

This article was written by Joanne Harris for The Daily Telegraph in January 2001

The village square is dusted with a light covering of snow. A number of people in hats and winter coats play pétanque, while a group of children cluster around a yapping Jack Russell dog. Three old ladies walk past, dressed identically in black, stopping briefly to peer into the window of one of the little shops facing the church. At first sight, it could almost be real.

Of course, there are some irregularities. The unseasonal heat. The mysterious but tantalizing scent of chocolate. And the fact that one of the old ladies looks suspiciously like Leslie Caron, who played Gigi in the musical of the same name, nearly half a century ago.

Notwithstanding these details, the illusion is almost perfect. It should be; the main square of the little French village has been recreated here with painstaking care, stone by stone. I recognize it instantly, although I have never been there. I recognize the shop, too, although the name has changed. I recognize the people, even though we have never met. I even recognize the dog. They are all from my novel, *Chocolat*, and this is the set of the film.

The scene has all the surreal elements of a dream. Down the steps to the side of the set, I can see Carrie-Anne Moss, wearing an impeccable twinset, pearls, hat and white gloves, riding a micro-scooter at top speed past a long table covered in cakes; Juliette Binoche is sitting in a canvas chair, having her hair done; a small girl in a red cloak is climbing some scaffolding and, as I turn the corner past a row of enormous lights, I see a woman standing alone in semi-darkness, stirring a large pan on a portable stove. I come closer, and discover that the pan contains melted chocolate. The scent of it is so strong and rich that it fills the entire place, village and all. Set out in front of me, on long tables, are hundreds of chocolate figures of all sizes and species; rabbits, lambs, fish, hens. And all of them seem to be looking straight at me. It's enough to make anyone lose touch with reality.

People often ask me: Did you ever imagine this would happen?

Of all the questions I have to answer, I dread this one the most. Could I possibly have imagined that my little book, written on Sunday mornings between my teaching job and my three-year-old daughter, would one day lead to all this?

Well, of course I could. That's what I do, after all. I imagine things.

I don't, however, expect them to happen.

Three years ago, when I wrote the book, I was a French teacher at a boys' school in Leeds. A lot of the time I still think of myself that way. It's easier to live in a fantasy world when real life keeps to a proper routine, but when reality starts playing games, things get complicated. Several times during the past three years, I have found myself genuinely unsure of whether or not I was dreaming.

I suppose it really began with Juliette Binoche. Playing the What-if game (what if my book got published, what if it became a film, what if I could choose anyone I wanted to play in it) I could see it all perfectly before the book was even finished. Some of the details changed, actors came in and out of favour, but in my mind it was always Juliette Binoche as Vianne. I understood that by signing the option agreement I had effectively given Miramax the right to set the film in space, if they wanted to, but all the same I continued to mention Juliette Binoche to everyone I met, as if by some process of attrition I might eventually break through.

The film industry is like a huge dinosaur; it takes an incredible time for commands from the brain to reach the various parts of the body, and once I had signed the option agreement I heard nothing more about *Chocolat* for eighteen months. I didn't expect to; I knew by then that most optioned books never make it to film, and that most film projects fall through at the last minute. A wise friend told me that as far as Hollywood was concerned I should never believe anything until I was in the cinema, watching

the credits. It was good advice. I still mentioned Juliette Binoche, though, whenever I could get anyone to listen.

Then, the first rumblings began. The internet is the best place to check rumours. Most of the information I got was from there; the name of the screenwriter; the debate on casting; the signing of Lasse Hallström as director. Miramax kept stubbornly silent, but it was clear to me that something was happening inside the Hollywood dinosaur. I got a copy of Bob Jacobs' script to read; I liked it very much, in spite of the changes to the story. But I continued to expect nothing.

Six months later, the rumbling had got louder. The rumours had begun to contradict each other; one day Miramax were going to cast Gwyneth Paltrow, then Julia Roberts, then Whoopi Goldberg. No-one seemed to have taken my hints regarding Juliette Binoche.

Then she phoned me. She had read the book, and talked Harvey Weinstein into giving her the part. (Why didn't I think of that? I wondered, but I suppose this kind of thing only works if you're Juliette Binoche.) Second, she liked the script but was concerned about some of the dialogue. Could I meet her in Paris to discuss it?

This, I think, was the moment at which I began to question my grasp on reality. Nothing about life in Barnsley or teaching at Leeds Grammar School had prepared me for this. We met in a café over tea, cakes and the script (there was a marvellous moment as the supercilious garçon who had ignored me as I sat waiting suddenly realized whom I had been waiting for). On screen, Juliette often looks ethereal and rather melancholy; in life she is funny, vivacious and very smart. She plays the star extremely well when she has to (at premières and with rude journalists), but she is above all a real person doing a real job. We talked for hours; once I had got over my awe I found that we shared a surprising amount of common ground. We concluded that we needed to talk some more, and Juliette invited herself for a weekend the following month, to go over the script in detail.

Dinosaurs can move quite fast, once the brain is in gear. After my meeting with Juliette a lot of things started to happen; the cast began to assemble; the script was rewritten several times; the date for filming was set for the 2nd May. There is no guest room in my house, so Juliette slept in my daughter's bed (surrounded by soft toys and pictures of spacemen), while during the day we scrutinized every line of the *Chocolat* script, making changes as we went. She read her own part aloud; I read everything else. We drank gallons of hot chocolate. I kept pinching myself.

One of the reasons I originally thought of Juliette for the part is that she has a child the same age as my own daughter, Anouchka, who figures prominently in the book. The relationship between mother and daughter is the strongest one in the story, and I hoped she would bring some of her own experience to the part. I was right; she and Anouchka got on wonderfully (although Anouchka insisted upon referring to her as "Juliette Brioche"), and we all had strong feelings about the fact that my daughter's invisible rabbit, Pantoufle (a key player in the book) had morphed, courtesy of Miramax, into a kangaroo. Sadly, in spite of this, the kangaroo has remained. It is my only real regret.

In spite of this, we made headway on the script. In normal circumstances I would only have had a courtesy involvement, as anyone who has sold their soul to Hollywood will know, but it's amazing what you can do if you have a big star on your side. Most of my suggestions were adopted. Suddenly I was consulted on all kinds of things, from the musical score to the correct way to cast runes. The red good-luck sachets which Vianne hangs up above her door were taken from my house by Juliette during her visit. So far, I think the luck is working.

The shooting began the following week in Bath, then on location in France. I spent the last two weeks on set in Shepperton, where most of the interiors had been built. It was at the same time like and very unlike what I had imagined. The sets were disturbingly familiar; I recognized my great-grandmother's

house in France and her bedroom and all her pots and pans hanging on the wall; the chocolaterie was exactly as I had imagined it, but better, with rows of sweet-jars against the walls and strange Mexican figurines guarding the chocolate treasure. There was even a tribute to the original Pantoufle in the window - a chocolate marzipan rabbit in a magician's hat and cape. Anouchka has it in her bedroom now. The fact that she hasn't eaten it is the greatest compliment I can think of.

Chocolate is a mood-altering substance. I have always suspected this (in twelve years of teaching, it never failed for me), and I saw the proof at last during the filming of *Chocolat*. Film sets can be stressful places. The budgets, the schedules, the personal conflicts mean that tempers often run high, especially so near the end. But not here. Here, everyone seemed to be having a wonderful time. Lasse Hallström (who I had imagined as a rather frightening figure with a peaked cap and a megaphone) was charming, never raising his voice or showing a sign of impatience. The scent of chocolate from the portable stove behind the set was so strong that actors from other sets found excuses to linger outside, sniffing enviously. In spite of the frenzy of activity backstage, no-one seemed too busy to talk to me. There was an atmosphere of creative, cheerful energy. Even the photographer was smiling. It must have been the chocolate.

At the end of it all, however, I am aware of having been very lucky. I feel like someone who has wandered through a dangerous maze, taking turns at random, and who has, against all probability, blundered their way to the prize. It makes me feel rather guilty, and I almost expected to hate the film, as if in compensation for having had such an easy ride so far. But I don't. It's everything I hoped it would be; warm, funny and light-hearted, with enough irony to keep it from being over-sweet. Sitting watching it for the first time in New York, eating popcorn and watching the credits roll, I can ask myself cautiously whether it's safe to start believing now.