

Each month we will focus on an inspiring author based in or writing about Wales! You'll have an introduction to their latest book, what inspires them to write, and any advice they have for young writers!

Get to know

Joanne Rush



Joanne Rush is a novelist, a short story writer and a poet. She has a PhD in English Literature from Cambridge University, which is where she first fell in love with myths and folklore. Joanne's literary achievements include winning The Fiction Desk's Short Story Competition, with her story 'Guests,' inspiring her forthcoming debut novel, *Dancing on Knives*. Joanne is also the founder of The Writing Set, a creative writing company based in Bath, Oxford and London.



Summary:

Laura, a brilliant young Bosnian refugee, must confront her harrowing past when she falls in love with British diplomat Adam, whose job takes them to Serbia – the country that once invaded her own.

With Adam preoccupied in his pursuit of war criminal General Ratko Mladić, Laura is troubled by familiar ghostly figures whose reminiscences about the city she

once fled hold a dangerous allure.

Can they help her? Or is she losing her mind? As Laura grapples with these hidden secrets, she uncovers a defiant power within herself. Poised on the edge of magic realism, this is a story for our time, about the dark legacy of war and the unexpected roads that lead to redemption.

What influences and memories stand out from your childhood?

My parents' house was always full of extraordinary people. I remember we had fierce debates about everything from religion to politics. One of my best friends was half Iranian, so we also ate some wonderful food – rice with spiced lamb and apricots was not commonplace in nineties Surrey!

I was also an incurable animal lover as a child. Lost dogs and sleepy homing pigeons seemed to spot me from miles away. Once I rescued a young deer that had fallen off a roadside bank and winded itself. I've never forgotten what it felt like to get close to something so fragile and sinewy and wild. It's an experience I gave to Laura – the main character in my novel – at a turning point in her life.

As a young person, who or what influenced you?

Books were definitely my biggest influence. I loved Laura Ingles Wilder's autobiographical stories about her life in 19th century America – the wolves and the wilderness still haunt me. I loved her sense of adventure, too. I've always been drawn to female characters who break the rules and fight to live extraordinary lives.

A wonderful real-life influence came from John and Pauline, who owned Tir Gwenith – the small-holding near Aberdaron where I lived each summer. John had a gentleness that drew children and animals to him. He was a beautiful listener. Pauline is to this day a patient, kind and practical person. She is very quiet, but tells unexpectedly funny stories. Many of her tales have stayed with me over the years. I wish I could say her patience rubbed off as well, but I'm actually very impatient – at least with myself. That's something I'm working on.

What are your favourite reading genres, and what books are you reading at the moment?

I love literary fiction. A novel with complex characters and lyrical prose will always make me miss bus stops. One of the lovely things about being a debut novelist is that you make friends with other debut novelists and send each other proof copies. Right now I'm very much enjoying Joanne Miller's *The Eights*. It's a hatpin sharp novel about a group of young women who are among the first female students at Oxford University in the 1920s – fighting sexism, learning to laugh, and helping each other survive the trauma and losses of World War 1.

I've recently fallen back in love with fantasy, too. Erin Morgenstern's *A Starless Sea* comes everywhere with me at the moment. 'Escapist fiction' is often used as a slur, but when life is hard or sad, I truly believe that getting lost in a story for a few hours is the best medicine in the world.

What experiences of libraries have influenced you during your lifetime?

Libraries are my favourite places on earth, which of course explains why my main character is a librarian. I'm a card-carrying bookworm. I have a vivid memory of sweet-talking the school librarian into tripling the number of books I was allowed to borrow over the summer holidays. Books were then and are now an expensive luxury, so I am more grateful than I can say to public libraries. I think they are such welcoming, egalitarian places. I've only ever met kind and thoughtful librarians. In her brilliant short story collection *Public Library*, Ali Smith puts it far better than I can: 'democracy of reading, democracy of space'. Three cheers for that!