

Bestselling author, Kate Mosse, talks about her new book, *Sepulchre*, and her fascination with tarot cards

Celia Dodd

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Kate Mosse is unexpectedly down to earth for an author whose bestselling novels display a keen interest in the paranormal. Her latest book, *Sepulchre*, now in paperback, features tarot cards, ghosts and an Old Testament demon, while her last, *Labyrinth*, which has sold millions in 40 countries, contains coincidental echoes of *The Da Vinci Code* (with grail quests) and an apparently reincarnated heroine.

But then Mosse doesn't spend all her time writing in some ivory tower. She co-founded the women-only Orange Prize for Fiction, presents arts programmes on television and radio, and organises creative writing courses. She was the first woman executive director of the Chichester Festival Theatre and was named European Woman of Achievement in 2000 for her contribution to the arts.

When we meet, Mosse is on her way home to her husband and two teenage children in Chichester at the end of a long day. She was up at 5am to discuss James Bond (she is a big fan) on breakfast TV and moved swiftly on to a tour of Suffolk bookshops.

Mosse, 46, is tiny and chic in jeans and comfy boots, with her blonde hair loosely tied back. Sipping white wine diluted with a tumblerful of ice, she expands on the key role that fate has played in her life, her enduring interest in the super-natural and how that sits with her traditional Church of England upbringing. She wears her erudition lightly and doesn't mind a fig about being confused with the other Kate Moss.

While her conversation ranges from afternoon naps and miserable pregnancies to feeling fitter than ever in her forties despite a tendency to worry, she can't help coming back to books and their influence.

“The reading was extraordinarily accurate”

Her lifelong fascination with tarot was first sparked when she read the Italian author Italo Calvino. But the interest remained purely intellectual until she went for a reading in Covent Garden while researching *Sepulchre*.

“The tarot reader was a clever, very interesting, bright woman; not at all what I was expecting,” she says. “She answered my questions and then said: ‘Right, we’d better do you a reading.’ Seriously, my heart went thump. I was fascinated by my reaction. Why was it so scary if I didn’t believe in it? The reading was extraordinarily accurate about all sorts of things, from my connection with France (Mosse has a house in the foothills of the Pyrenees) to my two children.

“It was very creepy and I didn’t know what to think. I didn’t want to tell people about it because I didn’t want them either to agree or try to knock it down.”

Despite that experience Mosse remains firmly on the fence when it comes to the paranormal: she is fascinated, but neither believes nor disbelieves. “When I was younger I read a lot of folklore and I was always attracted to stories about ghosts, spirits and fairies. I was brought up going to church on Sundays, and it seemed to me that these stories were part of the same sort of thing, which is looking beyond the everyday.

“I’ve always liked that sense that it’s not our business to know everything. It’s great that there are things we don’t quite understand because it’s the antidote to the modern way of looking at things, which is if something can’t be proved, it’s not important. I don’t feel like that.”

Unusually for historical adventures, Mosse’s novels feature heroines, not heroes, who have nice frocks as well as sharp swords - she is, after all, a feminist. Yet the books have struck a chord with as many men as women at a time when interest in alternative philosophies is mushrooming at home and abroad.

She is surprised that even the most unexpected people have told her they have regular tarot readings, “almost like having a spiritual MoT”. She has no plans for a second reading herself.

She remains convinced that we make our own luck yet she acknowledges the pivotal role that fate has played in her life. The coincidence that makes her spine tingle was meeting her future husband, Greg. They dated at school but lost touch when they went to different universities until eight years later, when he was on a rare visit home from France and she was en route to act as her sister’s birth partner, they happened to sit opposite each other on a train. When they later married, Greg, a teacher and writer, took her surname - unusual even in feminist partnerships.

Fate again stepped in when the couple were looking for a bolt hole 20 years ago. Mosse had never heard of Carcassonne in southwest France, but she was drawn to the city and felt an immediate physical connection. Since then the family decamp to their two-up-two-down house for several months every year, although because of book tours and teenage commitments, not as much at the moment. The area provides the backdrop to her last two novels.

A strong sense of place

The same strong sense of place drew Mosse to move back home to West Sussex, where she grew up with two younger sisters in Fishbourne, the site of a Roman villa that her amateur archaeologist mother helped to excavate. Her father, a solicitor, took parenting more seriously than many men of his generation and Mosse has tried to recreate her happy childhood, with its few simple but non-negotiable rules (such as no televisions in bedrooms) with her own children, Martha, 18, and Felix, 15. Martha even went to the same girls’ comprehensive in Chichester.

Mosse’s grandfather was a vicar, her godmother is a Protestant nun and her aunt was a founder member of the movement for the ordination of women. So until her teens, attending church every Sunday was part of the natural rhythm of life. “I enjoyed that sense of being connected by music and words and place with many other generations,” she says. “But in my teens I can clearly remember being in Chichester

Cathedral and suddenly not being able to say the words; thinking, this is all about 'men this' and 'father that'. The structure of my faith went."

When she is in need of spiritual restoration now she makes for the woods. "I believe that the physical environment holds its scars, its ghosts; I feel the memory of things that happened is around. So when I stand on top of the Trundle, a hill fort in Sussex, I don't feel that I'm on my own. I'm very aware of the thousands of people who have stood there before. I like that sense of both being part of something much bigger and older, and also the insignificance of it - that people are small and passing through and those hills have been there for hundreds of thousands of years - and hopefully will be when we've passed on."

Music was her first love

As a teenager Mosse's life revolved around orchestras and practising her violin for several hours a day. But at 16 she decided she wasn't good enough to be a soloist and instead went to read English at Oxford, where she was involved in the drama society. These days she gets a vicarious buzz when her musical children perform: "I can experience the emotions of waiting to go on before a concert and hearing the orchestra tuning up through my children. That's fabulous, because it was something I missed." She no longer plays, but music as a conduit to other worlds is a key theme in her writing.

Mosse took another brave decision in her late twenties when she turned down a top publishing job to write and set up the Orange Prize. It could have been financial suicide: she had one child, her husband was training for a post-graduate certificate in education and she had been offered a modest advance to write non-fiction. "I had to close my eyes and jump. I thought, this is the moment. It was scary because I come from the sort of background where you earn your living, you don't suddenly decide you don't fancy working. So while it felt absolutely the right thing to do I also felt irresponsible."

Her writing career started with a non-fiction book about the emotional side of pregnancy, *Becoming a Mother* (Virago, £9.99). She hated being pregnant, worried endlessly and felt ill, so she decided to compare notes with other women and get something positive out of the experience. Fifteen years on the book still sells steadily.

She is still a bit of a worrier, but refuses to let it influence her behaviour. "I often get more worried than I should about other people's feelings, and I'm quite capable of waking up at 3am thinking, 'If only I'd set that up better...' But I don't think that you need to be on an even keel all the time. If I feel stressed I go for a swim or a cycle ride or take the dog for a walk. Around the time *Sepulchre* was published (last October) our West Highland terrier was being dragged out about five times a day."

Mosse says she began to feel her age on a recent US tour, yet she still manages happily on six hours' sleep. The secret, she says, is a 15-minute afternoon nap and adds: "I feel all right about ageing because I feel fitter now than I did in my twenties. When you get older you think, I'm never going to look like Kate Moss. But it's a relief in a way, because you can just look like a better or worse version of yourself, depending on the light. My mum, who is in her seventies, looks fantastic, not because she has ever pampered herself, but because she is herself. So I just think I'll carry on

copying her.”

Kate Mosse's latest novel, Sepulchre (Orion, £7.99), is available at £7.59, free p&p, from Times Books First. Call 0870 1608080; www.timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy

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