

PLACE AS INSPIRATION FOR FICTION

Lecture by Kate Mosse, written for EKF, May 2008

Eighteen years ago, my husband and I bought a tiny, biscuit-coloured house in Carcassonne. It nestles in the deep shadow of the battlements of the medieval Cité. We knew nothing about the place. It was one of those random, haphazard decisions that have unexpected and far-reaching consequences. I'd never even been to southwest France. I had vague memories of school history lessons and a medieval Crusade that had destroyed the independence of the Midi in the 13th century. But I knew nothing of the *langue d'oc*, or Occitan, the language of the Languedoc. And I knew nothing about the legendary medieval Christians, the Cathars, whose history is everywhere.

But in November 1989, as I stood outside the little house in the *Quartier Barbacane* looking up through the cloud of rain and mist at the fairytale towers and turrets of the Cité, I felt immediately at home. The following summer – now with a five-month-old daughter – Greg and I sat in the garden on 14th July, Bastille Day, watching the *embrassement de la cité*. The entire length of fortification was lit up with a cascade of magnesium flares – a spectacular annual tradition dating back to 1898 – and spent casings showered down in a flurry of spark and flame. I realised I was completely hooked. This was the beginning of a love affair that has lasted nearly 20 years and been the inspiration behind two novels, *Labyrinth*, and more recently, *Sepulchre*.

Labyrinth is a time-slip adventure novel, set part in 13th century Carcassonne and Chartres, and partly in the modern day. Reworking Grail legend, it tells the story of a young girl, Alaïs, swept up in the brutal Crusade launched against a group of peaceable Christians, the Cathars, who lived in the southwest of France. *Sepulchre*, also set in two different time periods – the 1890s and the present day – is a ghost story, a Tarot tale. The novels, although similar in structure and for the strong female heroines, are very different in tone

and scope and intention. *Labyrinth* is very much an epic novel, a story told against the broad backdrop of history. *Sepulchre*, on the other hand, is more claustrophobic, more domestic, a tale of haunting and mysticism set against the stifling backdrop of fin-de-siècle French society. What they have in common is that they both grew out of my love for the region and the history of my adopted home. *Labyrinth* is a love letter, if you like, to Carcassonne itself. *Sepulchre*, a little more ambivalent, is a homage to the ancient forests, lakes and mountains surrounding the antique spa town of Rennes-les-Bains, about 30 kilometres to the south of Carcassonne.

But, I am running ahead of myself. Back in 1989 I had no intention of writing a novel about Carcassonne or the Cathars or Tarot cards and ghosts and ruined tombs. Then, I just wanted to be more than a visitor passing through. In the long, hot summers that followed – in between the usual summer pursuits and caring for our two young children - I read everything about the Languedoc I could get my hands on – the Romans in the 1st century BC, the Visigoths in the 5th, Charlemagne and Dame Carcas, the 8th century Saracen queen after whom the city is named, the Albigensians in the 13th, the Nazi Occupation in the 20th. I collected guidebooks, history books, theology, even Occitan poetry and proverbs. I hunted down traditional festivals, such as the extraordinary – and enduring – medieval fertility rite of the Fête de l'Âne in Laderm-sur-Lauquet. I graduated from English to French histories, more subtle, more complicated, more hidden.

So what of the place itself? Looking around the beautiful city of Sozopol, I think Carcassonne is a place where this audience would feel immediately at home. To the north lies the Montagne Noire, purple at dawn; to the east are the vineyards of the Minervois and, beyond the Narbonnais plains, the Mediterranean Sea; to the south lies the wild, rocky landscape of the gulleys and mountains of the Ariège.

Carcassonne itself is a town divided. The medieval Cité was restored (controversially) by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in the second half of the 19th century – the scandal about which I make reference to in *Sepulchre*. The old town sits high on a hill on the right bank of the

Aude. On the other side of the river is the Bastide Saint-Louis. First built in 14th century, it underwent a period of massive expansion and prosperity during the 19th century and was rebuilt on a grid of narrow cobbled streets. For over 600 years, the two halves have been linked by the perfect medieval stone-arched bridge, the Pont Vieux. A battered Jesus on a metal cross half way across marks the point at which the old and new towns meet.

From the moment they learnt to climb, our two children – now 18 and 15 years old! - treated the medieval Cité's 3 km of ramparts as their playground. Every summer in the lists – the space between the outer and inner walls known as the *lices* – hosts a medieval joust. The sound of metal on metal, the thud of the quintain and splinter of wood, rings out much as it would have done eight hundred years ago.

The Cité has 52 defensive towers and was considered impregnable – *imprenable*. Viollet-le-Duc's restoration didn't always respect their medieval antecedents – grey slate rather than red tile, for example. But in the oldest surviving sections of walls on the northern side – the Charpentière, the Manuquière or the Moulin d'Avar – you can imagine the stonemasons cutting the original foundations.

My medieval heroine of *Labyrinth*, Alaïs, lives in the Château Comtal. Constructed on Roman and Visigoth foundations, the castle was built as part of the western fortifications in the middle of the 11th century by the Trencavel dynasty. Although many of the oldest buildings are gone – their stones scavenged to build the Bastide Saint-Louis – the main courtyard, the Cour d'Honneur, the smaller Cour du Midi and the distinctive watchtower, the Tour Pinte, remain. On the eastern walls of the Château, replica wooden *hourds* have been constructed, just as they were during the siege of Carcassonne in August 1209, to allow the defenders to hurl missiles down on the besieging army beneath.

Unlike the Bastide, the Cité's network of tiny cobbled alleyways and streets is more spider's web than grid. The conflicts of history live on in the place names – rue Raymond-Roger Trencavel, rue Saint-Louis, impasse Agnès de Montpellier. There are houses and

schools – one bilingual Oc / French – tucked away behind the shops, bars and restaurants. Many of the older inhabitants have lived within the walls for generations. Head for place Marcou, a small square in the heart of the Cité, or, for *belle époque* splendour and a beautiful ivy-covered façade, try the luxurious Hôtel de la Cité on the site of the old Episcopal Palace beside the Basilica Saint-Nazaire.

In 1989 there were few English tourists. Carcassonne had not yet been designated a Unesco World Heritage Site. Ryanair didn't yet serve the tiny airport – now there are two flights a day from London alone. There was an air of loving neglect surrounding many of the monuments, despite the fact that, in the early 20th century, Carcassonne had actively set out to market itself as a tourist destination. The 19th century heroine of *Sepulchre*, *Léonie*, visits the Cité at the point in 1891 when tourism is just beginning to take hold. The first fixed tourist office opened in 1902, one of the first in France, repackaging medieval history as an alternative to the fashionable but idle resorts of Cannes or Nice. Postcards reproducing a line from Gustave Nadaud's famous 1863 song – '*Il ne faut pas mourir sans avoir vu Carcassonne*' – were mass produced. The campaign worked. More than 10 000 visitors arrived on the new railway line between July and October 1905. One hundred years later, a staggering 3 million visitors come to Carcassonne every year. It is the second most-visited site in France outside Paris (not to mention where the 1991 film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* starring Kevin Costner was filmed.) Now, I admit, there are one or two tourists also holding paperback copies of *Labyrinth* and *Sepulchre*.

Read *LABYRINTH* extract (attached)

Moving on from the spirit of place - which is my first inspiration – to the thorny question of genre. All authors resist the idea of being categorised into one genre or another. After all, what we seek, are readers who will enjoy our work, that's all. But publishers, agents, publicists, journalists need often to put books in one box or another.

I, like all novelists, am therefore often asked what ‘type’ of books I write. I grew up reading some of the great adventure novels of the late nineteenth century from Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She* to Jules Verne. What I enjoyed was the combination of action, landscape (extreme cold, to extreme heat!), mixed with a healthy dollop of cliff-hanging (literally, often) adventure, mystery and the sense that, whatever the trials and tribulations along the way, it would all end happily in the end. The spirit of place is all important, a clearly defined and described landscape. There is a clear sense of right and wrong, usually a quest or sacrifice at the heart of things, and the promise that the story will resolve. There will be no loose ends.

As a novelist, I was attracted by the challenge of writing ‘old fashioned’ adventure, as it were, but replacing the traditional male hero with a female one! But the genre label – adventure – seemed to be invisible on the bookshelves. Did this mean that readers no longer wanted traditional adventures? Or was it just a question of categorisation? Of expectation? Of literary tradition? Both male and female writers are constrained by literary expectations of what publishers believe readers want and always have been. Ever since Daniel Defoe created the confessional narrative with *Moll Flanders*, women have struggled to escape from the suffocating expectation of romantic intrigues, unrequited pining, passive forbearance as *le repos du soldat* and tragic purity. Further back in the canon, precedents were set in the myths and legends retold by Shakespeare and brilliantly laid bare by Lisa Jardine’s 1983 critique *Still Harping on Daughters*. While Brutus, Octavius, Mark Antony and her husband Cassius go to war centre stage, Portia kills herself – the supreme self-abnegation – off stage by swallowing fire.

Literature needs strong, positive female characters – as well as gentle, reflective male characters - to emerge without being sublimated into, for example, the pantomime self-righteous blue stockings of Molière’s *L’Ecole des femmes*. And they have. But when Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote the epic horror tale *Frankenstein*, was she continuing her mother’s battle for the rights of women in another medium, or falling back on an older pattern of gender roles? When women in fiction began to come of age and speak for

themselves – think of Eliza Bennett and Becky Sharp – what was their goal, their *dénouement*? Was it authority and command, the desire for wider importance in a wider world? And when George Eliot's *Middlemarch* was first serialised in 1871 and 1872, why was it considered scandalous for Dorothea to prefer the idealistic young doctor to the emotionless older academic Casaubon. In Coventry Patmore's notorious early 20th century poem *The Angel in the House*, the 19th century domestic ideal was still lionised. Children's writers such as Frances Hodgson Burnett gave their dreams of liberation to children precisely because those roles were not available to women. Even if the antecedents of the modern adventure heroine lie in the Victorian past, this still doesn't make the novels they inhabit adventure stories in the classic sense.

Read *SEPULCHRE* extract (attached)

So, when I asked what I write, I reply that I consider *Labyrinth* and *Sepulchre* to be adventure novels. The narrative rests squarely on the shoulders of two female protagonists: they have romantic and sexual adventures, have homes and domestic lives, but their role within the novel is to lead not follow. My heroines are not traditional adventure heroines, waiting on the mountain top waiting to be rescued, but instead masters (sorry!) of their own lives and, by extension, the lives of others. For me, it is this intention – the decision to put the action centre stage – that separates straightforward historical fiction from traditional adventure writing.

So, to return to where we began, with the landscape of southwest France that inspired *Labyrinth* and *Sepulchre*. Readers, visitors from all countries, are drawn to the Languedoc for the same reason I was. They come for adventure in the mountains and hills around Carcassonne, too. They come to hear the whispered folklore and tragic history of the region. They come for the gaunt silhouettes of ruined castles– Lastours, Quéribus, Peyreperouse – which pepper the landscape. And then there is Montségur, the spiritual centre of the Cathar Church in the Languedoc from 1204 until its final defeat at the hands of the French Crusaders. The 'safe mountain' citadel perches perilously on the top of the

mountain looking out over the Pic de St-Bartélémy and the hidden caves beneath the Pic de Soularac, where *Labyrinth* both begins and ends. Half a day's ride to the east, are the wooded hills around the spa town of Rennes-les-Bains where *Sepulchre* is set, where a quite different sequence of mythologies, of legends, of folklore hold sway.

When Montségur fell in March 1244, after ten months of siege, more than two hundred Cathars were burned alive in a pyre constructed on the lower slopes. Now, a small stone *stèle* stands in the Prats dels Cremats to mark the spot. Flowers, scraps of poetry and fragments of material are left at the foot of the cross in tribute. In the tiny square of Rennes-les-Bains, where once 19th century ladies and gentlemen walked arm in arm, now modern day tourists sit in the shade under the plane trees and listen to the voices of the villagers speaking still in the language of their childhoods, Occitan. This is the nature of narrative, the personal and tiny remainders, every day, of the way in which the land tells its story.

Despite the stream of visitors across the Prats dels Cremats, despite the overcrowded August streets of the Cité, the spirit of place is strong. The real Carcassonne – or *Carcassona*, to use its older Occitan name – can still be felt. Beyond the ice creams and plastic swords, it's there in the hills, in the brilliant Midi light, in the violent summer storms and flash floods, the dry, evening wind from the north, the *Cers*, that blows down from the mountains, just as it did 800 years ago. It is a land of secrets still. It is this I have attempted to capture in *Labyrinth* and *Sepulchre*.