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Since the publication of her first novel, *The Enchanted Girl*, back in 1989, Joanne Harris has been consistently writing outstanding novels that have earned her international repute and a strong following of readers. The novel *Chocolat* (1999), which was adapted into an Oscar-nominated movie, has catapulted Joanne into world-wide fame and her books are now published in over 40 countries. Her mastery at storytelling combined with a deep understanding of human emotions and the intricacies of community relationships have made her novels widely popular. Despite the huge success of her early novels however, Harris' pen never finds time for a breather as she continues to produce stories that shun the borders of stereotype and cut across different literary genres.

Harris' writing style is undeniably one of the attributes that makes her novels so compelling. Words seem to flow smoothly and naturally out of her thoughts in a voice that touches the readers' emotions.

"Writing style is something very personal," she says, "and in my case it has evolved naturally over a period of time to reflect my own interests and preoccupations. Although difficult to define precisely, I'd say it's graphic, tonal and visual, with a particular accent on colour and sense perceptions."

Developing an appealing writing style is every author's concern.



International bestselling author **Joanne Harris** speaks to **Richard Zahra** about her writing, her books

and the troublesome Norse God, Loki

Photos: Lorne Campbell, Guzelian Ltd.

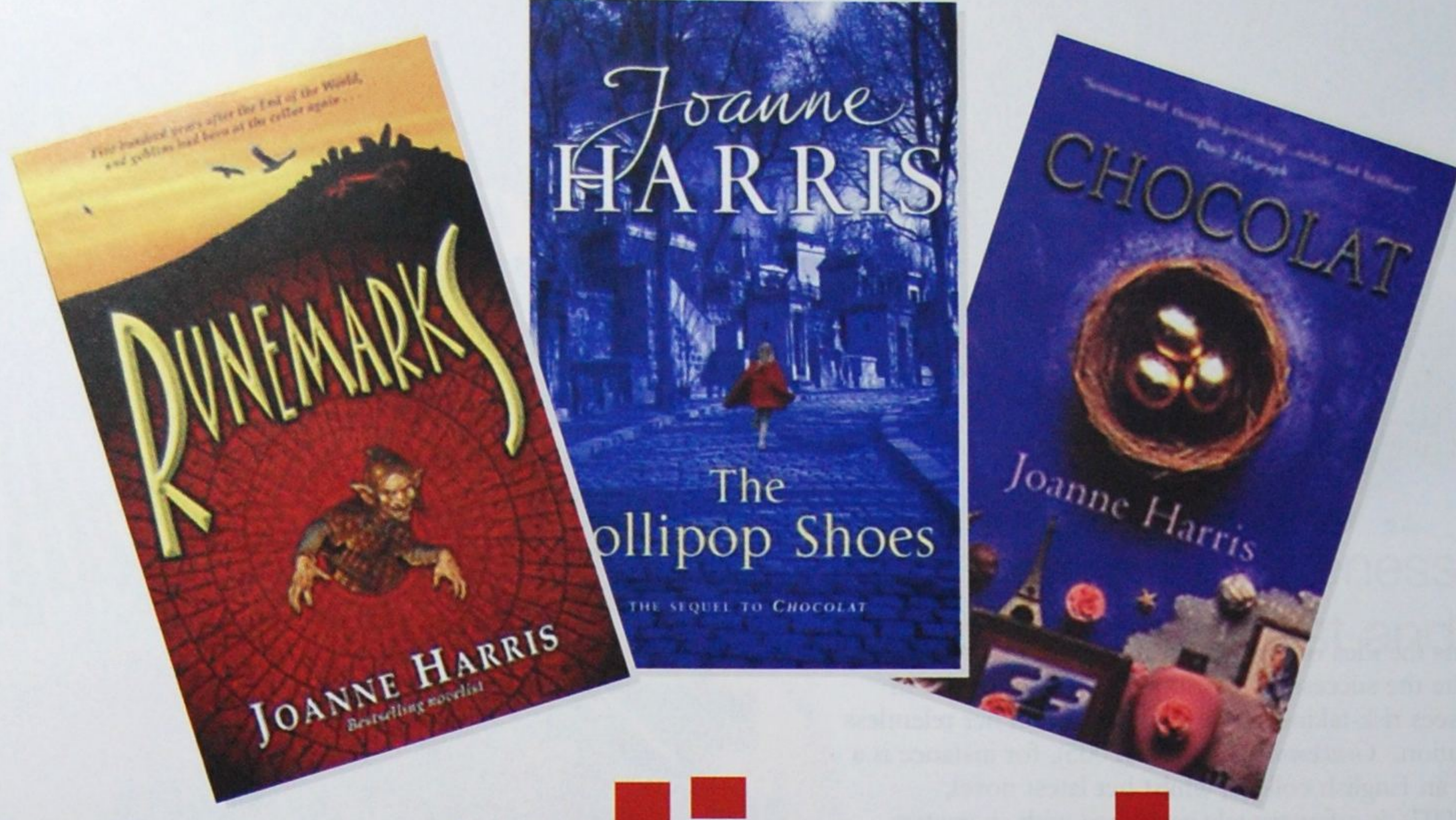
"I don't think a personal style can be consciously created," adds Harris. "Mine reflects both my interest in music and foreign languages – I often read aloud as I work, and that determines the rhythm patterns of the language I'm using. I use the first person in order to empathize more easily; I try to evoke scents and tastes as well as sights and sounds in order to create the illusion of really *being there*."

The characters that roam Harris' novels are extremely convincing and tend to linger in readers' memories. They are often catalysts for change who are at odds with the establishment

Considering the intricate plots and subplots that Joanne Harris weaves into her novels, it is quite surprising that she does little advance planning. "I rarely plan very much ahead," she says. "To me, writing a book is such an organic process that it's better for me to have just a few key facts in mind, and to allow the book to sprawl freely and of its own accord. It can always be tidied up later."

The characters that roam Harris' novels are extremely convincing and tend to linger in readers' memories. They are often catalysts for change who are at odds with the establishment. Take Vianne Rocher (*Chocolat*) and Framboise Dartigen (*Five Quarters of the Orange*), to name but two examples.

"I write about people who I can believe in," explains Harris. "I don't believe in heroes and villains – I'm not interested in designating characters as good or evil. What I like to do is to work out why people make the choices they do, and how they deal with the consequences. I like strong and complex characters, and I like to see them interact with others. Conflict is what fuels a storyline – and these characters tend to create conflict wherever they go. I'm interested in people in general – their habits, their memories, their obsessions, their flaws. I talk to people all the time, and I collect from real life many of the elements that later appear in my stories. In this way I try to bring as much human detail as possible into my portrayals."



ingredients of success

A number of Harris' hugely successful novels are set in a typical southern French rural community. Having a French mother and an English father, it is not surprising she has a deep insight on the complexities of French character which she can translate into her stories.

"I write about the places that I know best," says Harris. "It's the only way to make them real enough for someone else to believe in them."

Joanne Harris has been shaped by two geographically close but highly contrasting cultures. When asked how her 'French half' differs from her 'English half', she replies: "I don't have a very accurate point of comparison, of course. But if I had to analyze it, I'd say that my literary, solitary, tending-towards-depression side is English, whereas my extrovert, culinary, sociable side belongs to my French half."

Food has featured prominently in many of Harris' novels. She believes that food denotes cultural diversity but is also a common denominator amongst societies – a universal human pleasure. Harris' own food tastes hark back to the simple, hearty Mediterranean cuisine of southern France.

"There's no way to beat simple, fresh food, locally produced, in season," she admits. "A basic tomato salad, using fresh, home-grown tomatoes, parsley, shallots and olive oil can taste better than the most complicated of dishes. And you can make a terrific meal from nothing more than good bread, cheese, olives and a glass of decent red wine."

Before becoming a full time writer, Joanne Harris worked for 15 years as a school teacher. She liked her job but literary success

brought a proportionate increase in commitments. She explains: "Dealing with the Press, travel, leaving home for long periods of time and trying to come to terms with what I do as part of a business rather than something that gives me joy, are my most pressing demands."

When Harris was told that a movie adaptation of *Chocolat* was being considered, she realised what a significant breakthrough that could bring to her writing career, but nonetheless, remained as pragmatic as ever. "I was told, very wisely, that these things aren't worthy of attention until you're in the cinema at the premiere, watching the credits roll," she says.

Eventually, the dream was realised and the project went ahead. The Oscar-nominated movie boosted interest in Joanne's books world-wide and established her as a literary name.

Following *Chocolat*, Harris quit her job to pursue her writing career. "I was faced with the usual concerns of leaving a stable job – money, security, fear of failure," she says. "It

takes a tremendous leap of faith to leave a well-paid, secure job (and one you know you're good at) to do something as chancy as writing books. Once a teacher, always a teacher, though, or so one of my old colleagues maintains. It took me some time to get used to the lack of routine, the solitude, the vast amounts of free time and the fact that I had to take responsibility for what I did during the day."

When asked how the Joanne Harris who was still struggling to publish her first novel, back in 1988, is different from today's highly successful Joanne Harris, she simply answers: "As far as I can tell, no different... except that now I have a different job, and rather more money!"

Harris' determination to write primarily for her own enjoyment and that of her loved ones is perhaps an echo of the rebellious, subversive protagonists in her novels, who never seem to go along with the established rules



Harris shuns the idea of applying a successful formula to her novels, despite the success of her food-related stories set in France. She sees risk-taking as the way forward in her relentless writer's evolution. *Gentlemen and Players* (2005), for instance is a thriller set in an English college, garnish her latest novel, *Runemarks* (2007), is a fantasy tale, whiskered with characters from Norse mythology – a far cry from the novels set in the quaint, fabricated French village of Lansquen-Tannes.

"I write what I write," says Harris. "It's hard enough trying to concentrate on making a book as good as it can be without trying to second-guess the audience (or even the marketing team!)"

The experimental nature of her writing can perhaps be fully appreciated in *Jigs and Reels* (2004), her eclectic and only short story collection to date. "I don't write many short stories a year," she explains, "so it takes time to build up a collection. But I do like writing them, especially when I'm on tour, so I think there should be another book sooner or later."

Harris fosters a very independent attitude towards her writing. "I'm rather resistant to joining causes," she says. "I'm also resistant to stereotypes – and I'm equally interested in male characters as in female ones."

Some of Joanne Harris' novels have been described in various studies as having very strong elements of *magic realism*, which is the 'in' movement of literature at the moment. Harris has no qualms about what she thinks of pigeonholing books into categories or appellations. "I'm not really set comfortable with any category," she affirms. "I don't really see how sticking a label on a book can help people understand it better."

With her new book *Runemarks* hot out of the press, it is still too early to assess the readers' response. What we can be certain of is that if Joanne Harris has a target, she'll pursue it with determination, no matter what. "I don't suppress my aspirations," she says. "It isn't healthy. Writing *Runemarks* was fun, and my daughter loved it, which is essentially all I wanted to achieve."

Modern writers are constrained by the demands of their publishers, who are often motivated by business considerations. Harris' determination to write primarily for her own enjoyment and that of her loved ones is perhaps an echo of the rebellious, subversive protagonists in her novels, who never seem to go along with the established rules. While discussing *Runemarks*, Harris says: "If I were to cast myself in the role of a Norse God, it would be Loki, because without him, bad and undoubtedly troublesome as he is, there would have been no stories to tell." That pinch of mischief has propelled Joanne Harris along the hard road to success and earned her a large following of readers who seem to relish every literary trick or treat that she has in store for them. ■