

Sweet Taste of Success

Beverley Byrne meets Joanne Harris, who explains that it was childhood memories of running "barefoot and free" in the French countryside that inspired her to write the delightful novel *Chocolat*

Since the release of *Chocolat* the Oscar-nominated film inspired by the book of the same name, the author, Joanne Harris, has become something of a celebrity. Recently spotted hobnobbing in Hollywood with the stars of the film - Juliette Binoche, Johnny Depp and Alfred Molina - she was wearing a red, figure-hugging gown by designer Amanda Wakeley and looking every inch a star herself.

Yet, only two years ago, Joanne was teaching French at Leeds Grammar School and living a quiet life with her husband, Kevin, and 9-year-old daughter, Anouchka, in a modest house in Barnsley. It is here that I went to meet the woman responsible for a menu of mouthwatering novels bearing titles such as *Blackberry Wine* and, the latest, *Five Quarters of the Orange*.

Her office is one that would be familiar to many writers: a paper-strewn desk, piles of books and mementoes of momentous occasions. By her own admission she is a hoarder who cannot bear to get rid of things.

"I seem to have an awful lot of frogs," she says, fumbling under a pile of correspondence and finding a trio of brightly coloured, Mexican-style ceramic frogs.

"These were a gift from my agent and this," she adds, producing another, "belonged to my grandfather. It sat on the desk at my grandparents' house in France. He used to call me his frog. It was my nickname. All the members of our family were called after animals. My mother was a chicken, one aunt was a rabbit and the other was a pig. I was the frog and it has stayed with me ever since."

Joanne Harris was born to a French mother and English father. Although she spent the first three years of her life living above her paternal grandparents' sweet shop in Barnsley, the holidays which she spent with her maternal grandparents on the island of Noirmoutier in Brittany left an indelible impression on her. The weeks she spent "running free in bare feet" not only explain her fluent French (she also speaks German) but also her innate understanding of rural France - its past, its traditions and its folklore.

"I felt that the island belonged to me," she recalls. "I could do anything I wanted to do, in complete safety. I remember the boulangerie and a corner shop and once a week the butcher would visit in a van.

"My earliest memories are of spending all day long on the beach or going fishing and sailing with my grandfather. At Easter we would hunt for eggs among the fig trees.

"French children believe that when the bells are silenced on Good Friday, they have flown to Rome, upside-down, to be blessed by the Pope. His blessings turn into chocolate, which fills the upturned bells. Then, they return to France just in time for Easter Sunday but, in their excitement, they forget they are full of chocolate and, as they ring, it flies out of the tower.

"This is why French children make nests and hide them high in the trees to catch the flying confectionery. The grown-ups spend ages searching for the children's nests to fill them with eggs. Today I still do this with Anouchka, here at home in Yorkshire."

Naturally Joanne inherited the French tradition of growing herbs and vegetables and, of course, cooking and eating for pleasure. It is also not surprising that these early memories are fed into her novels. *Five Quarters of the Orange*, for example, finds the protagonist, Framboise, plying her culinary trade in a crêperie.

She elaborates: "I remember my grandmother making the most wonderful crêpes. My mother still uses her pan and makes her own pancakes in exactly the same way. I think a lot of French families retain a tradition of passing down recipes belonging to their loved ones.

"When you use them and sit down together at the table to eat, it is almost as if they are there with you. It is a way of keeping people in your memory.

"I find cooking with my daughter great fun. We make a tremendous amount of mess and noise together and there is a sense of sharing and maintaining something which belongs to both of us."

When I ask Joanne whether she feels more French than English, she remains neutral. "It took me a very long while to understand that I was speaking two different languages. I remember being asked to translate something and it came as a big surprise to me to realise that some people were unable to understand one of the languages which I spoke. "When I attended school and there were language lessons including translations, I found them difficult although I picked it up eventually." Joanne attended Wakefield Girls' High School and Barnsley Sixth Form College which is where, in 1981, she was introduced to her future husband, Kevin. She went on to read Modern and Medieval Languages at St Catherine's College, Cambridge and, as both her parents and grandfather were teachers, she felt naturally drawn towards the profession, too.

When I suggest that teaching can be a challenging career, she explains that studying martial arts added to her confidence. "It was the only sport I have ever enjoyed and it was useful when breaking up fights between a few enthusiastic testosterone-burdened boys," she laughs.

Does she miss teaching modern languages at Leeds Grammar School?

"I enjoyed it and, had circumstances not forced the issue, I would not have left," she replies. "It was an energising job and I liked the fact that no two days were ever alike.

"For 10 years, I combined teaching with writing but the success of *Chocolat* made it impossible to continue. I must say, however, that it has all worked out quite nicely."

It was her husband, Kevin, who provided the catalyst for *Chocolat*. Annoyed with him for watching football on television, she asked him what he thought the female equivalent was. His immediate response was "chocolate", which resulted in Joanne writing a novel with chocolate as its theme - and the rest, as they say, is history.

These days, when she is not on promotional tours or attending star-studded receptions, she is happy to be working at home.

"When I first stopped working at the school, I wondered how I would like being stuck in an office all day. But I take the laptop and sometimes work in Anouchka's room, or the kitchen. I follow a pattern of moving around the house or going off to talk to people, which tends to keep me awake intellectually.

"I am extremely energetic about the things I like doing but I can be very lazy about the things I don't, such as filing, which is why we are sitting in an office I can hardly get into!"

Has she any prized mementoes? I ask. She points to a script of *Chocolat* signed by all the cast and the urn which, in the film, contained the ashes of the heroine's mother.

It is well documented that Joanne considered the casting of Juliette Binoche in the title role to be perfect.

"Last year she came to stay here in our house in Barnsley. She slept in Anouchka's room and we spent the entire weekend going through the script together. I must say it was quite peculiar to be drinking hot chocolate with a famous film star, right in your own front room."

Despite her whirlwind success, Joanne Harris remains happy to go with the flow. She has no plans to leave her Barnsley home.

"I have no reason to. My daughter attends the school across the road and all my ties are here," she says. "My parents, my brother and all our friends live close by and that, to me, means far more than a fancy house in an upmarket neighbourhood.

"I would have been quite content to remain a teacher and write as a hobby. I have achieved more than I ever imagined and I am still enjoying it.

"That, for me, has always been the principle motivation. My ambition was to have a good time; everything else is a bonus."