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## Joanne Harris

**Coastliners**  
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**Q: In many ways, *Coastliners* reads like a thriller—many of the twists and turns of the book are utterly unexpected. Was this element of intrigue something you intended at the outset, or did it evolve as you wrote?**

A: I usually plan ahead with certain aspects of the plot (I think you have to when there are so many unexpected twists and turns), although when I work I do tend to remain quite flexible on details, and sometimes developments emerge that surprise me as much as they do the reader! I think it's dull to have a completely fixed idea of a story from the moment you begin; it's much more exciting to deal with problems and situations as they arise&#8212;though this can be risky too, as you can never predict how things are going to turn out!

**Q: You convey the catatonic silences of GrosJean Prasteau with great dexterity. Was his character especially difficult to conceive?**

A: Not to conceive, although I did on occasion find him quite painful to write about. He isn't an easy person, either to like or to understand; and I had to be sympathetic towards him in spite of that, and to make sure that my own personal feelings didn't interfere with my portrayal of him, or his role in the story.

**Q: You've been credited with pioneering the "gastromance" work that merges the exuberance of food with the ecstatic qualities of romantic fiction. In what ways does *Coastliners* keep with that tradition, and how does it differ?**

A: Well of course I didn't pioneer the use of food in fiction: it has been a standard literary device since Chaucer and Rabelais, who used food wonderfully as a metaphor for sensuality. However I do think that my stories have elements in common with Grimm, Andersen and Perrault, who often attributed magical properties to food (the Gingerbread House, the magic beans, Snow White and the apple). I have tried to write a kind of contemporary folklore, in which the reality of the senses merges with the extra-sensory, magical or miraculous. In that respect, *Coastliners* follows very closely my previous novels; there are the same elements of dark-and-light fantasy and the same strong accent on the senses&#8212;taste, sound, scent, and touch. I want the reader to share as much of that as possible. I want them to feel they are really somewhere else when they are reading one of my books. One reviewer said that the story made her feel the sand beneath her toes. And if that isn't magic, then I don't know what is.

**Q: You have described *Coastliners* as a portrait of the France of your childhood summers. To what extent was the claustrophobia of small village life&#8212;where everyone knows everyone else's business&#8212;part of that experience?**

A: That's a part of it, certainly; but I have lived in villages all my life, and I find that there is a similar mentality in villages all over the world. It's sometimes claustrophobic, but it can also be profoundly comforting to have such an extended family around you, and to have that sense of community.

**Q: In *Coastliners*, you address ecological issues like beach erosion, artificial reefs, and environmental contamination. Did you do any research on these subjects before you wrote about them, or are they preoccupations of yours outside the world of fiction?**

A: Of course I researched them; but having spent so many holidays on an island you get to know the problems closest to the inhabitants' hearts. I still have family in that part of France; an oil spill recently obliterated the tourist trade on the island and drove most of the fishermen (including a family member) out of business; it was inevitable that I was going to bring some of my personal feelings and experiences into the book. There are too many instances of ships jettisoning waste oil into the sea; too many businesses willing to sacrifice the long-term well-being of the planet for their own short-term profits, too many tankers defying regulations in order to save money and putting the coastline, the environment and the people at risk. In this story I found a use for the anger I feel about these things.

**Q: Outsiders like Mado and Flynn play important roles in *Coastliners*. Do you find yourself drawn to writing characters whose personal lives are somewhat mysterious?**

A: I think everybody has a secret life. People in general are interesting to me, and I find that many of them have hidden depths and quirks that they may not even be aware of. My heroes and heroines are often unlikely people who are dragged into situations without meaning to become involved, or people with a past that has never quite left them. They are often isolated, introspective people, often confrontational or anarchic in some way, often damaged or secretly unhappy or incomplete. Most of all, however, they are catalysts; people with the ability to make a difference to those around them.