



What's left to achieve for *Labyrinth* author?

Olivia Greenway meets best-selling author Kate Mosse to ask what's next?

ALTHOUGH SALES of her books top five million, and have been translated into 38 languages, Kate Mosse had been working in publishing, and fitting in her writing around other work, for many years when what was to be her first million seller was released. She is the first to admit she wasn't an overnight success. "I was 45 when *Labyrinth* was published in 2005."

Wondering whether the book's huge success was down to luck or talent, Mosse is pragmatic: "The quality of anybody's book is what matters, of course, but the truth is in publishing, there is always an element of luck, things that are outside your control. There was something about that book that caught the public mood. It was only six months after the *Da Vinci Code* was published. It was picked early on for the Richard and Judy book club. It went to number one two days after appearing on the show and it stayed there for six months. But there are lots of amazing books that don't get their moment in the sun, so I do believe luck plays a part."

'Labyrinth made being a full-time writer possible'

The book was the turning point for Mosse. "Before *Labyrinth*, I was a reader who writes. With *Labyrinth*, I felt I was a writer. I was lucky with what happened to the book; it made it possible for me to be a writer (full-time). You never expect it until it happens to you."

Labyrinth is part of a historical trilogy, based on Carcassonne, in the Languedoc region in south-west France. Mosse had bought a small house there with her husband in 1989. Again, luck played its part. Her mother-in-law had a friend of a friend whose

estate agency was twinned with an estate agency in Carcassonne. So, they went there. "The minute I got off the train – it was November and cold and horrible – I fell in love with the place. I didn't intend to write about it, but little by little, living there, learning about the stories and the history, it became a place I could write about." She still divides her time between Sussex and the small fortified French city.

Before Mosse was catapulted to fame, she had been beaver away behind the scenes, supporting other writers. The annual Women's Prize for Fiction was founded in 1996, prompted by the fact that the Booker shortlist of 1991 had no women writers at all. Mosse and some of her contemporaries were suitably appalled and decided something had to be done. Over 20 years on, it's regarded as one of the world's most prestigious literary prizes.

Mosse, co-founder, is still much involved.

"People are very interested in the amplification of women's voices and supporting excellence. We are very lucky with our sponsors as they share our enthusiasm."

Mosse is appearing at the four-day Marlborough LitFest, whose media sponsor is *Wiltshire Life*, in late September. She has sound advice for a festival first-timer, who might not be sure what to expect. "The best way to approach good literary festivals, and Marlborough is one of those as it's set somewhere real, rather than a tent in a field, is to treat it as like being in a conversation with friends. If you go into a friend's sitting room and you don't know a couple of people, you will sit and listen to them. In the end, the most human of needs is the sitting, and telling of and listening to stories. At a festival, you don't have to have read the books. Just go and listen."

Mosse discusses her own approach at festivals. "When I'm talking at a festival, I don't tell the story of my novel; I tell stories about writing it, where the ideas came from; how I do my research; why I wrote about this person, rather than that person. Basically, this book that I'm holding in my hand: where did it come from?"

And what, one wonders, is the hardest part of getting published? "The hardest part, of course, is writing the book. If you feel that what you have written deserves to be read by lots of people, then stick with it. As I said earlier, luck can play an important role."

Mosse is presently working on her new series of historical fiction. *The Burning Chambers*, the first in a series of four, has recently been published. The quartet is set over 300 years of Huguenot history and features Amsterdam, and Franschhoek in South Africa: the French in exile. "I write about ordinary people living under extraordinary circumstances. That's the nature of religious wars." *City of Tears* is book two, which she has already started working on.

Marlborough LitFest speaker Kate Mosse also works to promote other women writers and is co-founder of the Women's Prize for Fiction



PHOTOS BY RUTH CRAFER

MARLBOROUGH LITFEST: KATE MOSSE

It's noticeable that a strong sense of place runs through all her historical works. Not just an imagined place, but a real place you can almost smell and feel. "When people ask me to define my fiction, the biggest thing about it is it's about the land. It's the belief that the stories I write can only happen where they are set. The land isn't a backdrop, it's fundamentally a character in a story. I first looked up at the Franschhoek Mountains and thought: these look like the mountains of Languedoc. If you were a refugee, you might think, 'I could make a home here.' That's where the four books started."

‘I work from early morning until I can't do it anymore’

And how does Mosse write? "Before I start my first draft, I will have done lots of research (physically visiting various places) and made copious notes. I work from early morning until I can't do it anymore. That's usually late afternoon. I write seven days a week. Until it's finished, I can't see the shape of the book. It's like you can't start decorating until you've built the house. When it's done, I take a break, say a week or so."

Mosse continues: "Then I get back and attack it and cut and paste and rewrite. So, by the third draft, the real writing begins; you can see the light and shade and which bits aren't working or coming off as you would like. I'm a sprinter, rather than a marathon runner. When I'm 'doing it' I'm really doing it. It's what works for me."

As already mentioned, Mosse also spends her time helping other writers. "I deliver a novel and while it's being edited, I do the Women's Prize for Fiction work. It's very hard to do your own work and support other writers at the same time. I feel very lucky to be able to plan my year. The private stuff is me at my desk, the public stuff is me out and about talking about other people's work and just trying to balance it."

It's obvious that Mosse works very hard to master her craft but the notion persists among the wider public that writing is effortless. Mosse agrees: "There is the idea with writing that it comes fully formed; writers draft beautiful prose straight onto the page. Whereas with every other artform, we understand, for example piano playing, you need to practise your scales every day before you are able to play Rachmaninov's second piano concerto. Writing is the same. And everyone says they have no time. You might not have time to write the novel that you think is important to you, but get your writing muscles fit for purpose, so when you do have time to write, the skills are in place. Scribble things down while you are waiting for the kettle to boil. Write a description of steam. Any type of writing is better than no writing."

In recognition of her contribution to services for literature and to women, Mosse was awarded the OBE in 2013. "It was a complete surprise. When the letter came, I rushed through to tell my family. Then, there was nothing for weeks and weeks. At one point, I wondered if I had imagined it. But then the BBC approached me for an interview, so I knew it was real. I feel the arts make such a massive contribution towards the health of this country, so it was great. It was a lovely day and a wonderful thing."

With success stamped through her like a stick of rock, can there be anything left she would still like to achieve? Mosse delivers a final surprise: "I bought a button accordion years ago – I was seduced by the beauty of it – and every new year, I think I must get a teacher and learn to play."

• *Marlborough LitFest runs from September 27 to 30. Kate Mosse talks about her new book, The Burning Chambers, on September 29 at Marlborough Town Hall, 4.30pm-5.30pm, £10. For more information and to book tickets, visit www.marlboroughlitfest.org*

