

MARY ZACAROLI talks to Oxford author Mary Cavanagh about *The Crowded Bed*, a psychological drama inspired by her fascination with Jewish culture

# Detective work helps author's first novel

Mary Cavanagh's first novel *The Crowded Bed* is a skilfully complex, psychological piece full of high drama and murky secrets, although at its heart is a loving, long-enduring relationship. It begins with Jewish GP Joe Fortune murdering his father-in-law Gordon before he returns to bed with his sedated wife Anna. Shocking and horrific, you might think, but by the end of the book, one empathises very much with Joe's dark deed because wealthy, powerful, well-connected Gordon is truly a monster.

The book, which is mainly told from Joe's viewpoint, starts five days before the murder and alternates between past and present. Over its course we go through Joe's loving, but suffocating childhood, Oxford university days and his hellish first marriage to a nice Jewish girl. This is interspersed with Anna's loveless upbringing and difficult first marriage. It is clear that they are passionately in love with each other, but that their bed is full of the ghosts of a sometimes unbearable past and Joe wants to murder Gordon in part to avenge these.

When I asked Mary what inspired her to create Joe, she explained how her central character was originally Gordon, but that when Joe appeared, he demanded centre stage.

"He became so fascinating to me," she said. Mary then went through some happy years finding out about Jewish culture. "I tagged on to the shirt-tails of every Jew I knew and made sure that my research was right," she said.

"I went through a phase of being absolutely fascinated with the religion, the people, with the attitude to their faith and their attitudes towards their social structure and culture, which is so much part of Judaism."

Such absorption has enriched the book greatly and some reviewers have said how well she describes Jewish family life. They have also compared her book to such diverse authors as Susan Hill, Anita Shreve, Virginia Woolf and Henry Fielding. Blog



NEW CHAPTER: Novelist Mary Cavanagh has published her first novel at the age of 60

reviewers, who are becoming increasingly influential, particularly seem to like her book.

Apart from murder, she tackles some very dark themes: incest, adultery and abuse, but because of the way she writes, they never seem melodramatic. They just unfold, are explained and become part of Anna and Joe's hinterland. I asked what made her want to write about these things.

"I'm not the sort of writer that can write ten pages about a man putting a sock on," she said. "I have actually got to have some sort of real drama in my books to develop my characters."

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Mary was born and grew up in North Oxford. She used parts of her childhood in the book — Joe's school is based on St Barnabas School in Jericho, while Gordon is based on ex-colonialists who she came across as a child in North Oxford.

"They were used to servants and kowtowing and they had no humanity at all," she said.

She came to writing late in life. "I only did it when I had the head space." That came when her two sons were at college, even though she was working full-time as a medical administrator.

"Once I took it up, I never ever let it go. I

never thought I can't be bothered. I was always bothered."

She was inspired to write by Kate Atkinson's book *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*.

"I thought I don't have to write like everyone else. I can be unique. I can do wild things and I can get away with it."

She can, because she writes with great warmth and panache, making her characters believable and, apart from Gordon, likeable. She found writing male characters easy.

"I am a real man watcher. I've had male employers, before I was married I had boyfriends and I made a sport of watching them and realising that they're very different to women."

By contrast she finds it difficult writing women. "I don't know why. Maybe because I'm not very good at revealing myself."

The book was published earlier this year when Mary was 60.

"Mary Wesley started at my age or even older. She actually managed to sustain a career and that's what I want out of my writing. I want a career. I've still got a lot of energy and a lot of impetus."

She also has the nous to realise that to get books sold she has to generate publicity herself.

"I've been quite ruthless in being bold. I've never been like that before."

Boldness led to David Baddiel writing a bizarre column in *The Times* about how he was refusing to review the book as he'd only been sent it because he was a Jew. Great publicity for Mary and it resulted in a proper review in the paper. See what a bit ofchutzpah can achieve.

● *The Crowded Bed* is published by Transita at £7.99. See *Bookings* right.

BOOKS CHOICE

By MAGGIE HARTFORD

**Love Songs and Lies**  
Libby Purves  
(Hodder, £6.99)

Libby Purves has risen to great heights since leaving Radio Oxford in the 1970s. She has been a regular Radio 4 broadcaster as well as writing her own column in *The Times* about country life. She now lives in Norfolk, but her latest novel, set in a canalside house similar to the one she lived in when she was a student in Jericho, is filled with nostalgia for her Oxford days. Written with her usual light style, it nevertheless packs a powerful emotional punch. A gripping story about a destructive student relationship which leaves a legacy of problems for the next generation, it should appeal both to baby boomers and to their children.

**The Tenderness of Wolves**  
Stef Penney  
(Quercus, £7.99)

This novel, set in 19th-century Canada, is so vivid that it's difficult to believe that Penney wrote it without leaving the British Library. The story starts with the brutal murder of a man in the isolated settlement of Dove River. Tracks leaving the dead man's cabin head north towards the forest and the tundra. Hudson's Bay Company men, trappers, traders and journalists set out from Dove River pursuing the tracks across a desolate landscape. Penney cleverly weaves adventure, suspense, revelation and humour into an epic historical romance and murder mystery.

**The Secrets of Happiness**  
Richard Schoch  
(Profile, £8.99)

Some people might turn to Prozac or their 'life coach' for help, but Schoch argues that happiness is about leading a better life rather than looking for the quick fix. He says we should look at what the great thinkers of the past — Thomas Aquinas, the Buddha, John Stuart Mill — said, and how they transformed their own lives. As he says, today's happiness 'industry' concentrates on putting us in touch with our own emotions, but there is another way of feeling better about ourselves — by helping others or trying to make the world a better place.

## Bookings

**MONDAY**  
**Celebration:** Asylum Welcome launches book *How the World Came to Oxford*. 7.30pm, Town Hall, St Aldate's, Oxford. Details from 01865 722082.

**WEDNESDAY**  
**Debate:** Novelist Joanna Trollope and her paperback editor Linda Evans discuss the relationship between author and editor. Oxford University Museum of Natural History, Parks Road. Book signing 6.45pm, talk 7pm. Oxford Publishing Society members only, join at door for £15.

**THURSDAY**  
**Meet the author:** Local authors Tim Pears (*Blenheim Orchard*) and Mary Cavanagh (*The Crowded Bed*) talk about what inspired them to write about Oxford. 2pm, Museum of Oxford, Town Hall, St Aldate's, £2, concessions £1.50.

Details of book-related events can be sent to Maggie Hartford, *The Oxford Times*, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0EJ, or emailed to [maggie.hartford@nqo.com](mailto:maggie.hartford@nqo.com)

LOCAL AUTHOR

PAUL COLLIER



Oxford economics professor Paul Collier is an expert on African economies. In *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (OUP, £16.99), he looks at why conventional aid has failed to halt the downward spiral.