

Bittersweet 'Orange':

'Chocolat' author Joanne Harris concocts a darker tale set in WWII France

by Rosemary Herbert - Monday, June 11, 2001

Growing up is never easy, but if you're the plain kid sister of a daring big brother and a beautiful sister, if your country is occupied by enemies, your father is killed in battle and your mother suffers strange migraine-induced rages, surviving childhood requires extraordinary grit.

That is the girlhood recounted by the widow Framboise Simon in this month's Herald Community Book Club selection, "Five Quarters of the Orange" (Morrow; list price, \$25; book club price, \$17.50). This fifth novel by Joanne Harris is just as delicious as her blockbuster book "Chocolat" (1999), but her celebrated sensuous prose is far more bitter than sweet.

In her new book, a 9-year-old girl uses the scent of oranges to trigger migraine headaches in her widowed mother. Harris' descriptions of food preparation are as likely to show characters pounding out frustrations as they are to make readers' mouths water.

"I don't feel comfortable at all in a pigeonhole," the author said in a telephone interview from the Yorkshire, England, home she shares with her husband and 8-year-old daughter. "So I won't let that happen."

Though "Chocolat" and her next novel, "Blackberry Wine" (2000), were "fairly upbeat," Harris said she was ready to enter an uneasy emotional and political landscape in her new book, set in World War II France during the German occupation.

Harris said she is more comfortable working with "darker, less redemptive worlds." After all, she is the author of two little-known post-Victorian Gothic thrillers, "The Evil Seed" (1987) and "Sleep, Pale Sister" (1989). Like her new novel, those books are concerned with revenge in unsettled situations.

But beyond that, the books have a different appeal. "I enjoy the mental picture of my two fan bases getting together in a massive battle between ladies of a certain age and punks with piercings," Harris said. "The ladies would win hands down, I can assure you!"

Nevertheless, the book and film of "Chocolat" demonstrated broad appeal. And with a 9-year-old urchin (also portrayed later in life) and a 35-year-old widow as heroines, "Five Quarters of the Orange" should win over readers of all ages.

"There's an unfairness in the world of writing that presupposes that people are more interesting at certain ages," Harris said, noting the preponderance of books about characters entering adulthood or stumbling through midlife crises.

"But crises don't necessarily come to schedule. In this book they have to do with external circumstances" leading children to rat on neighbors to the only emotionally available adult in their lives: a German soldier.

A former teacher of French and German in English schools, Harris found it easy to get into the mind of her young protagonist. "Nine years old is a dangerous part of childhood, a gray area, because you're not sure what you are."

Born in 1964 and raised in Yorkshire by her English father and French mother, Harris said she always was fascinated by her mother's and maternal grandparents' war stories. They spent part of World War II in hiding after Harris' grandfather was denounced to the Gestapo by a desperate neighbor.

She also used her own memories of food-gathering, cooking and daredevil escapades as ingredients in her recipe for this book.

For instance, Framboise's persistence in playing along the treacherous banks of the Loire River, even after a child is killed there by a poisonous snake, stems from Harris' hijinks during summer vacations. Although she knew the "unpleasant sandbanks were always collapsing, and the currents washed people away," she invented a game involving swimming through underwater loops of tree roots.

"I gave myself a big surprise when I surfaced and found myself looking into the eyes of a (poisonous) water adder," she said.

But that didn't shake her. Harris escaped that encounter unscathed but continued to tempt fate until she was bitten by another adder. Fortunately, she lived to tell the tale.

Rosemary Herbert is the Boston Herald's book review editor.

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