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## Julia Stuart

**The Matchmaker of Périgord**  
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**Q: Is it true that some aspects of the plot for *The Matchmaker of Périgord* grew out of a vacation you took to the region of Périgord? Can you elaborate a bit on how this came about?**

A: I used to visit the Périgord on holiday with my boyfriend (now husband) who had family in the area. In the middle of the hamlet I stayed in was a shower erected several decades ago when there was still no running water. Inhabitants were charged a *franc* to use it, and their names were marked down in a ledger. I spent 10 weeks there writing the second half of the novel and went to each restaurant, attraction and fête attended by the novel's couples on their dates. I also spent several mornings in one of the bakeries in Mareuil-sur-Belle watching the baker at work, and asking him questions. He told me that one of the drawbacks of the job was being on his feet all day, so I slipped the tale of his resulting varicose veins into the novel. When I told him that the plot involved someone hiding a love letter in a *mille-feuilles* he told his wife, who pointed out that the letter would become soggy. So I included that in the plot too. I also interviewed a number of other locals, and used some of their anecdotes, such as ironing ducks before plucking them, urinating in the church's holy water, and ringing a hand bell during the Second World War to annoy the Pétainist neighbours whenever De Gaulle was on the radio from London.

**Q: How closely did you pattern Amour-sur-Belle on actual French villages you've visited?**

A: Amour-Sur-Belle doesn't exist, but is a mix of a hamlet, a village and a town near Brantôme in the Périgord Vert. The inspiration for the château came from that of Mareuil-sur-Belle, which has (not terribly well) repaired steps, a room of dolls, as well as plastic flowers. (It is, nevertheless, very much worth a visit on account of the marvellous Count who will show you around). The town also has an ancient weighing platform for animals, and an oyster-seller on Saturdays. The church is based on one I visited in a nearby village, which does have green mould on the walls. The carved ivy on the dentist's wall thought to have been looted from the church is in a friend's sitting room. I only had to look out of my window to see the dilapidated buildings covered in ivy. People hunted for mushrooms in nearby woods, and charts were available in pharmacies in the region warning which ones were poisonous. The bakery with its ancient stove and shovels like rowing oars is based on one I visited in Brantôme.

**Q: You've worked as a journalist for many years. How does your creative process as a fiction writer compare to your process as a writer of nonfiction?**

A: The beauty about non-fiction is that once the interview and research is done you already have the story. All you have to do is assemble it in a comprehensive and interesting fashion. But you are, of course, restricted to the facts. The beauty of fiction is that you can make it all up, which is very liberating after many years of journalism, but you have absolutely no framework to cling on to, apart from a three-sentence plot, which is slightly terrifying (particularly on a lone journey of 100,000 words, compared to 1,500 for a newspaper piece). You just have to keep furiously peddling and not look down. I think it's that thrill of not knowing precisely what's going to happen by the end of a sentence, the freedom to choose what to write about, and the liberty to express it in the precise words of your choosing that eventually draws journalists to writing fiction.

**Q: As a non-native, did you feel any trepidation in depicting France and its denizens in *The Matchmaker of Périgord*? What were some of the challenges you experienced?**

A: I wasn't worried about depicting the area as I felt I knew it relatively well, and wrote the second half of the novel in situ. I used a lot of what I saw, even down to the cherry stones painfully passed by the birds. I was, however, concerned about reproducing stereotypes, which I very much hope I've avoided. However, some nationalities do, of course, conform to their stereotypes. Berets are still commonplace amongst the older generation in this area of France, but I knew no one would believe me so there's only one mention of the defining headgear. And, of course, the French are passionate about bread (the road signs for the two bakeries in Mareuil-sur-Belle are larger than those for the nearest towns).

**Q: What do you like to eat in your *cassoulet*? Do you have a family recipe (or a favorite restaurant's version) to share with your readers?**

A: The best cassoulet I've ever tasted was cooked by the head of sales at my British publishers, Transworld. He served it at his home in an effort to seduce some buyers into stocking the novel in their bookstores. Fortunately for me, I was invited along. The recipe was from Jeanne Strang's book, *Goose Fat and Garlic: Country Recipes from South-West France*. And they did decide to stock *The Matchmaker of Périgord*.