

## A Q&A with Johana Gustawsson

### **1. What was your inspiration for writing *Block 46*?**

For a long time, I felt the need to exhume the years of deportation of my grandfather at the Buchenwald concentration camp. Perhaps the need to mend something that was broken, or to forge a link that I couldn't forge during his lifetime... I also wanted to dive into the minds of a serial killer and of a profiler, to accompany them in their respective manhunt, decrypt the murderous impulses of the former and the investigative nature of the latter.

### **2. It's a dark, gritty and often graphic crime novel... were there any scenes that you felt uncomfortable writing?**

The scenes in Buchenwald concentration camp were painful to write. I felt I was dragging pain, loss and barbarity with each word... And it caused me many nightmares: I ended up shouting and crying in my sleep, like my granddad used to do... Through my research, I discovered a much more atrocious, barbaric and bloody reality than the one I had been told, and translating this into Erich Ebner's story was quite a tough process.

### **3. Were you surprised by the runaway success of *Block 46* in your native France, and to win such prestigious awards?**

I was totally surprised! I thought I could die after being published (I am from Spanish descent and therefore very prone to drama!) and I never thought: "will it be successful?", I was just so thrilled of being published! It was like a storm that took us by surprise, and I feel so grateful it did!

### **4. Alongside the police, you have some unusual protagonists – a profiler and a true-crime writer. Did you deliberately set out to do something different?**

I wanted a change from the alcoholic investigator with a pitiful life... I wanted to read a story lead by modern Amazons, that is how the tenebrous Emily Roy and the stubborn Alexis Castells came to life. Two inspiring women who, each in their own way, by pen or psychology, live to track down and hunt serial killers.

### **5. Tell us about the Holocaust storyline. What inspired this and what kind of research did you have to do?**

My paternal grandfather was deported to Buchenwald concentration camp in 1943. This page of our family history always haunted us as it really tainted my granddad's relationship to my father. In 2009, when my dad got sick, I felt the need to go searching for this missing piece of our family history. The journey was painful but cathartic, as I had to gather recollections of my father; to re-live my grandfather's nightmares of the deportation and to make those memories my own, in order to better resuscitate them. I then dived into the Nuremberg trials and numerous books about the Buchenwald concentration camp like "The Theory and Practice of Hell" by Eugen Kogon.

### **6. One of the key themes in the book is the nature of evil ... Tell us more about this.**

I am terribly intrigued by the mind of serial killers: their urges, fantasies, and their psyche. The question of nature and nurture fascinates me: how does one become a serial killer? What triggers it? Are serial killers born evil or is it childhood traumatic events that cause the criminal behavior? I find it thrilling!

### **7. Despite your French background, you've chosen to set your book in Germany, Sweden and London ... are these places you know well?**

These places define me as a woman and writer: I'm not only French, but also a Londoner and an aspiring Swede! I arrived in London in 2009, after seven years in Paris. At the time, I was a journalist, freelancing for French magazines. I immediately felt at home in this city of various villages steeped in history, great parks and ancient pubs, all mixed with a cosmopolitan culture that inspired me. Hampstead is my favourite part of town. It is truly a haven that feels just like Miss Marple's St. Mary Mead. As for Sweden, it was my husband who brought the Scandinavian influence into our family. He introduced me to the rough beauty of the west coast, the Nordic folklore and the divine *kanelbullar*, the Swedish cinnamon buns, that one of my character is crazy about!

**8. Tell us about your route to publication.**

My work as a journalist led me to write the biography of a French actress. Our collaboration resulted in a second book, this time a thriller. Through this novel, I met Lilas Seewald, my editor. It was she who guided me on the path of "Block 46".

**9. How did you feel when you heard that your book would be published in English?**

When my publisher called me to let me know, I began to jump! Which is absolutely not a metaphor as I landed on one of my son's dinosaurs and hurt my foot! It was too surreal to grasp! Very few French crime novels get translated into English and I feel extremely grateful that Block 46 is one of those.

**10. What are you reading now and what would you recommend?**

Right now, I am doing the research for the third book in the Roy & Castells series, so all I'm reading are history books about the Franco years and the scandal of the stolen children. A wonderful novel is waiting on my bedside table though: "A Suitable Lie" from Michael J Malone. I can't wait to dive into it!

**11. Are there any French crime writers that we should be reading?**

Pierre Lemaître and Bernard Minier. Wonderful ones.

**12. What's next?**

The Roy & Castells new adventure, "Mör", is published in March in France, and will arrive in 2018 in the UK. A puzzling case which makes Emily Roy and Alexis Castells travel between London in 1888 and Falkenberg, in Sweden, in 2016.