

People

CATHIE HARTIGAN

An author's journey

Exeter novelist Cathie Hartigan explains how a day at the museum proved very inspirational

Every day, I count myself fortunate to live in this part of the world. I have lived in Devon both by the sea and on the edge of Dartmoor and now I'm in the middle of Exeter. For an author, I can safely say, inspiration lies around every corner.

My debut novel, *Secret of the Song*, tells two stories, intertwining the past and present. Lisa, the heroine of the contemporary story, lives in Exeter. Although I have imagined the little music shop where she works, readers will recognise the streets, riverside and many of the city's landmarks.

The plot revolves around a piece of sheet music that is found in Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM). How could I resist including a scene in the building's distinctive pink foyer? It's a favourite place

of mine. Years ago, I was involved in an arts project that culminated in a concert in the museum's art gallery. Singing Their Praises celebrated local birdlife in poetry and song, including the famous peregrine who lived on St Michael's Church in the city.

Exeter was both a mine of information and inspiration during the writing of *Secret of the Song*. Sadly, an important scene has become particularly poignant since the novel's publication. Every day when I walk across Cathedral Yard to the place where I write, at the Devon and Exeter Institution, I feel sorry about The Royal Clarence Hotel's devastation in last year's fire. Some of the buildings destroyed were as old as those in the historical thread of my novel, which is set in sixteenth century Naples.

The unexpected is always close by, and poor Sylvia,



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my Italian heroine, has no idea that her ambition to work for a wealthy princess in a castle would be such a dangerous occupation. Her mother warns her that being too good a needlewoman will get her noticed, and that's a very bad idea. Does Sylvia listen? Of course not!

Years ago, when I was a girl, I first came to the Westcountry on a family holiday to Teignmouth. The excitement and thrill of seeing the beautiful coastline for the first time is still clear in my mind. I was used to a London suburb and an occasional trip to the south coast, so the sight of the red cliffs and their weirdly eroded curves came as a surprise. Devon lanes and the views glimpsed through gates, the wild grandeur of the moors: everywhere had its wonders. I knew I wanted to come back.

In those days there was no such thing as creative writing, it was all literature and the assumption that only other, special people wrote books. So it was my other love, music, which I studied at Dartington College of Arts in Devon.

The journey from music teacher to writer was really only as far as one keyboard to another. And slowly, a hobby was becoming a passion. In 2005 my mother suggested entering the Woman and Home short story competition, and I was lucky enough to be a finalist. This gave me huge confidence. Next, I enrolled on an Open College of Arts correspondence course. I was like a child at Christmas. Not only could I do all the assignments, I absolutely loved it!

I've always thought that, although you can't make luck happen, it's worth keeping an eye out for it passing by. To me, teaching creative writing at Exeter College felt like a lucky break, even though it was only one class a week. Gradually this increased as I taught poetry and fiction during the day as well as evening. It's a privilege to hear other people's stories, and there proved to be a great deal of writing talent here.

I began writing a novel and joined a group called Exeter Writers. It was there that I first came into contact with professional writers who had sound knowledge of the publishing industry. The hard truth is contained in the word industry. Publishing is one thing; the industry is about money. Will your novel sell? A book costs a significant amount of money to produce, so was I a good investment?

One interview I had with a commissioning editor put my novel *Secret of the Song* in perspective. She began by telling me how much she loved my writing – that's always good to hear, but usually prelude to bad news. Sure enough, she

couldn't see how to sell a novel that was about not just a niche subject, classical music, but set in Exeter, a minor city (humph!), and Renaissance Naples. Fortunately, these are bright days for independent authors. Whatever you think of Amazon, the Kindle (plus their paperback publishing arm, Createspace) enabled me to publish my novel myself. But would it sink or swim? I'd have to wait and see.

Had *Secret of the Song* been my first publication I think it may well have sunk, but an Exeter

Writers friend, Margaret James and I had already published a textbook: *The Creative Writing Student's Handbook*. Margaret is the author of 17 novels and had been teaching fiction writing

for the London School of Journalism for years. We're delighted that our handbook is regularly awarded Amazon bestseller status, internationally and here in the UK.

An energetic social media presence on the web is essential for any writer these days. By 2015 I was running my own business, Creative Writing Matters with Margaret and another Exeter Writer and successful author, Sophie Duffy. Our

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aim was to support other writers both face-to-face and online. There is no clear career path for writers but all three of us had furthered our careers through competitions. Now Creative Writing Matters runs four contests, including our flagship competition The Exeter Novel Prize, which I'd like to think has put Exeter firmly on the literary map.

The upshot of all this activity meant that, when my novel was published, I already had a tiny bit of credibility in the writing world. It isn't writers, however, that a new novel needs, it's readers, and that's when I had my biggest stroke of luck. I received an email from Amazon Kindle to say they wanted to promote *Secret of the Song*. It was receiving lovely reviews and I was happy it was selling at all, considering I'd been told it was a non-starter. Amazon, though, didn't think so. After a single day promoting my novel, it rose to No 35 overall in the Kindle UK chart and No 1 in its genre. That was a very happy day!

Modern day Exeter will be the setting for my next novel, and the past will be in Italy again, but this time I'm only going back to the Second World War. It was a desperate and difficult time for the Allies in Italy, and there are accounts of courage from surprising quarters that moved me to tears. I hope my novel will do justice to one of those. It's going to take me quite a while.

Secret of the Song by Cathie Hartigan £8.99 Createspace and £1.99 Amazon Kindle