

Edinburgh International Book Festival 2024 – An Afternoon with Jenny Colgan

Arriving at the EIBF Press Office to collect my pass, I realise a photoshoot is in full swing.

It seems to involve a bicycle covered in knitting. Looking round a pillar, I see a tall woman dressed in red. I've seen her before; it's **Jenny Colgan**, here to talk about her latest novel *Close Knit*, set on a remote Scottish island where three generations of manic knitters share a cottage.



Jenny Colgan with her knitted bicycle PHOTO Roberto Ricciuti

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

JENNY
COLGAN

Close
Knit



Everyone knows her life story.
But who will win her heart?

The book's setting is classic Colgan country. This is a small community, a young

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Half an hour later, I'm in the Spiegeltent, where Colgan is sitting down with another superstar of the book world, literary agent **Jenny Brown**. There's a large and enthusiastic audience, many of whom have already bought the hardback edition of *Close Knit*.

I thought only libraries did that, which just shows how popular Colgan is (and also how little I know about her readers.) The lady behind me in the queue has bought it as a present for her sister. "But I'm going to read it first. She won't mind."

Brown begins by reminding us that Colgan's numerous novels have already sold over twelve million copies worldwide. In addition to her trademark romances, she's written children's books and *Dr Who* novelisations.

Born in Prestwick, she's lived in France, the US, London and the Netherlands, but in 2015 she returned with her family to Scotland and now lives in a small village in Fife. When she came back she was struck by how much had changed. As a child she'd found small town life oppressive, but now that she had her own children she was only too pleased to be told if they were up to no good. Maybe it was she who had changed?

Close Knit may be about knitting, but it's also about love and small communities. Colgan's own mother was a primary school and peripatetic knitting and sewing teacher. Her grandma also knitted, but "She had terrible taste – and we had to wear it!"

Morag, protagonist of the new novel, is still living at home. Her mother and grandmother are confident women though Morag isn't. She lives largely in a fantasy world of her own creation. Colgan, who says she was just the same as a child,

wanted to explore how Morag could break free – of her routine and of her dream world. But all this while still holding on to the best bits about living in a supportive, largely female community. And although Morag does connect with a character from a previous book, Colgan's emphatic that any of her novels can be read as standalones. She loathes books that tell the reader too much about what has gone before – “Library readers never get to read a whole series ever!”

Brown notes that, while her more recent novels are set in Scotland and name check the cities, Colgan never identifies any real villages or small towns. “Have you ever been on a local Facebook page?!”

Writers, says Colgan, need to be very careful not to get things wrong. Readers will instantly notice incorrect geographical details or pronunciations. By using fictional locations she avoids most of the risks. Brown agrees saying the ceildh in *Close Knit* is the best, most authentic description of a small town event that she's ever read (and coming from someone as well read as Brown that's high praise indeed.)

Colgan's novels are funny, they have happy endings that make readers feel better, but she's not afraid of a serious issue or two. She likes to pick an interesting subject, like mental health – she notes how hard it was for most of us (even sociable people like her) to leave the house after the lockdowns – or the current housing crisis, especially as it affects young people. She's had to adapt her writing to keep up with modern life. The young women in her novels all used to live in London flatshares and now few can afford that. House shares are becoming multi-generational, as newly single older adults can't make the rent alone, and adult children are moving back in with their parents (her next novel is going to focus on that one.) She won't write another 'little shop' book either. “These days it would be impossible to open a cupcake shop without money.”

She may be open to change, but Colgan's not about to launch herself onto BookTok. It's great, she says, for younger writers, especially those from less mainstream/affluent backgrounds, just as the 1997 abolition of the Net Book Agreement was good news for her own generation,

'For us it opened the floodgates...Marian Keyes, Lisa Jewell, JoJo Moyes, Sophie Kinsella; a whole crowd of us stormed the barricades – we charged through!'

But that very generation should, she thinks, steer clear of things they don't understand,

'It's embarrassing seeing the older generation trying to do BookTok, we don't know what we're doing!'

Colgan may pre-select a few themes, but she definitely doesn't have everything worked out before she starts writing,

'You type and see what comes out...if you can't surprise yourself you have no chance of making your reader feel surprise...you have to throw a bunch of people in and see what they do that seems interesting...you really have to write to please yourself or you'll get into trouble.'

She doesn't mind her books being labelled "rom com", but she does object to that patronising put-down "chick-lit". In Scandinavia, she says, the genre is "feelgood" and in France "livre dou dou" – a comforter or cuddly toy. She's slightly (but only slightly) irked by how little romantic fiction men seem to read. She's forever hearing comments like "I read my girlfriend's book and it was *quite* good".

What's more important for Colgan, though, is that people enjoy what they read. She can't stand book snobbery – "books being seen as medicinal...like broccoli".

Reading to a child should be the nicest, most special part of a carer's day, and your own reading should be of anything you like – that, she says, is the mark of a real reader. She loved writing for children, but had to stop when her own family was growing up. You need to visit schools near and far to promote such books, and she simply didn't have the time.

Brown asks if romantic fiction always needs a love interest? Yes, says Colgan, and for two reasons. The first is that there just aren't that many stories in fiction. It's the journey rather than the ending that's interesting. The second is that choosing who you're going to spend your entire life with is the biggest decision you'll ever make. No matter what age you are when you do it, it'll have huge consequences.

Just as she's 'wildly' interested in other people's relationships, she's also fascinated by their reading. The rise of the e-reader, much as she loves hers, has somewhat spoiled her fun on planes. In countries where they're less popular she still enjoys a good book-spotting session on the beach.

The Sunday Times bestseller

JENNY
COLGAN

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One and a half books a year is a lot, says Brown – how does she manage it? “I pay for help.”

I once read a colour supplement interview with a rather posh couple who were both authors. They sent their children to boarding school so that they could get on. Colgan isn't afraid to be honest, in fact she thinks it's very important. Her children go to summer camp as “it's the only way”. She has no time for people who pretend they're doing it all, “Those lifestyle blogs are rubbish!”

Amen to that one.

It takes her two to three months to prepare a draft,

'I send it off, they send it back. It's like homework.'

She doesn't know how people write Christmas novels in summer. She writes the next year's one between October and December, when seasonal stuff is all around her.

Asked about writing for *Dr Who*, she tells a story about winning a children's competition to meet the then doctor, Tom Baker (though by the time she actually met him, he'd regenerated into Peter Davidson.) When she later started writing for the series, she discovered that plenty of actors had entered the same competition. David Tennant demanded to know what her tiebreaker had been.

She approached the show's writing team herself. They were wary and asked her if she'd be "putting kissing in". She said no, of course not – "then they started putting it in themselves". She's impressed by people like Stephen Moffat, who's written screenplays *and* novelisations. Novels, she says, require you to create emotions in characters' heads. Films are all about images and taking words out.

Colgan's always thinking about new projects. She was delighted to be asked by the family of Nina Bawden to write a sequel to *Carrie's War*, although sadly in the end it never happened. "But the Narnia books come out of copyright in 2029 – the temptation!"

And what about that bike? It was made for her by the North Berwick Yarn Club. She'd hoped they'd let her take it on her book tour, but it seems they want it back. She's extremely jealous of Brown, who's soon off to Shetland Wool Week, "The Edinburgh Festival of knitting!"

Meanwhile Colgan's next appearances include Glasgow, Basingstoke, Tain and Easter Ross, St Andrew's and Kilmarnock. She's back in Edinburgh again on 19th September for an Egg Book Club event. She'll have to manage all of that without the bicycle, but by whatever means she arrives, her many fans will always be thrilled to see her.

Close Knit by Jenny Colgan is published by Hodder & Stoughton. The paperback version will be available in February 2025.



Jenny Colgan with her knitted bicycle PHOTO Roberto Ricciuti