

Q & A with Jane Menczer

1. In the novel the foggy backstreets of Edwardian London are brought vividly to life. What is it about this particular time period that you find so alluring?

I think I'm drawn to the Edwardian period because, in many ways, it can be seen to represent the beginning of the modern age. While elements of the era seem to belong to a distant time, others – the motor car, the aeroplane, the beginning of the suffragette movement – appear relatively modern. I have also always loved Victorian and Edwardian literature and wanted to try to recapture some of the atmospheres and settings that are evoked so vividly by Dickens, Conan Doyle and Conrad, among others.

2. Margaret's journey of self-discovery is very central to the novel. Was this always planned or did she grow as the story took shape?

The first scene that I wrote was the one where MacIntyre is walking across the foggy beach and enters the cave. Soon after that I started to "hear" Miss Trant's voice in my head. I didn't plan the story in advance and certainly, as I was writing, Margaret and her domestic life came more and more sharply into focus. The idea that the central mystery should in some way be of personal concern to my protagonist was suggested to me by the crime writer Jim Kelly during the early stages of writing the book, and that turned out to be the lynchpin that held all the different threads in the novel together.

3. The simmering tensions that ultimately led to outbreak of the First World War form the backdrop to An Unlikely Agent. Did you set out to explore how history is shaped by individuals?

My main focus to begin with was on the story, characters and setting, but as I wrote I found that I was also developing a number of different ideas and themes. I wasn't consciously writing about the way that history is shaped by individuals, although I can see how that could apply to the book. However, I was aware of exploring the way in which individuals are shaped by the historical period in which they exist, particularly the idea that it is incredibly difficult, perhaps impossible, to escape the prejudices and preconceptions that pervade the zeitgeist of a particular era.

4. Do you have any favourite authors or books that particularly inspired you to put pen to paper (so to speak)?

There are too many to list but they include Conrad's novels, especially *The Secret Agent*, which captures the seedy glamour of Edwardian London so brilliantly. John Buchan's writing is such fun to read and the different narrative voices of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *The Power-House* were particularly important in sparking ideas. I also love Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* – it's such a compelling read. I read all of Charles Dickens' novels in my twenties and early thirties and his humour and larger than life characters have been resonating in my mind ever since.

5. What is your favourite scene or moment in the book?

One scene that I really enjoyed writing was the one where Margaret visits Mr Plimpson in his new business premises and threatens Mr Peters with a gun. It was incredibly satisfying to turn the tables on the two men who had dismissed her as merely a timid little mouse and I had great fun trying to bring out the humour in such a tense and potentially deadly situation.

6. What inspired you to become a writer?

I have wanted to be a writer ever since I learnt to read – maybe even before that. When I was a child I loved listening to my mum and my grandma telling madeup stories and my sister and I used to emulate them by telling each other stories when we were in bed at night. I started writing at a very young age - I remember carrying an exercise book around in which I was writing poems and stories when I was five or six. And our house was full of books and I was a voracious reader, which was also important.

7. What advice would you give to any budding writers?

Read as much good writing as you can – the more varied the better. Even if you are busy, try to find a regular slot to write – even half an hour a day can make all the difference. Also, perseverance is essential. It can take years to write a book, especially if you have other work and family commitments, and it's important to enjoy the process of writing itself rather than focusing exclusively on the creation of an end product. I've also found the comments of readers I trust have been incredibly helpful in helping me to develop my writing. And The Paris Review interviews are a great source of inspiration and information for any writer.