

A Conversation with Jacqueline Winspear, author of the series featuring Maisie Dobbs, Psychologist & Investigator

Who is Maisie and what inspired her?

I had not planned to write fiction. Even though one of my writing mentors had encouraged me to give it serious thought, at that point my passion was the personal essay. However, I was driving to work one morning, crawling along in heavy traffic, then stuck at a stop light, when I did what many people do in those conditions – I started daydreaming. Suddenly, in my mind’s eye, I saw a woman – dressed in the fashion of the late 1920’s – on the old wooden escalator at Warren Street station in London. She left the station, walked down Warren Street and stopped outside one of the houses, whereupon she took out an envelope with a set of keys. The scene continued, even as I heard the car horn from the driver behind me (the light had changed). I couldn’t wait to get home that evening to write what I had seen that morning, which was essentially the first chapter of *Maisie Dobbs*, the first novel in the series. The thing was, that I knew so much about the character of Maisie before I had even reached work that day. She was born in Lambeth, a very poor area of south-east London, at the tail end of the 1800’s. Her rise from the position of a maid working in service is due to her intelligence, intellect, and in no small part to her other intuitive gifts – gifts that are recognized by Dr. Maurice Blanche, a friend of her employer. She wins a place to study at Girton College, Cambridge, but cuts her education short in 1915 when she enlists for nursing service. After the war, she continues her education, then works for Blanche as his assistant. Blanche’s history is complex – following medical training he also worked in “legal medicine” (forensics) and is a psychologist and, as readers come to know, also something of a philosopher. We first meet Maisie following his retirement, when she is setting up in business on her own.

It appears that your heroine is continually coming up against the dilemma of how to do her job as an investigator without letting her life – or her past – interfere.

At the age of 18, Maisie was plunged into the horror of war first-hand when she was sent to France as a nurse at a casualty clearing station (CCS), which was very close to the front lines. In a way, she lost part of herself there - not only was she injured when the CCS was shelled, but she saw death at its most horrific, and its saddest. Series readers will remember that in *Pardonable Lies* she is required to return to France, a daunting prospect. It is like driving

along a road where one has had a bad car accident from which one still suffers – you really would rather take another route. In *Pardonable Lies*, Maisie knows she is compromised, and the reader understands, too, that Maisie's suffering has never abated, that in her way she is as shell-shocked as many of the soldiers who returned from that war. In addition, Maisie is driven to ensure that, during an investigation, those she touches in the course of her work are left at peace with her actions, as far as that is possible.

Why did you choose the time following World War I for your novels? Do you have a particular interest in that time period?

My grandfather was severely wounded and shell-shocked at The Battle of the Somme in 1916. Even as a young child, I understood the extent of his suffering. When I asked questions about his profound limp and wheezy lungs, my mother would tell me that “Granddad was wounded in the Great War.” It seemed such a terrible thing to me, most probably due to the gravity with which the words “Great War” were spoken. In fact, I can remember the very first time I asked questions about my grandfather's health. I think I was about five at the time. My grandparents came to stay once or twice a year, coming down on the steam train from London for a week or two at a time. During one of those early visits, I heard my grandfather get up very early.

I waited for him to go downstairs, then clambered out of bed and followed him down. I sat on the stairs and peeked through the wooden rail. I saw him soaking his feet and calves, drying them and massaging his legs up and down. Then I saw my grandfather begin to remove something from his leg, then another, and another. Later, I asked what Granddad was doing and my mother explained to me – as best she could to a child – that he was removing shrapnel from his legs, shrapnel embedded when he went “over the top” during the Battle of the Somme. Of course, you can imagine the “what” and “why” questions that followed, however, I was left with an overriding image – the picture of darkness, of guns and of my grandfather wounded on the ground. I later learned that throughout my father's childhood, my grandfather was periodically taken away by ambulance for a month or so, perhaps to a soldiers convalescent home by the sea, so that he could breathe in fresh air to help his gas-damaged lungs. My grandfather died when he was 77, and to the day he died he was still removing shrapnel from his wounds of over fifty years before.

As I grew up my curiosity about the “war to end all wars” deepened, so that I always seemed to be reading something about the war. However, my interest was not in the politics of the time so much as rooted in the experiences of ordinary men and women, boys and girls, not only on the battlefield, but on the home front. And though I never set out to write a “war” novel, it came as no surprise that this part of history formed the backdrop of *Maisie Dobbs* and

other books in the series.

For me, the war and its aftermath provide fertile ground for a mystery, offering a literary vehicle for exploring the time. Such great social upheaval allows for the strange and unusual to emerge and a time of intense emotions can, to the writer of fiction, provide ample fodder for a compelling story, especially one concerning criminal acts and issues of guilt and innocence. After all, a generation is said to have lost its innocence in The Great War.

What research have you done in order to reconstruct this time so convincingly?

My research is ongoing. Books and records from and about the period are the mainstay of my personal library. I also read memoirs, fiction from the period, mainly to enhance my sense of language, of societal mores, etc. In addition, I do a considerable amount of primary research, which includes, for example, consulting the archives at the Imperial War Museum in London, walking the streets where I am setting scenes and then comparing what I can see and feel today with old photos and accounts of life at the time. I've been to France and Belgium several times to visit the Great War battlefields – and each visit was a a profound experience. For example, to walk around the edge of a field planted with new crops, and put your hand into the soil and come up with live ammunition from the war that was waged over 90 years ago takes one's breath away. One of my challenges was to imagine how these places might have looked twelve years after the war, in 1930, when Maisie has to return to France as part of her investigation into the death of a wartime aviator.

How is Maisie Dobbs an example of how women lived during that time and what they were able to accomplish?

One of the things I wanted to do in creating the character of Maisie Dobbs was to honor the spirit of that generation of women in Britain. They were the first generation of women in modern times to go into war related work, and they did so in the hundreds of thousands. Some 60,000 women went directly into war-related roles, as nurses, ambulance drivers, code-breakers, munitions workers, and in military support roles. Just shy of another 500,000 women assumed men's jobs so that men could be released to the battlefield. There was barely a field of endeavor untouched by a woman's hand – they built ships, built aircraft, drove trains and buses, worked the land, the first women police auxiliaries pounded the London streets, women worked in construction and in brewing – they did everything. But the sad thing is that they were a generation for whom life would never be as they might have expected it to be when they were girls in the years before the war. The 1921 census revealed that there were two million "surplus" women in Britain. Approximately 750,000 men of marriageable age were killed in the war, and about 1,350,000

came home seriously wounded and shell-shocked. Of course, those “surplus” women became the subject of jokes and speculation, and were often seen as something to be feared (heaven knows what they might get up to!). The truth is that they were an extraordinary generation. Plunged into war, having lost sweethearts and young husbands, brothers and fathers, women now had to be financially independent, they had to build community and friendships, and they had to prepare for growing old alone. The accomplishments and resolve of that generation is inspiring – for example, it was the great age of women novelists in Britain.

When you begin writing your novels, do you have the details of who did what, where, when and why mapped out specifically or do they develop as you write?

I have a basic idea of the who, the what and the where – a map of where I am going. The wonderful thing about a map is that it allows you to be more of an adventurer, because if you lose your way, you have something to come back to. Though I have key markers in the plot mapped out, I am also able to go off down another road if I am led there by curiosity, a dream or just my fingers on the keyboard.

Do you have to read the series in order of publication?

The books can definitely be read out of sequence, as I have woven just enough basic history from previous novels to enable readers to grasp the background quite readily. However, in any series, there is something to be gained from reading earlier books. It's not essential reading, but I think the readers of later books will enjoy going back to learn more about the continuing characters and how they came to think, feel and act as they do.