

KATE'S NEXT Quest

She may be a historical novelist but it's the living landscape that inspires Kate Mosse. From her home in the Sussex Downs, we catch up with the author of *Labyrinth* on her latest storytelling adventures

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SILVERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER

Kate Mosse is preposterously perky for someone who has been up since 2am. At four, she had toast with Marmite. At six, a nap. At seven, coffee, sweet and black. Now, at ten, after hours of writing, she is full of zing. "I'm on deadline," she says, from her home in Sussex. "My big non-fiction book [about women lost to history] is due in days. It is, as always, an essay crisis, up to the wire. It happens with every book. I can't do anything about it."

There is nothing to be done now, except believe that she'll make it, as she has before. Kate, 60, is best known for her novels. For millions of us, that's *Labyrinth*, a girl's own grail story set in 13th-century France. Kate was 45, with four books and a publishing career behind her when it became a worldwide bestseller in 2005. "*Labyrinth* sold a lot of copies, but, if you're sensible, you know that it was luck," she says. "The thing that was extraordinary was that it was everywhere, which meant that I felt public as an author in the way that I had never felt public before." While completing the Languedoc trilogy, continuing the *Labyrinth* story, Kate published two Gothic novels and built up the Women's Prize for Fiction, which she co-founded in 1996.

A dizzying delight of page-turners and projects is due in 2022. *The City of Tears*, the second in Kate's current quartet, kicked things off in January, when the paperback came out. The series charts the Huguenot diaspora from 16th-century France to 19th-century South Africa. Next on the publication rollcall is an interim story, *The Black Mountain*, a novella set in 18th-century Tenerife about a woman living in the shadow of a volcano, out for

World Book Night in April. The same month sees Kate's stage adaptation of her 2014 Gothic thriller *The Taxidermist's Daughter*.

The Women's Prize for Fiction, which rumbles on in the background all year, culminates in June; Kate's Miss Marple story for an Agatha Christie anthology is out in September; while the "big non-fiction", due any day now, appears in October. As we talk, plans emerge for a 1920s crime series and a big history play.

WRITERS AND REVOLUTIONARIES

Ideas outstrip hours, with projects often overtaking each other. But they all link up. For months, Kate's focus has been her big non-fiction book, which emerged from a social media campaign she ran last year, inviting people to nominate a woman from the past.

"History is full of trailblazing women - adventurers, founders, warrior queens - but where are they?" she says, with Pankhurst-like passion. "I want to put women's contributions back into the books." Emily Williamson, Etta Lemon and Eliza Phillips - creators of the RSPB - should be household names. And why don't more of us know about Kate's favourite finding: Josephine Cochrane, the woman behind the dishwasher?

Writing *Warrior Queens to Quiet Revolutionaries* has helped Kate prepare for the next instalment of her historical quartet: "It wasn't bad research following these intrepid women... It's been really inspiring reading the words of travellers like Isabella Bird, looking at how she brought to life these utterly different climates and utterly different expanses of land, and thinking about how I can do the same." For Kate, place is everything: ▶

“I LIKE FEELING SMALL IN THE LANDSCAPE. I TRUST IT: IT WILL BE HERE WHEN WE’RE GONE”

“I’m a landscape writer really. My first inspiration is landscape. History comes second because, for me, every story can only be told where it’s set.”

Every day she goes for a big walk, listening for “whispers in the landscape” that might become ideas. She’s been walking a lot recently across Fishbourne Marshes, near where she lives, to adapt *The Taxidermist’s Daughter*. “It’s where I spent my childhood, where I’d walk with my parents and my two sisters...”

It’s always been the landscape of my imagination. A lot of the writer I am comes from growing up in Sussex, near the Downs and the marshes.”

Over the past couple of years, she has followed the wash of seasons, and today sings lyrically of spring. She waits for the blackthorn to appear, then the hawthorn, and rejoices when you get “an explosion of wild-flower colour... little pinpricks of pink and blue and yellow”. It’s all so different on an overcast day, “when the clouds are purple and you’re surrounded by this menacing landscape of mud. If you fell into that mud, it would be difficult to get out.” A beat. “That’s one thing I love about that landscape: that beneath the beauty, there is menace.”

Kate also ventures deep into Kingley Vale, the oldest yew forest in Europe. “It is the most extraordinary place,” she says, revelling in local legend about the chalk downland running red with the blood of Viking warriors slain by Saxon defenders. “A lot of that red comes from the sap, but it’s a very particular colour in a certain light.” Light is up to more tricks on The Trundle, an Iron Age hillfort. “When the moon is full, it looks like bone because it’s so white,” she says.

Out walking, Kate sends herself texts, particularly about how trees and flowers look in that light and about shadows: “As someone who writes adventure fiction, it’s a key part of plotting. If I have someone running away, as I almost always do, I need to know which way their shadow falls or else they’ll be seen.”

She walks with her phone otherwise off. “For me, walking is a solitary thing and a silent thing,” she says. “It is about being peaceful... If I’m awake in the night, I will often imagine I’m in the countryside.” She loves birds, trees and flowers, but is “terrible” at identifying them. “As a writer, I find out names to get descriptions right. But otherwise, it doesn’t matter to me. I don’t need to know what something is to be moved by it.”

And there is plenty to be moved by, whether it’s nature or history, like The Trundle or Goosehill Camp, another Iron Age hillfort. “I do like walking in places where there is a sense of the past,” Kate says. “I love feeling that people have walked these paths thousands of years before me and people will walk these paths thousands of years after me. I like that idea of being part of the continuity of human experience. I like feeling small in the landscape. I trust it: it will be here when we’re gone.” On a more

intimate scale, the Sussex landscape connects generations of her own family. “I walk locally to remember my parents,” says Kate, who has two children, Martha, 32, and Felix, 29, with her husband, Greg. “It’s a landscape that matters to me... I do think about what happens after I’m gone. I don’t see it as morbid. For people who spend a lot of time in the countryside, that sense of the cycle of things is ingrained more on a daily basis than maybe it is in the city.”

Kate’s 2021 memoir, *An Extra Pair of Hands*, about caring for her parents and now Granny Rosie, her mother-in-law, displays a similar blend of pragmatism and compassion. If place is everything for Kate’s writing, then family is everything for all other aspects of life. The Mosses have always been close. Kate’s love of history comes from Ma, who volunteered on the dig of Fishbourne Roman Palace nearby, while her love of adventure fiction comes from Dad’s bedtime stories: Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* was a popular choice.

She also absorbed her parents’ love of theatre. Her dad, who performed in rep before he became a solicitor, was company secretary to the board of the Chichester Festival Theatre. Kate, who had her first job there, selling ice creams, would go on to become the theatre’s first female executive director. Now, the theatre is staging *The Taxidermist’s Daughter*, her first major play. “It feels an enormous thing for it to be on there,” Kate says. “It’s exciting, but nerve-wracking, starting a new career at 60.” While *Labyrinth* put Kate in the spotlight as an author, a play is a more immediate experience. “When I first saw people reading *Labyrinth*, that was exciting, but not nerve-wracking because I couldn’t tell what they thought. In a theatre, you feel people reacting. That will be extraordinary. On the first night, I expect to be a gibbering wreck.”

HISTORY ON REPEAT

After becoming an author, Kate discovered her dad had written plays. “It’s the weirdest thing finding patterns in your history,” she says, adding that one day she might put one on. More recently, she’s unearthed another pattern: that there was a novelist in the family. Her great-grandmother, Lily Watson, was the Kate Mosse of her day – a big deal, read by Gladstone, the prime minister.

Kate’s quest to find out more about her has become the spine of her women in history book: “I’ve been tracing her footsteps, but it’s been hard. I’ve had to rely on relatives finding things in attics.” She laughs, still as perky. “It shows that anyone can disappear from history. I thought I was breaking new ground in my family as a writer. It turns out to be far from the case.”

THE BLACK MOUNTAIN (PAN BOOKS, £11) is out on 14 April to mark World Book Night on 23 April. *The Taxidermist’s Daughter* runs at Chichester Festival Theatre from 8-30 April (cft.org.uk). See pages 153 and 171 for details on how you can join Kate at Good Housekeeping Live and the Good Housekeeping Literary Festival.



ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPH BY BAILEYS BOOK BAR

Kate's CHAPTERS

1961 Born to Richard, a solicitor with an acting past, and Barbara, an economics teacher and amateur archaeologist. Grows up in Fishbourne, near Chichester in West Sussex (seen bottom left in 1967/8)

1984 Graduates from Oxford, where she read English, and falls into publishing through a temp job at Hodder & Stoughton

1992 Quits publishing, after being offered a promotion to run several imprints, to write her first non-fiction book, *Becoming a Mother*, out the following year

1996 Co-founds the Women’s Prize for Fiction (then the Orange Prize) in response to an all-male Booker Prize shortlist (Kate is seen below right with Catherine Mayer, June Sarpong and Kit De Waal, 2018)

1996 Experiments with literary fiction with *Eskimo Kissing*. Another high-concept book, *Crucifix Lane*, follows

2005 *Labyrinth*, a big time-slip novel set in 13th-century France, tops bestseller lists worldwide

2013 Appointed OBE for services to literature

2018 Releases *The Burning Chambers*, the first in a quartet of novels, covering the Huguenot diaspora from 16th-century France to 19th-century South Africa

2021 Publishes *An Extra Pair of Hands*, about looking after her elderly parents and mother-in-law

2022 A bumper year sees the paperback release of *The City of Tears*, *The Black Mountain* for World Book Night, the play of *The Taxidermist’s Daughter*, a new Miss Marple story and *Warrior Queens to Quiet Revolutionaries*