunately I'm a bit of a schizophrenic!

MA) Any word yet on *Chocolat* being turned into a film?

JH) The film is in production now - filming started on May 2nd. The cast is terrific: Juliette Binoche, Alfred Molina, Judi dench, Johnny Depp, Robert Carlyle and others. The director is great too; Lasse Hallstrom, who recently did "The Cider House Rules". The script is okay, but dumbed-down a little, with a few minor but annoying character changes. Still, I'm looking forward to it all enormously; it should premiere in New York before Christmas, and in England just afterwards.

MA) You gave up teaching with the success of *Chocolat*. Do you think you will ever return to teaching?

JH) Once a teacher, always a teacher; an ex-colleague told me that recently, and I think he was right. I don't think I could ever quite give up teaching entirely (I have been teaching a French literature course at Sheffield University just to keep myself ticking over), but I do think that that formal part of my life is over. Giving up teaching was a very difficult decision for me to take; it was a job I enjoyed, and that I was good at, and I was very much aware that I was giving it up for something much riskier and, in some ways, something quite alien to my nature. However, some rainbows you have to chase. This was mine.

MA) In both *Chocolat* and *Blackberry Wine*, there is a tendency to supply people with what they need or desire. What made you include this element in both books?

JH) Perhaps it's because that's happening to me right now. Besides, there is already far too much gloomy stuff being written, without my having to contribute any more!

MA) The seasons also play a significant role in both books. Do you find yourself greatly influenced by the seasons or the weather in general?

JH) Yes; in winter (particularly in February) I am generally prone to depression. In spring and summer I am at my most creative and energetic. I write happy stories when the sun shines (I wrote *Chocolat* from March to July, and it shows), and dark ones when the weather is bad (I began "Sleep, Pale Sister" in December, and that shows too). Also, the lunar cycle influences me quite strongly. The differences in my mood and output at these times are so great that I am now starting to plan my work schedule accordingly!

MA) Your writing has been described as organic fiction. How do you feel about this description?

JH) I'm not really sure what it means. Organic fruit is free of chemicals, grown naturally and, though it is often smaller than the chemically treated varieties and often has irregularities in texture and shape, it tends to taste better and to be better for the health. If that's the analogy the critic had in mind, that's fine by me!

MA) Are there any plans for another novel? Might you include some of the previous characters featured, or do you plan to strike out in a new direction?

JH) I don't want to write about Lansquenet forever; my next book, *Five Quarters of the Orange*, is set in the Loire valley during the German occupation. It is not an entirely new direction, however; I find that small communities often have a great many things in common with each other, as do the stories which happen to them.