


Daughter of Catalonia: Jane MacKenzie introduces her new novel



[Jane MacKenzie](#) has lived and worked all over the world, from the Gambia to Papua New Guinea via Switzerland and Bahrain – but her heart has always belonged to France. She's always known she wanted to write a novel too – but her career was in education, not literature. After a lifetime of travelling and working, she's now not only settled in Collioure but also seen [Daughter of Catalonia](#) appear in print. In conversation with her literary agent [Jenny Brown](#) at [Blackwell's](#) last week, Jane talked about her new novel.

Daughter of Catalonia is set in Languedoc-Rousillon, one of the most beautiful parts of France, full of sunshine, warmth and wine. Collioure, the place that Jane now calls home, is a fishing village famed for its artists and its anchovies.

Overlooking the Mediterranean, at the foot of the Pyrenees, it was a favourite of Picasso, Matisse, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Georges Braque; when Jane found it, she knew she wanted to stay. Already fluent in French, she had no difficulty in settling in and becoming part of the local community; at last she had time to write.

 All was not plain sailing however, as Jane was unable to sell her first novel. She realised that her subject matter was wrong, and that the rich setting and plot she needed were already there in front of her; Catalonia, its people, and what happened to them in the Second World War.

The novel opens in 1958, when a young and sheltered girl returns to Catalonia to find out what happened to her late father, a Spanish Catalan and adopted French resident.

Although Madeleine left the area with her mother during the war, he stayed on as a member of the French Resistance; she knows he died, and now she wants to know why. The local people have returned to their everyday lives; having suffered under the Vichy government, they no longer talk about the betrayals and deceptions of the war years. The questions Madeleine asks open a Pandora's box of secrets, secrets that will change everyone's lives.

☒ Daughter of Catalonia is written in three time frames, moving between 1958, the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, and the Second World War itself. Jane explained that she had at first tried to bring the past into the present narrative, but Jenny's suggestion of using flashbacks had proved much more effective in allowing each period to stand out vividly.

Although the story is certainly not chick-lit, it has a romantic thread which Jane chose because she wanted the novel to be accessible and easy to read. She does not use people she knows in her books, saying that a writer needs control of her characters, whereas her real friends and family never do anything she wants them to. She was ruthless in cutting facts not relevant to the story, as although she finds Catalan history fascinating and has carried out a huge amount of research, she always reminded herself that her primary goal was to entertain. Her first draft was, she says, very dark, but she saw that the beauty and charm of Catalonia had been lost, so she spent months re-writing and 'putting the charm back in.' Parts of the story are inevitably sad, but the ending is full of sunshine.

The difficulties of getting published are well known, and Jenny was submitting Jane's manuscript at a time when publishers had become exceptionally cautious, concerned about the economy and the impact of e-books. Jane says she found the process much harder than she'd expected, and was very lucky to be taken on by Jenny's agency, hugely valuing Jenny's tactful and calm input. In the end, Jenny received two offers

for Daughter of Catalonia and it was published last month by [Allison & Busby](#), who were so impressed with Jenny's editing that they saw no need to repeat the process in-house.

Jane is already working on her next book; although it is not really a sequel, she was reluctant to ignore the many tendrils coming from the novel and has decided to write about the family of Madeleine's father across the border in Spain. Book three is already taking shape in her mind – after that she is thinking of taking a break from Catalonia and setting her next work in the Scottish Highlands, the birthplace of her late husband. She retains a home in Plockton and feels that the area is just as romantic as France and Spain, with many similar characteristics.

Daughter of Catalonia has already earned many enthusiastic reviews; Jane was especially delighted to be told that readers could 'smell the sun and the grapes' of Roussillon. Writing the story has anchored Jane in Collioure and she now can't imagine living anywhere else in France. For those of us who must remain in Edinburgh, a delicious spread of Catalan snacks and several glasses of Languedoc wine concluded a most interesting and enjoyable evening.

Daughter of Catalonia is published by [Allison & Busby](#) and is available from Blackwell's, South Bridge.

More information about Jane MacKenzie and Daughter of Catalonia can be found on Jane's [website](#).