

It sounds like something out of pulp fiction -- a crime writer whose intimate knowledge of poisons would allow her commit the perfect crime. Except this is no cliché, it's real: Andrea Japp spent 20 years working as a toxicologist before becoming a novelist, as well as being the woman who translates Patricia Cornwell's novels in to French.

Here, the author of the magnificent medieval crime series *The Agnès de Souarcy Chronicles* reveals what drove her to writing novels, why she is a stickler for historical accuracy and the reason she has never revealed a recipe for poison in her books -- until now.

English readers might not be familiar with medieval French history, but it's a fascinating period. Can you tell us how you became interested and why you thought it would make a good setting for crime fiction?

It's true that English readers might not be familiar with the French Middle Ages but actually they are similar to the English Middle Ages (with one major difference which is that England, unlike most of the rest of Europe, escaped the Inquisition). Our two histories area intertwined. Even though we were at war off and on for centuries, our cultures are fundamentally the same.

I was interested in the period for a multitude of reason but the most compelling one was to do with death. Death was everywhere, the thought of death was never far from people's thoughts and yet they they could still be joyful and full of life.

I was fascinated by the rare fundamental differences between today and then. In the Middle ages people were just as greedy, cruel and calculating as they are now, but also sometimes just as heroic or selfless. Although Man has made great technological advances, human psychology has not changed much. But two major differences are worth mentioning – religious faith, which was the bedrock of society in medieval times, and the sense of community. There wasn't as much of the 'me-me' attitude that pervades our society today. The individual was less important then the village, the manor, the abbey or the family, for which you fought and made sacrifices. There was a sort of dignity of the human spirit that I wonder if we have not lost a little of today.

And then there was the sense of the supernatural which no longer exists today. When you write a contemporary thriller, you need only consider Man and his inventions. In the Middle Ages there was so much that was unexplained. Man lived with nature. He was afraid of it because he knew the caprices it was capable of, but he also respected it because he lived from it. All the things he did not understand he attributed to magic which he tried to come to terms with. So a sort of paganism still ruled, that the Catholic Church never completely succeeded in eradicating.

There is an incredible amount of detail about the plants used as food, medicine and poisons in the books. Tell us about your research for the series.

I spent eight incredibly intense months putting together a reliable historical bibliography, from the works of historians who specialise in the period. I am very familiar with plants and poisons since I am a research toxicologist. Finally I had the chance to poison the characters in my books, which I have never done in my contemporary books, since I didn't want to give out 'recipes' for poison. Setting my

murder mysteries in the Middle Ages allowed me to use substances that are well known today, and are now very easy to detect. In other words had someone wanted to use them they would quickly have been found out. So it was exhilarating to be able to use my knowledge without fear of aiding or abetting would-be murderers.

There are also real historical figures and places used in the books. How tied are you to being historically accurate, versus giving fans what we call in English “a good read”?

I'm a scientist by profession, so I loathe errors and approximations!

I have made the historical detail as accurate as possible in my descriptions of happenings and characters, but also when I referred to objects, clothes and furniture etc. I work on the assumption that readers of historical fiction expect a good read and a gripping adventure filled with twists, but that they also would like to learn about the period, whilst being entertained. So I make it a point of honour to ensure that the historical background is exact.

Sometimes I spend a lot of time researching a small detailed point, for my own interest. For example, I suddenly wondered why the train on ladies' dresses was at the front. They must have had to lift it up all the time to avoid walking on it and falling over. It seemed illogical and it wasn't easy to find the explanation. The reason turned out to be that material was very expensive and even noblewomen only possessed a few dresses. They were often pregnant and it was essential that their dresses could be used throughout their pregnancies. So the train was made long enough to rise off the ground as their bellies grew and still be long enough to be decent.

I also became very interested in the climate, which was crucial since it could cause terrible famine, leading to riots, which in turn had political consequences.

Your readers may be shocked at all the trials and tribulations that Agnès de Souarcy has gone through over the first three books in the series – and with a fourth book due out in English next year, has she got more troubles to cope with?

Indeed she has, but some of her worst fears will also be resolved and some of her questions answered! What attracts me more than anything about thrillers, whether historical or contemporary, is the view of human behaviour they provide. How does someone who is leading a normal, peaceful life expecting that that will continue until they die, cope when suddenly plunged into a violent reality that overwhelms them? What will that human being do? How will they react? Will they flee in terror, will they be cowardly or will they fight to defend those who are dear to them? And then you add the particular context of the era, and you get perhaps a different answer. Even though the Middle Ages were not in fact as dreadfully bloody as most people, at least in France, imagine, it was a harsh life, especially for women, as there were so many laws, limiting their rights and possibilities.

There are many strong female characters in these books. We imagine women in medieval times were very downtrodden – is there evidence that this was not the case?

It was the case. Previously (about two centuries earlier) women had had more rights. They had been free to exercise various professions including medicine. But in the

Middle Ages the only women who retained any power were nuns or widows of noblemen with male children. Apart from that women were controlled by their fathers, husbands or brothers. That's why widows with means would usually turn down offers of remarriage and join a convent instead – faith was not their real motive.

There were regional differences too. For example the fate of women in Normandy was even less auspicious than elsewhere because Norman law at that time was less favourable to women. Nevertheless there were some extraordinary women, with such strength of will that they succeeded in imposing themselves as masters (some even had recourse to poison to eliminate anyone who stood in their way!) All Agnès's troubles stemmed from this system of keeping women 'under the yoke'.

How is writing historic fiction different to contemporary crime? And do you imagine different readers reading the books as you write?

Historical fiction is very different. I wouldn't say it was more difficult to write, but there are more considerations.

First of all you have to draw up a very good bibliography, and secondly you must always be aware of the history of your period. The story you want to tell has to take into account the limitations of that history. That was one of the problems I encountered writing the Agnès de Souarcy chronicles. I wanted a taut pace with no dead time. How was that to be managed with the communication methods of the time? No question of covering long distances because that would have taken days. The only way of transmitting information was by messenger on horseback or carrier pigeon.

I had a similar problem when I wrote another medieval series set in a monastery for women. I had to invent a restricted layout for the monastery because in reality the site would have been very spread out and it would have taken half a day's walking for a nun to go from point to point. The writer of contemporary fiction is very little constrained by physical considerations, but when you write historical fiction the limitations are legion and the author is much less free.

My readership is very loyal, I am incredibly lucky. The people who read my contemporary books also read my historical novels. The inverse is not also true however because some of my 'historical' readers only like historical fiction and find my contemporary novels too dark. But even when I published a collection of short stories, which the French don't much care for, unlike the English, my readers read those and I was very happy about that.

You're a toxicologist by training. Which came first – an interest in crime fiction or an interest in toxicology?

My father was a scientist and I have always had scientific leanings. I can't pretend that I wrote a diary or little stories when I was a child – I always preferred science. My father was however a very keen reader. He loved crime fiction, and sci-fi, and he also read many English and American authors, whom I therefore read early on. I discovered Shakespeare, Somerset Maugham, John Fowles and Tennessee Williams before Balzac.

To be frank, after 20 years of research and eight years directing a scientific team, I went through some uncomfortable soul-searching. Research science is necessarily a team effort. I began to ask myself what I personally had achieved on my own? Nothing. I wanted an achievement that was all my own! So I wrote a novel. A crime novel because that was a genre I liked and because the demands of the structure were a little like the protocol that needs to be followed in an experiment. The novel was well-received. And that was the beginning of my career as a novelist.

You're a prolific author, with some 20 novels to your name, along with translations of Patricia Cornwell's books, not to mention screenplays and comics. Where do you get the energy and passion for so much writing?

I don't do much else apart from working and I'm what we call 'une petite dormeuse'. Four to five hours sleep are all that I need.

One of the things I love most is to learn, and that's no doubt the main reason I wanted to set my writing in the Middle Ages, even though during the first month of compiling my sources I really began to wonder why on earth I had embarked on it. I love to think that I am giving my readers knowledge that they will find passionately interesting. It gives me immense pleasure.

Translating Patricia Cornwell is also a great pleasure and partly because she introduces me to new ideas. I found myself immersed in the recent advances in artificial intelligence and the intricacies of the nervous system for her last novel. I was delighted because I would never have done so had I not translated the text.

I think that my energy and passion can be summed up like this: I want to learn and to surprise my readers all the time imagining them being pleased by what they read.

Does your working day have a distinct routine? Or do you wait for inspiration before you can work?

I always admire authors who decide that they will work from nine in the morning until one. That's not what happens in my case. Hours can go by without a single sentence occurring to me. If that happens I play with my dogs, make myself some tea, I read and I wait. Sometime when inspiration fails to strike I become a little anxious. And then suddenly a sort of unlocking occurs, I don't know how. And then I can write, in a kind of trance, for 10 hours at a stretch. The next day I am sometimes surprised by the direction my writing has taken.

Do you believe that crime novelists have a connection to a darker side of humanity?

Darker or simply 'humanity'? I think that crime writers are interested in what makes people tick. Man is at once the best and the worst of creatures. Our species is capable of the grandest and most beautiful things but equally capable of the worst of things. I believe that you cannot talk about Man without evoking his cruel, twisted, greedy, bad side. No more than you can talk about Man without evoking his capacity for greatness, love and sacrifice.

Do women make the best crime writers? If so, why?

It's what a lot of publishers appear to think. I believe that what women bring to the crime novel is a sensitivity to the everyday and to the state of the victim, since in a

certain sense they are victims as well. That is one of the enormous strengths of Patricia Cornwell. Over and above the fact that she invented the first woman forensic scientist, she also gave a voice to the victims.

Women are obliged to be very sensitive to their environment in the general sense and to the psychology of the people they meet, and that shows in their writing. It's the famous feminine intuition, which I believe is actually only the ability to make the best use of our sixth sense. Agatha Christie, with her Hercule Poirot and his 'little grey cells', was one of the precursors of the psychologically-based thriller.

How much do the skills of being a fiction writer differ from those of translating fiction?

The two things are completely different. When I am being Andrea Japp, I am immersed in my world, with my way of seeing things. I have my own style and obsessions. Because of this I never write when I am translating, because if translating I have to get inside the head of the other author. I have to take over THEIR style and THEIR priorities.

It is out of the question for me to write as Japp when I am translating Patricia Cornwell. My aim is to replicate the author's style as closely as possible even though I am writing in a language that is stylistically very different from English (our syntax is almost the opposite of yours and English is much more contextual than French). You have to practice humility: you have to forget yourself in order to become the voice of the author.

Here in the UK we've long been obsessed with crime fiction and drama. With the growth in popularity of authors such as yourself, Claude Izner, and also the popularity of the television series *Spiral (Engrenages)*, is there a renaissance in French crime writing? Or is it that we anglophones are just catching up!

I think there really is a renaissance in French crime writing. It's a bit like a melting pot into which everyone has thrown what was important to them. The French have abandoned (thank goodness!) the old type of crime fiction with the mustachioed inspector who, without appearing to do very much, suddenly understands the truth (how, one wonders?) Anglo-Saxon crime writing has had an influence: it has more pace, more action and the investigations are more rigorous. You are not catching up. It's French crime writing that has evolved, even though our great writers like Simenon and Manchette, also left their mark.

Who are your favourite writers and why?

I had quite a classical education and I am always re-reading my favourite authors. Some books I have read twenty times and they are always a pleasure. I love Marguerite Yourcenar, Balzac, Maupassant, Tennessee Williams, John Fowles, Somerset Maugham, Toni Morrison for example. What all these authors have in common, at least from in my view, is that they all manage to pin down using exceptional language, 'the essence of humanity.' Sometimes I witness real-life situations when I think 'that's pure Maupassant' or 'that's straight out of Somerset Maugham'! I was an only child so I had a fairly solitary childhood and books were very important to me. I learnt about life and people, thanks to my books.

There are some French authors, who're no longer well-known today, that I really enjoy: André Armandy, Nathalie Henneberg, etc. I recently re-read Mervin Peake and *The Lord of the Rings*, with great pleasure. I also read new thrillers.

It's hard to imagine you have any spare time, but what do you like to do when you're not working?

I like to cook, that's my only hobby. I love making jam, chutney and purées (coulis) to enjoy with friends. And I have very good writing ideas when I cook. Apart from cooking, reading and the cinema, I don't really enjoy other leisure activities. I was conditioned in childhood to believe that only work and the accumulation of knowledge was important. Everything else except for reading and music was considered childish! So I find it very hard just to relax and I often regret that.

What other talent would you like to have?

I would have loved to have had a singing voice! A voice as sublime as Callas, Victoria de los Angeles, Kiri Te Kanawa etc.. I sing atrociously, but I have a powerful voice! Everyone runs away when I start to sing!

What is your greatest fear?

I would never like to think that I had been cowardly. I do get frightened, as we all do, but I force myself to face up to things.

What is the most important lesson has life taught you?

To have aims and ambitions but never to make fixed plans, because life is full of surprises. I would never have thought that I would become a writer, for example.

Always to take the opportunity to learn, without thinking, 'Will this be good for my career?' Although I always took science and maths options, I liked English (and philosophy) a lot. English is a beautiful language. It's easy to learn conversational English (which is not the case with French). On the other hand literary English is subtle and difficult. I could have contented myself with a scientific but rather basic English, which was what I needed for my work. But I was always interested in the intricacies of the English language. The result? I became Patricia Cornwell's translator for the *Scarpetta* books. So, never make fixed plans that might limit you - you could miss out on some of the best surprises that life might throw at you.

The other lesson I have learned is a sad one, inspired by the sudden death of my best friend, Elizabeth. You should make the most of the time you have with the people you love, don't let yourself be overwhelmed by your commitments and let time slip away. You never know how much time you will have together. Don't put off for later having a good time with the people you love.