

**WAITROSE & PARTNERS**  
**LIFE ON A PLATE**  
**SEASON 1, EPISODE 6: JOANNE HARRIS**

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**SPEAKERS**

Jimi Famurewa, Alison Oakervee, Joanne Harris

**Jimi 00:00**

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Welcome to Life on a Plate, the brand-new podcast from Waitrose, in which we talk to some very special guests about what food really means to them. We ask about their comfort foods and favourite dishes, their food memories and even their kitchen disasters. By the end of each episode, you'll know a lot more about them. With me, as ever, is my co-host Alison Oakervee, Waitrose food editor and kitchen genius – I just went with genius that time. She makes me call her that.

**Alison 01:51**

I do.

**Jimi 01:52**

She demands it. How are you Alison?

**Alison 01:54**

Today? I'm alright, thank you. How are you? What have you been up to?

**Jimi 01:57**

Well, never mind all that, I've got something I want to ask you.

**Alison** 02:01

Oh yeah?

**Jimi** 02:02

And it's the important business of snacking. One of the great things about doing these conversations is we're kind of looking at each other, we're recording remotely, but I get a little window into your life, and I'm pretty sure the other day you were like devouring some lovely little crudités with a nice little sophisticated dip, and I feel like I'm a lot more the kind of person that would just, like, kind of cram in some biscuits, or you know, just kind of grab... I don't know some sort of crisps off the side. But you were like having something really healthy, is that... are you a healthy snacker?

**Alison** 02:34

I do try to be a healthier snacker because I just really like savoury things, I really like salty and savoury. And so...

**Jimi** 02:41

So, what was it you were having?

**Alison** 02:43

I think I hacked up a cucumber – so it's got to be in like big chunky pieces with a bit of salt. I can't remember what the dip was – I think it was a bit of mushroom, kind of a mushroom dip or something – mushroom patty of some form and crackers. It was a little bit of a picky, picky thing just to keep going.

**Jimi** 03:00

See this is the thing, I'm learning things and I feel like I'd love to be at that point where I could have that kind of healthy snack and feel satisfied. But yeah, that's the kind of thing that, I yeah, I don't know, I suppose...

**Alison** 03:14

So what do you go for?

**Jimi** 03:15

I suppose to be honest, one of my favourite things as an emergency snack is maybe like some peanut butter on something, on like a corn cake or something. If I wanted something a little bit healthier, with a bit of fruit, with an apple. But if we're talking non health and just kind of desperately need some sugar and a lift, it's probably biscuits. I'm probably more of a sweet person, traditionally.

**Alison** 03:38

I mean, if there's a whole tray of cookies straight out the oven, that've just cooled enough to be firm, and then that's it, I'm in.

**Jimi** 03:45

Oh God, yeah, I'm totally with you. But again, I feel like I'm quite indiscriminate in this case, like, you know, the cheapest biscuits imaginable, or even like really nice ones. I like both ends of the scale. Sweet stuff is an appropriate conversation topic because of our guest in this episode. And our guest is Joanne Harris, who of course is the author of the 1999 bestseller, and subsequently, Oscar nominated film, *Chocolat*. Joanne is a born and bred Yorkshire woman with a really fascinating background. Half French, half English. She was raised with a real sort of French sensibility when it came to food. She grows her own stuff. She's great on different appetites and different eating philosophies of the French versus the English. I didn't know too much about Joanne but she's got a really fascinating take on the world. She's a really prolific author. What did you make of her?

**Alison** 04:50

I thought she was fascinating, I mean, just the whole growing up in England with, with a French family and the way she talks about going back and visiting and just keeping her French family and heritage alive whilst in Yorkshire was just, she was just fascinating and just her take on food because she was quite open with the fact that she has synesthesia, which is just something I've never even heard of before.

**Jimi** 05:15

Yeah. So that, for people that are equally blissfully unaware is where you experience different senses, kind of at the same time, so colours have a sound, or like, colours have a smell and, it's all sort of jumbled up together, and she's talking about the fact that it's affected her writing and the way that she views the world. She was great on the whirlwind of *Chocolat*, which was, you know, 20 years ago last year, and just giving us that insight into what it's like to be at the heart of something so crazy and...

**Alison** 05:52

It was just a sudden rise to fame.

**Jimi** 05:55

It's such a phenomena. Yeah. Juliette Binoche coming to her house. That was quite... I quite enjoy the vision of Juliette Binoche just kind of sweeping a small town in Yorkshire – feels like a film or a book in itself. But yes, she was great on the sweet stuff. And she was just a joy to have on, a really smart, compelling and beautifully honest interview as well. So yeah, shall we get the show on the road?

**Alison** 06:24

Sounds a good plan.

**Jimi** 06:25

Okay, so, without any more mucking about? Here is our Life on a Plate interview with Joanne Harris.

Joanne Harris, welcome to Life on a Plate. Thank you very much for joining us.

**Joanne Harris** 06:47

It's great to be here. Thank you.

**Jimi** 06:49

I wanted to start with the start of your kind of life and journey, really. You were raised in Yorkshire above a sweet shop, is that correct?

**Joanne Harris** 07:00

Well, I was born in a sweet shop.

**Jimi** 07:02

You were born in a sweet shop?

**Joanne Harris** 07:03

I was born in a sweet shop.

**Jimi** 07:04

Wow.

**Joanne Harris** 07:04

I grew up slightly, slightly further away. I was born at my grandparent's corner shop. There was very little that was foodie about it. It was a very typically Yorkshire newsagents with sweets and glass jars. So nothing at all like my, my sweetshop in *Chocolat*.

**Jimi** 07:22

Ah, okay. So a very different thing. But the point I was going to pick up on was your mother was French, your father was British – they met on a French exchange out in Brittany, I understand. And I wondered, putting the sweet shop side of it to one side, how did that upbringing influence your relationship with food, and that kind of cross-cultural influence? How did, how did that kind of impact the way that you grew up thinking about food, enjoying food, understanding food, that kind of mix of British and French?

**Joanne Harris** 07:56

Well, it wasn't so much British as Yorkshire in those days. This was the 60s, there was a very particular kind of Yorkshire food and my grandparents ate that way. But my parents didn't. My mother came to Barnsley in the 60s without really speaking much English at all and without knowing anything about the customs and the way people were, and so everything was new to her, fish and chips was just bizarre, and pies and roasts and gravy and Yorkshire puddings and custard on everything. And she just refused all of this and said: 'Okay, we are going to speak French at home, we are going to eat French at home'. And so I was in this kind of little bubble world, at home. And outside, there was the rest of Yorkshire. And of course, when we went on holiday and we went to my grandparents, we had that culture and that was very French, it was very Breton. It was so different that there was no explaining it to the people back at home. My grandparents who didn't speak French, and viewed anybody who came from the other side of the Dale as a kind of dangerous outsider, you know, we were eating raw fruit, we were eating pasta, we were eating... we were eating galette, and all kinds of things they hadn't heard of. And they just, I think my grandmother particularly, who was quite suspicious of foreign food, felt that, you know, when I was with her, I should be given as much wholesome Yorkshire food as possible, just so that I'd be able to grow. And sadly, I didn't like any of that stuff and I wasn't used to it. And of course,

when I went to school and had to have school lunches, I wouldn't eat anything, because it was all smothered in, in things that I just considered to be just revolting, like gravy and custard and so I wouldn't eat anything that those things had touched. So I must have been a terrible pest at school. I know that the dinner ladies tried awfully hard to get me to eat something. And I don't think I had the vocabulary to, to explain to them that it just wasn't a culture that I was used to.

**Jimi** 10:00

Probably quite relatable to lots of people that have grown up, you know, children of immigrants and have grown up in this kind of household bubble of doing things one way, and then, going out into the world and suddenly having to kind of adapt to a completely different way of living and way of doing things.

**Joanne Harris** 10:17

Absolutely.

**Jimi** 10:18

Were there any dishes, were there any Yorkshire dishes, any British dishes that you did sort of cling to as something that: 'Oh, I get this. I really like this'. Were there any things that kind of formed the bridge between the cultures for you, that you remember liking as a child?

**Joanne Harris** 10:35

Not really, not in that way, not things that you would consider traditional Yorkshire dishes. What I did like, was what my grandfather made from what he grew in his garden and his allotment – and so he would make jam, and jellies, and preserves, and all those things I understood because I think those things are kind of more universal, and so I understood gardening and I understood garden produce. And I ate very, very simple things as a child, if I could recognise what it was, then I would eat it. And if it looked as if it had been messed around or covered with something, I wouldn't eat it. And so it was very simple.

**Alison** 11:11

So things like Yorkshire rhubarb would have been out as well?

**Joanne Harris** 11:16

No, I ate rhubarb.

**Alison** 11:17

As long as it wasn't smothered in custard?

**Joanne Harris** 11:18

As long as it didn't have that, I would eat it in pies and cakes, and I also, of course, because as children, we all fought with rhubarb, too, because rhubarb makes an excellent impromptu sword. And, and you can use the leaf as a shield. And then I remember... and rhubarb also dipped in sugar. Which I think a lot of the kids used to eat in those days. Nowadays, they probably wouldn't. But then it was a good thing.

**Jimi 11:42**

It's really interesting, again, that you mention the idea of growing things, your grandfather's allotment, and specifically jams and strawberries, because your most recent book, and forgive me, you're so prolific that it might not actually be your most recent book, but certainly your novel that was out last year, *The Strawberry Thief*, is, is the continuation of the story, you first started in *Chocolat*. Just over a decade ago now. It's a place and a set of characters that you've returned to frequently, and that's not always the case with writers of books that become these big bestsellers and sensations. What is it that's kept you coming back? And I noticed that on Twitter, you're 'Joanne *Chocolat*', you seem to be incredibly proud of that world, and that set of characters and that book.

**Joanne Harris 12:35**

Well I think initially it was because I wanted to write something about my French family. And the places of my childhood. And *Chocolat* was a very kind of nostalgic book, it was about things as I remembered them. And so it's not quite the France as it is, but it's that kind of France that exists in, in memory, and in nostalgia for me, and it became very real. And the characters became very real, because a lot of them were based on people that I knew. And Vianne, particularly, has a number of links to me. She's not exactly me, she's not a self-portrait in any way, but we have a number of things in common – one is our relationship with food, and, the other is our relationship with our daughters. And, and so because I initially started to write this series of books without meaning to write a series at all, I wrote as the parent of a five-year-old child, and... and as my child grew, I wrote as the parent of a teenager, and then the parent of an adult child. And so I think we have this link of motherhood between us and also this link of having a history and a philosophy of food, and a certain view of it. And that view was shaped very much by my mother, my grandmother, my great grandmother – all on the French side. Which is unfair to my, my English grandmother, who was also an excellent cook, but I, you know, I lived next door to her practically, I saw her every day, there wasn't that need to kind of reach out and stay in touch with that other culture that I only really connected with once or twice a year.

**Jimi 14:14**

What are your memories of those trips back and those times? I've seen you talk previously about Easter being a particularly evocative time for you in France and obviously, the link to *Chocolat* and the, the resonance it has within that story, and in other stories set in that period, and in that world. What are your really striking memories of those times? Were you a child that was very adventurous in what you ate, and not squeamish, and up for trying things that maybe...? I mean, I can absolutely say that I'd struggle to get my four-year-old and seven-year-old to try half of these things. If it's not a sausage or deep fried, they aren't as interested, but...

**Joanne Harris 15:02**

I didn't think of food in that way. To me food was very much about the people that surrounded it. And so it was very much about sitting in the kitchen in my great grandmother's house. And she would always give me something to do, whether it was shelling peas, or taking the little tails off the green beans or something. And so, I was always there in the kitchen, she was always telling stories. And when she died, my mother took over the same role. She was always telling stories about people, and so to me, all the food that she made, all the recipes that she had, were from somebody, they were like postcards

from the past, they were her way of keeping in touch with family in France. And it was also a way of celebrating the dead. And so it was my grandmother's cake, or my great grandmother's recipe for this. And all these, these dishes that my mother made had associations with me. And because my parents were teachers, they had these long holidays at Christmas, at Easter, in the, in the summer, and so we would go back then. And the whole family would get together, because it was the time that they got to see us. And so I remember these enormous family dinners, with 20, 30 people there and everyone talking nonstop. And the meal would go on for four or five hours, and the kids would wander off and play and then they would wander back again for another course and they would wander off and play. And it was, it was like a festival every time we went there it was a big celebration. Whether it was at the house, at my grandfather's house, or whether it was by the seaside at his holiday home. There were always these tables groaning with food.

**Jimi 16:38**

It is incredibly evocative. And the point about recipes being linked to certain lineage, and a heritage, and our own ancestry, and memories, and doing something a certain way – kind of uniting you with grandmothers or great grandmothers, or parents that did it that way before, and it's kind of a way of keeping people alive. And that's really interesting. And I think quite a resonant thing at the moment as we've all been confined, and people have been sharing recipes and trying to feed each other at a safe distance and things like that. How has your, how's your relationship with food been throughout this period?

**Joanne Harris 17:22**

I'm very lucky in that I've got a big garden. And it's just me and my husband in the house. And I spent much of the summer there and I grow the odd little thing, I'm not like my grandfather, I don't have this this wonderful, organised allotment but I do have a lot of fruit and some vegetables. And I've never felt so grateful for those things just for the practicalities of tending for them and picking them and enjoying them. The choice of what I have is relatively limited because I order from a local shop and, I look at buying things like olives and chillies, and things online, because these are things that I can't live without, but they're not very, very typically local things to me.

**Alison 18:08**

Are they the ingredients that you've missed most then, olives and chillies and those kind of non-seasonal?

**Joanne Harris 18:13**

Well, yes, I did have, I did have a lot of them in stock anyway because I always do but now I've run out. And so I'm looking with, with dismay at my pasta sauces, which don't have capers or olives anymore in them and, and thinking: 'Oh, dear', you know, 'I'm going to have to do something drastic to resolve this'. But no, I did. I've been cooking a lot of, of vegetables. My husband is vegetarian from a long way back. I'm sort of vegetarian by association. But I have been finding that I miss some of my French dishes. The reason that I can never be fully a vegetarian is that I have a French cultural identity, which is built around certain things, certain kind of nostalgic foods, which I would only eat in France. I'll eat them, and I'll feel that I'm reconnecting with some part of the past. And so although 99% of the time, I don't eat

meat or fish; when I go to France, I do. I become this different person. I'm missing that person right now.

**Alison** 19:15

What's the dish that you're looking to recreate and... if you were going back to France, what's one of the first dishes you'd cook?

**Joanne Harris** 19:20

Well, I wouldn't cook at all. I would go out. When I go to France, I go to where my grandfather's house was. And I go to the cemetery and I put flowers on the graves and I make sure everything's clean. And then I would go to the market, and there used to be in Vitré, in the market, and there still is probably, a little van that sold galette saucisse. And they were hot. Hot, rye pancakes cooked there on a griddle and you queue up and wait. And they wrap it in paper like fish and chips. And there would be a variety of sausages there. There might be merguez, the spicy ones, or just the ordinary grilled sausage or there might be also boudin blanc, the white pudding, or boudin noir, the black pudding, neither of which are remotely like what the British call black or white pudding. So I would probably ask for three galettes, and maybe two sausages, and I would just walk along the streets and eat them very slowly. And that would be my first meal there. And then maybe after that, I would get into the hardcore seafood and the mussels and the things that I would associate with summertime.

**Jimi** 20:45

A lot of the associations and the strong sort of nostalgic dishes you have tend to be savoury things and because of *Chocolat* it seems like you've spoken in the past of being heavily associated with sweetened, with baking and things like that, and I want to hear Alison's take on this as well, because I know she's a real keen baker. How has that been for you to become the, you know, the *Chocolat* woman and the woman of sweet dishes and things like that, when actually, your heart belongs to these kind of savoury staples?

**Joanne Harris** 21:18

It's interesting, because I think yes, people do assume that I'm much more sweet-toothed than I am. I do like cakes, and baking and chocolates. But to me, they are not everyday things. And I think that's my French side coming out, because French people do not have desserts in the way English people have desserts. In France, a dessert is something that you have on a special occasion, or when you go out, or on Sundays, and there's a big tradition of people going to the pâtisserie on Sundays and coming back with a cake, because the family is together. But it's not something that you automatically associate with a meal. And so to me, they are celebratory things, but they're not things that I have all the time, whereas savouries, you do have them all the time. I mean, obviously, *Chocolat* has been a wonderful gift to me in many ways, but it also means that people give me chocolate *all* the time. And sometimes particularly when it first came out and it was a book that actually came out in Italy six months before it came out in England. And so I toured Italy, and I had lots of events and I went to chocolate factories, and I ate every single chocolate you can imagine. And everywhere I went there was chocolate. And my, my final visit which, which was the Milan launch, was in a place called Cova, which is an absolutely beautiful Italian tea shop that specialises, of course it does, in chocolate. And by then I had been touring for three weeks and I was up to here with the chocolate, I just couldn't look at chocolate again, I

couldn't smell chocolate. And I thought, you know what, if I have to eat chocolate here or be photographed with chocolate here, I'm just going to bite somebody. And the maître d' was waiting for me in his lovely Italian outfit. And he said: 'Signora, I have something wonderful for you'. And: 'Oh bloody hell, it's going to be chocolate, isn't it? It's going to be chocolate, please, please!'. And he went around the back and he came back with this tray of anchovy toasts. And he said: 'You know, I thought maybe you would like something different today'. And I thought: 'Oh my God, just marry me now. This man understands me'. And, and I think he saved me. He saved me from, from never eating chocolate again.

**Jimi 23:28**

That's really interesting. Yeah, Alison are you more sweet than savoury? That's an interesting point.

**Alison 23:34**

It's the classic question. And I always, I'm like Joanne in that everyone thinks because I do a lot of baking, a lot of cooking, and seem to do a lot of sweet stuff, that actually that's what would be my preference. But actually I love savoury stuff. Give me anchovy toasts, or something savoury, or toast and Marmite any day over a slice of cake.

**Jimi 23:55**

Speaking of *Chocolat* Joanne, obviously, it's 20 years now, and I know you, you wrote a piece for *The Guardian* about writing it last year, I think I saw that which was a really beautiful insight into the whole period of you writing that book. When you were working as a teacher in a grammar school, and you were writing in these incredibly impressive bursts, and you did it so quickly. With the film being made the following year, I just wonder what were your memories of that time, that kind of whirlwind of it becoming this complete sensation? What were some of the stranger things that happened?

**Joanne Harris 24:34**

Oh, it was, it was at the same time, astonishing and wonderful and also very overwhelming. It was as if I was never quite able to settle down to what was happening before something else happened, which was even more off-putting and startling. And I had to, I was constantly trying to readjust my expectations of what happened. And it wasn't entirely comfortable. In fact, it was very uncomfortable in some ways. You know I went from the classroom, to touring various countries. And that was already hard enough. Because just the business of touring, dealing with the press, dealing with the public in such large numbers, I hadn't expected that at all. In many ways, Italy saved me because it gave me a dry run for what was going to happen in England and America. And then the movie happened. And initially, I thought, well, you know, this is just a movie option, nothing's going to happen. Or if it does, it will take years. It did happen. And it didn't take years. It took 18 months. And I was getting phone calls from Juliette Binoche, and I was singing down the phone to Johnny Depp trying to convey the chords that he would play when he was he was playing his guitar, because he wanted to play the same tune I spoke about in the book, and, and then I was on set. And then I was in Hollywood. And then I was at the Oscars, and I was being... at the same time, I was being doorstepped at home by *The Sun*. Because we had Oscar nominations, and they wanted me to say something. And there were people lying in wait for me as I walked my daughter to school, and she was five. And it was just amazing. But it was also quite frightening. And I had no idea who this person was that they wanted to talk to, but it

wasn't me. And I had, for a whole year, I had these mysterious panic attacks, whereby I would just faint. I'd never had a fainting fit before. It never happened after that. But freakier, and they were always in these astonishing venues, you know, like royal palaces or big, big premieres, I would just pass out like Tony Soprano, and I would find myself on the floor surrounded by people, and think: 'Dammit, it's happened again'. And it must have been overload. I was like a slot machine on tilt. I would just go. And, and I think that was just me trying to come to terms with the reality and trying to reset every time it got a bit too much. And so yeah, it was, it was a hell of a learning curve. But it was also everything I'd ever dreamed of. Which in some ways makes it harder to cope with because, you know, writers, they write things for a living, they make stuff up, but they never think that those dreams are going to come true.

**Jimi 27:21**

Of course, yeah. It was so breakneck, as you say. It's kind of so rare for something to go from page to screen in that kind of short amount of time, and to get the, the acclaim that it got on its release. How did you come through that period of when you were at your lowest ebb as it seemed? Or you were overwhelmed by this thing that you'd been longing for? Like, what got you through?

**Joanne Harris 27:43**

Well, I think that what helped enormously was that I was in my 30s, and not in my 20s when this happened. It wasn't my first novel. And I had had time to get used to the idea, first of all, that I wasn't going to be successful as a novelist, and then that I was going to be successful as a novelist. None of this would have been possible, I think if I'd been 25, instead of being 35, or whatever. I think if I'd lived in London, it would have been harder. But I live in the north. I live in Yorkshire, I live in a rural place. And so I was grounded geographically as well. I wasn't at the heart of things. There was that moment when I got hounded by the press. But most of the time that happens primarily to Londoners because journalists don't want to traipse all the way to Barnsley to doorstep some woman taking her kid to school, it's much easier to do it on your own doorstep. And so there was that. And also my family was very grounded. My family took it all very much more in their stride than I did. My daughter was still young enough to just go: 'Oh, my mother's famous now, I don't quite know what she does, and she signs her name a lot'. And then that was it, there wasn't, there was a very strong family unit there. My parents were very supportive. And my mother still doesn't feel that I have a proper job. There was nobody, there was nobody around me that was going to allow me to get so swollen headed that I didn't know who I was anymore. And of course, I was still writing, and writing has always been my escape. You know, I was still writing like a maniac. And it didn't matter where I was, whether I was at home or whether I was travelling, you know, I had been writing when I was teaching for so many years, that the idea of writing in my spare time was not a new thing. And so, you know, all this author stuff that I had to do, and all this travelling, that just replaced the teaching. And in my spare time in hotel rooms, and in airports, and, you know, in busy railway terminals, I wrote my next two books.

**Alison 29:50**

And I guess also as you're travelling, you're looking at different ideas for different people and watching getting characters as well?

**Joanne Harris 29:57**

Absolutely. I think when I quit teaching – and I quit teaching very reluctantly, leaving myself a long time to change my mind and to go back if I needed to. The one thing I was afraid of was that the human stimulus that I got every day from interacting with hundreds of different people every day in different situations, this human element that had always been part of my process, that I'd lose that and that I would just be, you know, sitting at home waiting for the muse to clock in. And I found that, (a), that didn't happen, because I never was sitting at home. You know, this is actually during lockdown. This is the longest I've had at home without going off and doing something in over 20 years. And I found that every time I went somewhere, met people, it just kept that essential part of the process alive. So yeah, everywhere I go, there are stories. And people tell me stories. And of course, many of the stories are linked to recipes, which is also great. Everybody tells me about their recipes, their life around food, it's a wonderful thing.

**Jimi 31:07**

Is there an example of one that particularly sticks out, something related to a recipe that then sparked off into something really huge?

**Joanne Harris 31:14**

There are lots that spring to mind. I don't tend to use people's stories when they are recognisable. But, what happens is that there's a sort of accumulation of small things that kind of build a big picture in my mind. I know when I was travelling for *Chocolat*, I went all over the place, and people told me chocolate stories, of course they did. And most of them were delicious, positive stories, but actually, some of them were quite negative. And I started to build the idea that food can be a negative, that food can be a source of anxiety. And I ended up writing *Five Quarters of The Orange*, which is very much about this. And the story that I think sparked that off – I was travelling through Eastern Europe, and I think I was in Serbia? Anyway, it was somewhere like that, where there had been proper unrest, and war, and unhappiness. And a woman was telling me about her upbringing around chocolate, and her mother who was a cleaner, and her father was dead, and her mother used to occasionally save up enough money to buy her a little square of chocolate. And to her mother, this was the culmination of everything food wise. It was, you know, it was the most delicious thing she could think of. The girl didn't like it. It was dark chocolate. She didn't like the taste of it. And it got to the point of embarrassment that she wasn't able to tell her mother that she didn't like it because this was a gift that she was given. And it was a special thing. And she didn't want to hurt her feelings. And so she would put these little squares of chocolate down the back of the radiator, where they would disappear. And this happened over several years, until eventually the radiator stopped working. And it got taken off the wall, revealing this little lake of melted and re-solidified chocolate with the paper still in. And she told me – and this was a woman of my age – and she said: 'You know, decades later, I still remember the expression on my poor mother's face as she saw this and it registered'. I thought it was an horrendous story, but it was also very funny. And I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But she sought me out to tell it to me. And I thought you know what, there's something here.

**Jimi 33:33**

Yeah, that's great that you put these stories out into the world and then you become this kind of repository for people's tales and their own family stories.

**Joanne Harris 33:43**

Yes! Oh the more stories you tell, the more stories you get. This is very much the case for people who tell stories, and especially if the stories are about people and things that those people have experienced, and I've said it before many times, but food is one of those things that connects people. The giving of it, the sharing of it, the experiencing of another culture via food initially, if you don't know the language, if you don't know all that much about it, you can still try the food. And it's a way of saying, you know, I welcome you.

**Jimi 34:29**

I was going to ask about your cooking – what are the things that you've gone back to? What are the things that brought particular solace, or discoveries that you've been, that you've been quite enjoying – what things have you been cooking?

**Joanne Harris 34:42**

I don't bake. My husband bakes very well when he wants to, and he might do it once every 10 years but it doesn't happen very often. But no, I've been doing more cooking than I usually do because I have more time at home than I usually do. I've been making a lot of things because I like food to be seasonal and local if possible. So what I cook, what I make tends to depend on what's available and where I am, and what time of year it is. And because I've had a limited amount of choice, I've looked at what was, what was actually seasonal. So I've grown food, and I've made jam. I don't always do this, because I don't always have time. But I made jam with my plums, and my blackberries and, and I cooked some crumbles and things with my apples and my rhubarb. Which was fun. I don't do this all that often. Otherwise, you know, I did have an awful lot of pasta in my food cupboards. And I've found ways to use pasta in lots of different ways. Lots of roast vegetables, which I like, and which you can use in all sorts of ways, you can make all kinds of things with those. And because I had a lot of fresh, homegrown things, and also locally grown things, that was nice, and I was able to find all sorts of ways of doing carrots and potatoes and things. But I also grew some tomatoes. And I think, you know, one of my favourite things in summer is just a very ordinary tomato salad. I think. I don't tend to cook complicated food, and whatever it looks like in my cookbooks and my cookbooks are a particular kind of French and nostalgic food – but because I don't have a huge amount of time, I tend to keep to, to quite simple things. And yes, I get a lot of joy out of a tomato and basil salad especially when all the ingredients have been homegrown.

**Alison 36:35**

What would you turn to as a comfort food then, other than tomato salad?

**Joanne Harris 36:41**

It would depend what time of year it was. At the moment I am no longer eating salads, I don't feel like it the way I usually do. And so I'm making a lot of soups, and stews, and curries, and, and things which are kind of warmer and more kind of more filling, I think, and so, I can never really go wrong with a nice soup. I've been making some mushroom soups recently. I've used one of Jack Monroe's recipes, she has a very nice one for mushroom soup, which I really love. Leek and potato is a good one as well, which I really enjoy. And also just putting a lot of vegetables into a slow cooker, and, and making a vegetable curry – I really, I really like that. And I mean, to me, anything stodgy right now is good.

**Jimi** 37:29

I think it's a good philosophy to live by. I wanted to ask as well about your synesthesia – have I pronounced it correctly there?

**Joanne Harris** 37:41

I think so. Yes.

**Jimi** 37:42

Talk us through that. For people that don't understand this, this condition.

**Joanne Harris** 37:44

It is a little difficult to describe because it's different for every person who has it. It's basically I think, a kind of cross connection in the brain. A neuro typical brain has properly defined sensors, and so when you see something, you just see it, you don't have another sensation that comes with sight. And the same goes with your other senses. Now, this isn't true with people with synesthesia, they tend to have crossovers. And so sometimes people can see sounds, or in my case, I smell colours. I think, also, I don't really know the difference between smell and taste. And so I also taste colours. And red, for instance, to me is chocolate. And if I see red, particularly in a bright light, I smell chocolate. Which can be confusing, because I don't always know whether it's a real smell or whether it's synesthesia, and I have to actually shut my eyes and properly concentrate on the actual smells around me to know what's real, and what is just me.

**Alison** 38:48

So the colour of the food doesn't always link up to the smell that you're smelling?

**Joanne Harris** 38:54

No, not at all. Right, tomatoes, smell of chocolate.

**Alison** 38:59

Wow.

**Joanne Harris** 39:00

They also smell of tomatoes, but I have to shut my eyes to make them properly smell of tomatoes. Otherwise, they'll smell of, of tomatoes, and this synesthesia smell of, of chocolate, which bright red always triggers for me. And chocolate doesn't to me, the colour of chocolate doesn't smell of chocolate at all.

**Alison** 39:15

So what would something like green smell of?

**Joanne Harris** 39:17

Depends on the green.

**Alison 39:18**

A lettuce.

**Joanne Harris 39:19**

Okay, that kind of bright green. Let me see if I can see something, I can't actually properly see anything that would trigger that. But it would probably smell of diesel, or gas, or something like that, because those sorts of colours tend to trigger those kinds of chemical smells.

**Jimi 39:33**

And so before you, you knew what this was, or had it, you know, diagnosed as it were like, what was it like to go through life, and how did it, did it sort of impact the way you kind of viewed the world the way you wrote?

**Joanne Harris 39:45**

I'm sure it's impacted. It's impacted everything but it never occurred to me that it wasn't normal. I thought everybody was like that, because everybody does think that everybody is like that. Everybody thinks that their normal is another person's normal. And so it took me under until I was in my 30s, to realise that, (a), I wasn't neurotypical at all, and, (b), that there was a name for it. And you know, you could actually talk to other people who had it. And so I went through a phase of talking to other synesthetes online, going: 'What does yours do?', and... and it's... And of course, nobody is, nobody is the same as anybody else. So I found people who thought Wednesday was green, and other people who thought that the name Nigel smelt of fish, or, you know, did... and it was fascinating, and I realised that actually, the perception of the world that we have is a very personal thing. And it was, it answered a lot of questions that I'd had about my childhood, you know, when I said things like: 'I like the chocolate one', when I really meant: 'I like the red one'. And people just didn't register the meaning of that. And I thought, well, you know, why not? I thought: 'Oh, this explains all that'. But no, it never, never occurred to me that people didn't, didn't experience colours and scents in the way that I did. Because why would you ask yourself that question?

**Jimi 41:07**

Yeah, yeah. That's a really important point about how we experience the world, and also the kind of things that we don't really know about, you know, our perception and brains. And, yeah, fascinating. What have you got lined up next? What kind of things are you plotting away on in your shed, which we can see? Which is quite famous on Twitter, isn't it, the shed? It's kind of...

**Joanne Harris 41:29**

I think the shed has more fans than I do, honestly.

**Jimi 41:34**

It's become a character in itself.

**Joanne Harris 41:36**

I mean, I've been lucky. I've been very lucky in lockdown in that I have much more space than most people have. And I haven't stopped working. I mean, some people have found that anxiety over current

events has totally stopped them working. And I have found that most of the time I've been able to, to put that anxiety aside and really properly get down to work. And so I've been working furiously during knock down. I've written one self-help book called *Ten Things About Writing* for people who want to write in lockdown. In fact, I was going to do that so that people who felt that yeah, this is the time I get to write that book I've been planning, so that they could, they could do that. My new novella *Orfeia* just came out. I am just at the moment finishing a thriller called *Narrow Door* which is set in the same world as my other thrillers.

**Jimi** 42:27

Joanne, it's been an absolute joy to have you on. Thank you so much for your time and for your answers. And for the chocolate radiator story, which I think will live on with me forever.

**Joanne Harris** 42:40

It's been a pleasure. Thank you, both of you.

**Jimi** 42:42

And yeah, and love to the shed as well.

**Joanne Harris** 42:47

Thank you, the shed sends back its appreciation.

**Jimi** 42:56

You've been listening to Life on a Plate from Waitrose. I'm Jimi Famurewa, thank you to my co-host Alison Oakervee, and our guest, Joanne Harris. To learn more about the series, go to [waitrose.com/podcast](https://waitrose.com/podcast), and please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.