

CULTURE

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| Interview |

JOANNE HARRIS

Juliette Binoche, Johnny Depp e il cioccolato: quest'alchimia indimenticabile è opera di Joanne Harris, che nel '99 scrisse *Chocolat*. Harris però ama cambiare genere: nel suo ultimo libro, un noir, un uomo dalla doppia identità fonda un blog per aspiranti assassini.

BY MARK WORDEN



TRACK 15
SPEAKER: MARK WORDEN
C1 ADVANCED

In the year 2000 Johnny Depp, Juliette Binoche and Alfred Molina starred in the movie *Chocolat*. The film tells the story of a young single mother who opens a chocolate shop in rural France. It was based on a best-selling novel of the same name by a British writer called Joanne Harris. Prior to that she had published two other novels, but had continued to work as a school teacher. The runaway success¹ of *Chocolat* changed her life, and she became a full-time writer. We asked her whether she had been surprised by its success:

Joanne Harris

(Standard British accent)

Oh, I was very surprised, but it still came relatively early in my career, and it was such a different story that in some ways I had begun again with a completely different attitude to writing and so, in some ways, it didn't come as a surprise at all, because, I mean, that's what we do, isn't it? We imagine things, we imagine that perhaps we'll make it big², perhaps there'll be a movie. It's a fun game to play, but I wasn't banking on it in any way³. I do feel rather sorry for people like Dan Brown who have written lots of books and then suddenly⁴ one goes stratospheric and they can never escape its influence. I think I've been lucky, in that *Chocolat* was never the book that eclipsed everything else that I had done and I have a very loyal constant readership, who do follow me, and they don't tend to talk about *Chocolat* anymore, they just tend to talk about the last thing that I did, which I find very liberating and refreshing.

GOD'S OWN COUNTY

Joanne Harris is half-French (her mother was born in France), but she was born in the northern English county of Yorkshire. And, apart from the time she spent studying Modern Languages at Cambridge, she has lived there all her life:

Joanne Harris

Well, Yorkshire's an interesting conflict, of course. I live just about between two points, in literary terms, between *Wuthering Heights*⁵ and *The Full Monty*, and I get all the spectrum⁶. It is, at the same time, a place of dramatic landscape⁷ and tremendous beauty and literary heritage⁸, but also of industrial heritage and of great poverty and of some insularity⁹ and of strong opinions, one way or another. It's certainly a county with a tremendous personality.

A NOVEL ON THE NET

And Yorkshire provides the setting for Joanne Harris' latest novel, *Blueyedboy*, which has been published in Italian by Garzanti as *Il ragazzo con gli occhi blu*. It is a disturbing tale of a sociopath in his 40s, who presents a different identity – "blueyedboy" – to the world on the internet. We asked Joanne Harris whether she agreed with the view that the internet had a negative effect on the capacity of youngsters to develop social skills¹⁰:

Joanne Harris

Well, as the parent of a teenage girl who spends plenty of time on the internet, I'm not sure I entirely believe that this happens. I think that some people can be very alarmist about the lack of social skills, but, actually,

GLOSSARY

- 1 runaway success: successo travolgente
- 2 perhaps we'll make it big: magari sfondiamo
- 3 I wasn't banking on it in any way: non ci contavo assolutamente
- 4 suddenly: improvvisamente
- 5 *Wuthering Heights*: Cime tempestose
- 6 I get all the spectrum: ho una visione completa
- 7 dramatic landscape: paesaggio straordinario
- 8 heritage: tradizione
- 9 insularity: ristrettezza di vedute
- 10 to develop social skills: imparare a socializzare



Chocolat author Joanne Harris and the English and Italian editions of her novels. In Italy she is published by Garzanti.

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having been a teacher for 15 years, I know that teenagers never had social skills, to start off with: they develop them naturally and I think, in many ways, the internet is a good way for them to connect with other people because, when you are a sort of gawky, inarticulate¹¹ adolescent, sometimes it helps to put your feelings in writing, and to articulate those things in a different way because otherwise you spend your life, as most of my pupils at Leeds Grammar School did, grunting¹² and giving each other manly taps on the shoulder¹³ and virtually not speaking at all. So I think this isn't entirely true. What I am worried about is the way that this kind of immediate medium,

that allows us instant gratification at the click of the mouse, has developed repercussions in the real world, in the way that everybody interacts with everybody else. I think we have become runder¹⁴ and less tolerant and less patient because we are expecting instant results and that, I think, is partly the fault¹⁵ of the whole internet culture and the fact that you can get things so quickly nowadays that, when you have to wait at traffic lights, or at a queue at Tescos¹⁶, or whatever, the level of rage¹⁷ and impatience that's generated is completely disproportionate to the amount of time you have to wait there and that, I think, is something of greater concern¹⁸. ☒

GLOSSARY

- 11 gawky, inarticulate:** goffo, impacciato
- 12 grunting:** grugnire
- 13 manly taps on the shoulder:** virilli pacche sulla spalla
- 14 ruder:** più scortesi
- 15 fault:** colpa
- 16 Tescos:** famosa catena di supermercati inglesi
- 17 rage:** rabbia
- 18 is something of greater concern:** è una cosa più preoccupante