

Not as sweet as *Chocolat*



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Joanne Harris at home
Steve Morgan/the times

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Her bestselling story about the temptation of cocoa courted controversy among Christians. Its sequel, which features sexual violence against teenagers by Islamic men, may enrage Muslims, but Joanne Harris is defiant

Joanne Harris, I can't help thinking, is about to get in a bit of trouble. And Harris, I can't help thinking, doesn't much mind. Or why else would this world-famous novelist make the subject of her new book the most inflammatory issue of our time, and specifically of this spring: serial attacks on teenage girls by Islamic men who twist the name of Allah to justify their crimes. Written in the North as these crimes — such as the Rochdale sexual attacks on teenage girls by Islamic men — carried on unabated, it presents a challenge to anyone, Islamic and non-Islamic, living in Britain today.

She is popular and influential like few other authors: since her novel *Chocolat* was published 13 years ago, it has sold well over 1 million copies. It was as indulgent as

its title, and readers fell in love with Vianne, the dreamy heroine and her finger-licking French food, more than its Catholic politics — indeed, the Hollywood film starring Johnny Depp all but edited the priest out. Yet despite her legions of fans and subsequent bestselling novels, one review rankled. Harris reveals this after an hour of us talking about her next instalment in the *Chocolat* story to give one reason why Vianne’s return to that little French village was not to do battle with the priest, but to sort out what the villagers are calling a “war” with their new Muslim immigrants.

“I remember feeling very sore once, when I got a most unfair review for *Chocolat*. It was years ago now, I don’t remember anything about it except the guy said: ‘Ah, the Catholic Church. It’s so easy to attack these days. She would never have dared to do this about an imam, as she would have been in so much trouble if she did.’

“Ever since, I’ve been thinking: ‘Do you know? That’s completely unfair.’ I’ve made frivolous jokes about priest-baiting, but I’m willing to bait anyone who uses what they believe, be it religious, ideological, political, what the hell, as a means of doing things I think are basically wrong, to do with controlling other people as opposed to following what they really believe.”

So, she’s baiting fundamentalist Muslims now? Of course, it’s more complicated than that, and *Peaches for Monsieur le Curé* is nuanced in a way that only good fiction can be, so let’s back up a little. But the guiding principle is this: Harris is not what you expect.

First, to meet this woman whose novels are typically set in France, you must travel to a village outside Huddersfield. There she lives, only a short hop from her childhood home in Barnsley. Her Francophile landscapes are conjured from a shed in the garden. Second, if you think she must resemble in some way her best-known character, Vianne, the warm, motherly woman who draws people out and in, then you’re in for another shock.

The person greeting me on her doorstep is friendly but no-nonsense, ushering me through her home’s stained glass and dark woods to a library brimming with hundreds of books. Biscuits — chocolate, of course — by the fire sounds so cosy, but she’s no shy writer type; as our conversation progresses, I imagine she would be brilliant on *Question Time*. She’s singular, sharp and subversive; the more time you spend in her company the more you admire her, and also, curiously, the more you feel intimidated.

“First of all,” Harris says, “I started thinking about how to get Vianne to go back.” A sequel to *Chocolat*, *The Lollipop Shoes*, had Vianne relocate from the fictional village of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes to Paris. Harris decided to write the third in the series in 2010, just as France was gearing up to ban the face veil. At the same time,

in the largely Muslim community a mile from Harris's home, they were gearing up for Ramadan.

“I thought: ‘What would really put the cat among the pigeons in Lansquenet? Right, Moroccans.’ You’re much more likely to see Moroccans in France than Bangladeshis or Pakistanis, which is who you get around here, but the potential for misunderstanding and xenophobia and fear on both sides is the same.”

This feels very contemporary. Was she influenced by news coverage of Muslim gangs preying on underage girls in the North? “I think inevitably some of that may have found its way into the story. I deliberately wanted to make it something that people could tie in to current events. This little village can’t be an island in time for ever. This [integrating with Islam] is something that has been on people’s minds wherever you are.”

So in *Peaches for Monsieur le Curé*, the priest from *Chocolat* is under siege, with the call to prayer from the mosque drowning out the church bells. Suddenly, a malignant Muslim duo arrive. A lady in a niqab and her male companion encourage the young local Muslims to radicalise, take up the face veil and preach intolerance. What follows is house burning, suicide attempts, rape and riot. It is in microcosm the cultural anxiety of the West in the 21st century. Yet Harris’s very desire to put a Muslim cat among the pigeons makes me feel nervous.

“Why? Because I have portrayed Muslims at all, or because I have portrayed Muslims in a light that they believe to be incorrect? I’m not being funny here, but I don’t think it would be reasonable for anyone to take offence, unless they do it because I have simply dared to portray someone not of my own culture. I have told stories about Christians before, and that’s not my culture either.” She makes me re-examine those nerves, and find myself a bit of a wimp.

“To consciously avoid writing about anyone from that culture, that would surely be much more telling in terms of where my prejudices lie,” Harris continues. “You are damned either way in some people’s eyes, because I have had immense criticism that there were too many white people in my stories. Now I write this and people say, ‘Wasn’t that a bit brave?’ which is shorthand for ‘a bit stupid’. This isn’t a political story, I’m not preaching anything here ... We’ll see. Every one of my books has ruffled somebody’s feathers.”

But the most unpleasant characters are the most fundamentalist Muslims, and the most sympathetic are the most progressive, like the teenage girl who blossoms when she throws off the face veil. The story is somewhat of a liberal fairy tale. Harris may not intend to be political, but the reader certainly feels swayed. “Well, I’ve never liked fundamentalism in any of its forms,” she says. “‘Don’t be mean to each other’:

I'm happy for people to understand that this is how I feel. But beyond that there are a lot of grey areas for me."

She is not her characters, she emphasises, "Not even Vianne. It would be impossible for me to say that I haven't seen intolerance in every religion I have ever seen. I don't hate religion — religion can be a wonderful, life-enhancing thing — but there are too many people in the world of many different religious persuasions who have funnelled their religion into this narrow beam of hatred for anyone who doesn't share precisely their views, and these are the people I dislike."

The title was a problem, a telling little problem. She wanted *Peaches at Ramadan*. Harris talked to a lot of local Muslims about whether they would find that title offensive. No one did. But her publishers persuaded her to change it. "Fair do's. I like this title too. But I have the sneaky feeling it was because of this word Ramadan that was either considered to be a turn-off or somehow a bit inflammatory. But the people who I had feared might consider it inflammatory didn't think it so. It was the other guys, the non-Muslims, who were being sensitive."

Harris was formerly a French teacher, and she has perfect teacher charisma: authoritative and rebellious. Someone once described her look as "Miss Jean Brodie crossed with a Cocteau Twin". *Chocolat* allowed her to give up the day job, but those experiences stay with her. Her first job was in a Dewsbury secondary with a large Muslim intake.

"Sometimes girls did disappear in the middle of the year and it would be a mystery where they had gone, then you would realise they had gone abroad and got married. Sometimes a girl would tell me, 'They're asking me to go on holiday somewhere. I think they're going to take me out of school.

I don't want to go', and I'd never hear from that girl again; there would be a kind of silence about what happened.

"There was an uneasiness in certain elements of that community that I've never forgotten. On the other hand there were other elements that were completely easy to deal with. I've tried to be balanced without refusing to look at some of those issues in the face."

No girls she taught wore a veil then, but she notes with regret that more do now. What if a girl in her class had worn a veil? She sighs deeply. "I would have felt sad for her, and sad for the others. Because underneath, all cultural sensitivities set aside, I would feel that she wouldn't be able to be a normal child. It is a huge barrier to normal social interaction. There's no getting around the fact that it is a mask."

When I ask if she's read the Koran, she replies, "Of course." Of course? "I'm equally familiar with the Bible. I'm interested in religion. The Koran has a huge amount of wisdom and poetry, but what it doesn't contain as far as I can see is anything that says it's all right to abuse people of other cultures, or about women having to cover their faces. Maybe I'm reading the wrong translation. But in the same way that the Bible doesn't say anything about slaughtering the infidel either; yet the Bible was used as the justification for doing just that."

It's nearly time for me to go, and Harris is still surprising me. So, I say, if Hollywood edited the priest out in the movie version of *Chocolat*, I doubt they'll be buying up the film rights for *Peaches for Monsieur le Curé*. They'd be too scared.

"Why? Because there is a Muslim bad guy? Because no Muslim does anything bad? I quite like the idea of making it into a stage musical to be honest." Is she joking? "No. I went to see *The Book of Mormon* [a hit Broadway musical from the creators of *South Park*] with my daughter in New York. It was fabulous. If they can make that into a stage musical, then very clearly the stage is not afraid of upsetting people."

She admires that: not afraid of upsetting people. I leave, my mind boggling at the thought of a niqab-covered chorus line high-stepping its way across the West End. I bet I can guess the preferred title: *Peaches at Ramadan*.

Peaches for Monsieur le Curé by Joanne Harris is published by Transworld on Thursday, £18.99