

Maisie Dobbs

by Jacqueline Winspear

About the Book

The daughter of a struggling greengrocer, Maisie Dobbs was only thirteen when she was sent to work as a maid for wealthy London aristocrats. But being bright and thoughtful beyond her years, Maisie studies her way to Cambridge, then serves as a nurse on the Front during the Great War. Now, it's the spring of 1929, nearly ten years after the Armistice and Maisie has just opened up her own detective agency. Her first assignment, a seemingly open-and-shut infidelity case, will reveal a much deeper, darker mystery, forcing Maisie to revisit the horrors of the war and the ghost she left behind. Refreshing, absorbing, and beautifully rendered, *Maisie Dobbs* marks the beginning of an incredible new series.

Praise for the Book

“[A] deft debut novel . . . Romantic readers sensing a story-within-a-story won't be disappointed. But first they must be prepared to be astonished at the sensitivity and wisdom with which Maisie resolves her first professional assignment.”

— *The New York Times Book Review*

“The reader familiar with Alexander McCall Smith's *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* . . . might think of *Maisie Dobbs* as its British counterpart. . . . Winspear, who intends to write a series featuring Maisie Dobbs, has created a winning character about whom readers will want to read more.”

— *The Associated Press*

“A quirky literary creation . . . a romance, a tale of terror, an historical novel and a primer on holistic health. Personally, I'm ready for a dose of the eclectic.”

— **Maureen Corrigan on NPR's *Fresh Air***

“There isn't a lot of room for originality in the sleuthing genre, but Jacqueline Winspear has come up with something surprisingly fresh.”

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

“This first novel by Jacqueline Winspear . . . catch[es] the sorrow of a lost generation in the character of one exceptional woman.”

— *Chicago Tribune*

Courtesy of Penguin Group

About the Author

Jacqueline Winspear

British Novelist (1955–)

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Personal Information: Born 1955, in Kent, England; married.

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Career: Novelist; formerly worked in publishing, London, England.

Awards: Agatha Award, 2005, for *Birds of a Feather*.

WRITINGS

- *Maisie Dobbs*, Soho Press (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Birds of a Feather*, Soho Press (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Pardonable Lies: A Maisie Dobbs Novel*, Holt (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Messenger of Truth: A Maisie Dobbs Novel*, Holt (New York, NY), 2006
- *An Incomplete Revenge: A Maisie Dobbs Novel*, Holt (New York, NY), 2008

Sidelights

After working in publishing for several years, British-born author Jacqueline Winspear moved to California in 1990 and embarked upon a fiction-writing career. Her first novel, *Maisie Dobbs*, was published by New York City-based Soho Press in 2003 as the planned first novel in a multivolume series.

Winspear's debut novel opens in early 1929, as Maisie Dobbs hangs out her shingle as a private investigator. One of the newly minted P.I.'s first clients is a man who employs Maisie to follow his evasive wife, hoping to find out whether she is still faithful to him. As Maisie undertakes this assignment, Winspear's story line intermittently tracks back, along with her protagonist's own thoughts, into Maisie's past, revealing the woman's complex character.

Maisie, who worked as a ladies' maid after her mother died during her early teens, was recognized for her intelligence, and with the help of her forward-thinking aristocratic employer she received the training to help her break out of a life of service. Attending Cambridge University's Girton College for women, she left to serve as a nurse on French battlefields during World War I, and fell in love with a young doctor, who mysteriously disappeared. This mystery from the past quickly links back with Maisie's present, as her client's wife is discovered to be somehow involved with the Retreat, a secret organization for soldiers still traumatized by the war.

Noting that *Maisie Dobbs* was inspired by Winspear's grandparents, "who were both injured during World War I," *Library Journal* contributor Caroline Hallsworth cited the novel as "a poignant and compelling story that explores war's lingering and insidious

impact on its survivors.” Hallsworth praised Winspear’s “simple, effective prose” and “compassionate sensitivity” and noted, favorably, that the novel does not descend into the maudlin. In *Kirkus Reviews* a contributor was less enthusiastic, finding *Maisie Dobbs* somewhat “convenient and contrived.” *BookLoons* reviewer G. Hall had more positive comments about the novel, praising Winspear for bringing “a complementary female perspective to bear on this very traumatic time in British history” and calling *Maisie Dobbs* “a welcome addition to the mystery field.” In *School Library Journal*, Susan H. Woodcock also enjoyed Winspear’s work, writing that the “strong protagonist and a lively sense of time and place carry readers” of *Maisie Dobbs* “along.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Kirkus Reviews*, May 15, 2003, review of *Maisie Dobbs*, p. 713.
- *Library Journal*, March 15, 2003, Caroline Hallsworth, review of *Maisie Dobbs*, p. 118.
- *Publishers Weekly*, June 16, 2003, review of *Maisie Dobbs*, p. 55.
- *School Library Journal*, December, 2003, Susan H. Woodcock, review of *Maisie Dobbs*, p. 177.

ONLINE

- *BookLoons*, <http://www.bookloons.com/> (October 13, 2003), G. Hall, review of *Maisie Dobbs*.
- *Books 'n' Bytes*, <http://www.booksnbytes.com/> (October 13, 2003), Harriet Klausner, review of *Maisie Dobbs*.
- *Soho Press Web site*, <http://www.sohopress.com/> (May 15, 2004).

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2005

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author Interview

Q: You write in your novel’s acknowledgments about sharing your home with Maisie Dobbs. Do you feel as if she has acquired a reality for you that goes beyond the printed page?

Jacqueline Winspear: I’m not sure about a reality that goes beyond the printed page. However, in writing *Maisie Dobbs* I immersed myself in a research process that encompassed not only the Great War, but the late 1920s. When I wasn’t writing, I was reading, watching documentaries, or wading through my notes. I wanted Maisie to be a woman of her time, to reflect a certain strength of spirit that was so present with women who had lived through the war, yet I also wanted her to have a uniqueness — in that respect, she took up a lot of space in our home. I think for a time I began every conversation with, “Maisie . . .”

Q: The dedication of your novel gives a brief description of two of your grandparents, whose lives helped to inspire your story. Would you be interested in telling us anything more about them?

JW: The interesting thing about many people of that Great War generation — especially those who were directly involved in the conflict — is how little they talked about it. People like my grandparents simply “got on with it” so to speak, and certainly it’s that same strength of spirit that served the British so well in World War II. There are stories about my grandparents that I find fascinating, but the war stories in particular didn’t reach me as oft-told tales, more as something spoken of with quiet gravity.

John “Jack” Winspear (my name is in honor of his nickname and my brother is also named John) was a costermonger by trade, a man who sold vegetables from a horse-drawn cart or “barrow.” In fact, he was considered quite successful because he had several horses — many costermongers had hand-barrows for their rounds. He had talked about some of his wartime experiences to my father, but only when asked — and probably badgered, if truth be told. I know that at one point he was a stretcher-bearer, with the job of going out into no-man’s land to retrieve the dead and dying. Two stories are particularly sad: On one occasion he came across the bodies of a British soldier and a German soldier — each had killed the other with a bayonet and their hands were still on their rifles, their eyes wide open looking at each other in death. The other story is his description of waiting for the sound of the whistle, the signal for the soldiers to go “over the top” and into a hell that they could only hear until the point of scrambling out of the trench, then screaming to keep themselves running. It was after such a battle, when only my grandfather and one other man in his company were left alive, that he was assigned to work as a stretcher-bearer before being sent to join another brigade. My grandfather died at the age of seventy-seven, and to the day he died he was still removing shrapnel from his legs, from wounds received in 1916 at the Battle of the Somme. My maternal grandmother, Clara, worked at the Woolwich Arsenal in London and, apparently, was almost immediately ostracized by many of her neighbors. You see, women who worked

in the factories earned good money for that time, and money meant freedom, a freedom of choice and action, which led to assumptions about a young woman's morals. The fact was that the women worked long, exhausting hours in dangerous conditions. Exposure to cordite and other chemicals used in the manufacture of explosives meant that the health of the liver was compromised. Many women suffered from jaundice — the munitions workers were known as “canaries” for the color of their skin — and the chemicals also caused the hair to have coppery streaks with a lot of static that sparked when you brushed your hair. The funny thing is that I didn't actually know she was blind in one eye until a few years ago. I was talking to my mother about Clara — she died when I was eighteen — and had always assumed that she had the family “lazy eye” that myself and several of my cousins inherited from somewhere. Then my mother said, “Oh, no, she was half-blinded at the arsenal,” and the story emerged about the explosion, how the girls working alongside her had been killed. That's what I mean about that generation never talking about themselves and their experiences. Part of my research was in having my mother talk to other family members (and Clara had ten children), to see what snippets of stories she had told, then piece them together to understand something of her experiences.

Q: Maisie's first case takes her on an unexpectedly personal journey, and it seems that, for you, writing the book was also a voyage of self-discovery. Are there insights this experience has given you about your family history and about yourself that you would care to share with us?

JW: Writing *Maisie Dobbs* came to be a personal quest in a way that I would never have imagined. I had written about one third or so of the book, squeezing my writing in between work commitments, etc., and then at one point put it aside as I was so busy. During the time of writing that first part of the story, I'd moved, got married, changed jobs — all big events in the space of a year! Then another life-changing moment occurred: I was out riding my horse and had a horrible accident. As I was flying through the air I immediately knew why it was happening, in the grand scheme of things — I had left my writing behind. I suffered a very badly broken arm and crushed shoulder, which required major surgery and the sort of internal hardware that would look at home in a carpenter's shop. Then came convalescence and a good six months of rehab — I was told that even after physical therapy I would be lucky to get 75 percent of the former use of my arm. A few weeks after surgery I was visiting my friend, Adair Lara, a San Francisco writer — I can still remember this so clearly — and she said, “Convalescence is the ideal time to finish your book!” I pointed to my right arm, which was in a sort of padded sling “structure,” and said, “With this?” Adair's response was, “Well you've got a left arm haven't you?” So — to cut a long story short — over half of *Maisie Dobbs* was finished with just one hand on the keyboard, and I was so determined to get the other hand operational that I worked hard at rehab and within three months had the book finished and a good 85 percent of my arm back. The interesting thing is that immediately before my surgery, I was reading *Seabiscuit* by Laura Hillenbrand, and then afterwards read her personal story of overcoming chronic fatigue in order to write. I found that to be so very inspiring. My accident paled into insignificance against such a challenge, so I was

determined not to let the accident stop me, and in effect used it to make the dream of writing a novel come true.

Q: Mysteries as a genre offer a rich interaction between fragmentation and completeness; the detective is expected to extract consistency from the scattered clues of a piecemeal reality. Your book seems especially fascinated with fragments, whether they concern the shattered faces of the denizens of the Retreat, the disruption of England's social order, or Maisie's need to come to terms with her own broken past. As you were writing, what were you thinking about all these different kinds of fragments, and how did you see them in relation to one another?

JW: Looking back, *Maisie Dobbs* came together like a mosaic, blending the stories and images as one would blend fragments of color and texture. I had the separate stories in my mind's eye: Maisie, her life and background; the effects of the Great War on one particular group of veterans; Maisie in 1929 and her quest to discover the truth about the Retreat, and also to establish her reputation now that she was no longer working with Maurice Blanche. Braiding the story with these strands was a very organic process for me.

Q: A writer who tries to re-create a historical period faces some formidable challenges. What research or literary models enabled you to reconstruct the 'teens and 'twenties so convincingly?

JW: In writing about that time between the start of the Great War and the years leading up to WWII, I was drawing upon the fruits of my own curiosity. In addition, I have been very fortunate in the people I've known and where I grew up. We lived in a small hamlet where, until I was about ten, my brother and I were the only children and my parents were among just a few younger couples. Everyone else was from that older generation of people who came of age in the Great War. It was therefore easy for me to capture the way people interacted, the language, the protocols of communication. I always joked that my early childhood had more in common with that of an Edwardian child than with, say, my cousins who lived in London — I think that has served me well with *Maisie Dobbs*. In addition, I've always loved that time between the wars. I am interested in the history of fashion of that time and used to haunt the Victoria and Albert Museum's costume collection in London. Also, years ago I used to help my friend on her stall in London's Portobello Road market. She dealt mainly in Art Deco jewelry and china, so I used to read a lot about the era — I wanted to sound as if I knew what I was talking about! During the time that I was writing *Maisie Dobbs*, I read only nonfiction in connection with the Great War, the events of the first thirty years of the century, etc. I made several visits to use the archives at London's Imperial War Museum and also walked every street that Maisie walks in London. So many people were helpful in responding to my requests for details, as can be seen in the acknowledgments. I can't say that I had any literary models in writing *Maisie Dobbs*, though.

Q: During the flashback portion at the center of the novel, Maisie is often paired with other young women: Enid, Priscilla Evernden, Iris Rigson. However, in the 1929 segments, she has no female confidante near her own age. What do you think accounts for this difference?

JW: Maisie’s journey from a girl who has tragically lost her mother, to maid, to young woman with her own business, has given her an aura of “aloneness.” Enid was her friend, but they were thrown together and in truth were a bit like chalk and cheese. Yet Maisie came to love Enid for her spirit and humor, and recognized that Priscilla also had similar qualities. Again, Maisie and Iris were friends of circumstance rather than choice, but their terrible experiences in France resulted in a different kind of bond. The fact that Maisie has no such friend in 1929 is partly to do with her position and partly due to her commitment to her work. Maisie’s “aloneness” comes to a head in *Birds of a Feather*, the second Maisie Dobbs novel.

Q: In her studies with Maurice Blanche, Maisie may have become familiar with the principle of quantum mechanics that holds that one cannot observe something without somehow changing it. She seems particularly aware of the fact that her investigations are bound to change the people involved, and she is admirably careful about wanting to change people only for the better. How were you able to create such a humanly sensitive private investigator?

JW: Maisie’s challenges — both in breaking through the “class ceiling” and as a nurse in France — have provided her with a unique perspective. Later, in her work as an investigator, her experiences have allowed greater insights into what it means to be human. In addition, her studies and curiosity have resulted in an innate understanding of how experience changes a person, that even good change can be challenging, and that her interactions with a person might change the outcome of events, or their thinking or attitude. She takes on this responsibility and, in a way, accompanies the person to a point in their personal journey where they are safe. She is not one to simply put the clues together, sort things out and move on. As far as what enabled me to create such a character, I think my own life experiences together with my training and work as a personal/life coach have helped. I have worked with many people who have made enormous leaps of faith to bring about change in their lives and have seen how such personal journeys can be challenging and, frankly, scary. So some of that has been brought into *Maisie Dobbs*.

Q: Despite all the violence that lies beneath the surface of your story — a world war, a series of unexplained deaths, and so on — you tend to deal with the actual moments of violence with careful restraint. The death of one key character is reported in a telegram. Another chapter cuts away just before a horrible explosion. Is there an authorial philosophy behind this well-mannered delicacy?

JW: I think it's a case of "less is more." While I certainly did not want to offer a clean and tidy image of a war that was filled with pain, terror, and bloodshed, I feel that a scene of violence can be just as effectively conveyed with less graphic images — and leave the imagination to do its work. Also, apart from the scene at the casualty clearing station, I was dealing very much with the aftermath of war, with words unspoken, with memories buried, and with scars so terrible one can but weep to think of the pain suffered. I didn't want to create graphic, violent scenes that overshadowed the whole book. For me the challenge was in conveying the lingering suffering of an individual and a country.

Q: Maisie's mentor, Maurice Blanche, is a man of remarkably keen perceptions. Have you had a Maurice Blanche in your own life?

JW: Maurice is really an amalgam of the teachers that have most impacted my life, whether in school or work. However, in his manner, Maurice reflects a teacher and friend who was most dear to me and to whom my second Maisie Dobbs novel is dedicated. Sadly, he died before *Maisie Dobbs* was published — and it had been my dream since childhood to present him with a copy of my first book.

Q: For someone dedicated to tracing through the labyrinths and "mazes" of human psychology and behavior, "Maisie" is a beautifully chosen name. In addition, the initials "M. D." are delightfully apt for someone who approaches detective work as a means toward healing. Are we right in supposing that a lot of thought went into naming her?

JW: Gosh, I hate to admit this, but the name "Maisie Dobbs" just came to me instantly along with the character. I had never written fiction before, yet had been badgered by one of my mentors to try fiction. I had no idea where to start — my other book-length manuscript was a memoir about my childhood — yet one day as I was stuck in traffic while driving to an appointment, Maisie Dobbs just came to me, just as she does in the first chapter. In my mind's eye I watched her walking through the turnstile at Warren Street tube station. I instantly knew her name and who she was. By the time I had driven another half mile, I knew her story. After work, I rushed home to write the first fifteen or so pages that became Chapter One. I have never wavered regarding her name and never doubted that the novel would bear her name. I am forever grateful that such an inspired moment gave me such a name, as it fits her perfectly.

Q: Do you think the traits of a good private eye also make for a good writer?

JW: I can only speak for myself here, but I do believe that being a good, detailed, and vigilant observer — of events, people, one’s environment, sounds, colors, etc. — is the key to being a good writer. Curiosity is important for me, and asking questions. Like Maurice, I’m a great believer in questions. When I think of my favorite writers, their work reflects a quest, a journey of discovery to the heart of a matter — whether that journey takes the form of an essay, a poem, a short story, or a novel.

Q: As you point out, many of the disabled soldiers at the Retreat develop a deep loyalty to Adam Jenkins because he provides “answers to unfathomable questions” and “leadership in their uncertainty.” Do you feel that Jenkins’s story is in some ways a parallel to the rise of Hitler?

JW: I do believe that people such as Jenkins, Hitler — or any such leader — gain power amid fear and uncertainty. At the heart of every cult is a compelling personality, one who exudes a certain charisma. In Jenkins I wanted to explore the wounds that resulted in his terrible acts at the Retreat. The trouble is that such individuals come to power on a tide of support from people desperate for leadership — people who are suffering emotionally, economically — and then such leaders create a mood of fear to maintain control when the people begin to doubt. Thus the people — whether a group or a nation — are powerless. And that fear can be of the leader himself and the consequence of crossing him, or of an external threat to one’s safety.

Q: The almost blank period that you have intentionally left between 1917 and 1929 is deeply tantalizing. Do you plan to fill this gap in subsequent Maisie Dobbs novels and, if so, would you like to drop any hints at the moment?

JW: Yes, that period is extremely tantalizing. There are a couple of possibilities: A case from her days with Maurice that is reopened; and a series of stories from the early days of Maisie’s apprenticeship with Maurice.

Courtesy of Penguin Group

Discussion Questions

1. How does Maisie's brief exchange with the newspaper vendor at the beginning of the novel (pp. 3–4) help to establish her character? Why is her combination of "bearing" and her "familiar way" of speaking such a surprise to Jack? How does this combination of qualities fit in with Maisie's desire for an office that is "something in the middle, something for everyone, something central, but then again not in the thick of things"?
2. Maisie initially has a hard time deciding what trade description to put on her nameplate (p. 5). At the end of the novel, she has firmly decided upon "M. Dobbs, Psychologist and Investigator." In what other ways, during the course of the story, does Maisie arrive at a clearer idea of who she is?
3. Enid, Maisie's roommate at Lord Compton's mansion, is vividly contrasted with Maisie. What implicit comparisons are made between the two young women? Despite her lack of formal education, does Enid possess a kind of wisdom that Maisie is slower to acquire? Does Enid's juxtaposition with Maisie help us to understand Maisie better?
4. When he learns that his wife is still mourning the early death of a former love who was horribly wounded in World War I, Christopher Davenham responds, "[O]ne just has to get on with it. After all, you can't just give in, can you?" (p. 52). Similarly, Mrs. Crawford criticizes James for being different from other ex-soldiers who have "got on with it" (p. 207). You may have noticed that the phrase "Get on with it" becomes an important motif late in the novel (cf. pp. 283 and 292). If getting on with it is such sensible advice, why is it so hard to follow?
5. Throughout most of the novel, the facial disfigurement of the veterans who join the colony at the Retreat generates sympathy for them. However, at a climactic moment in the story, their wounds are used to make them appear monstrous and inhuman: "With their damaged faces, once so very dear to a mother, father, or sweetheart, they were now reduced to gargoyles by a war that, for them, had never ended" (p. 262). In the story, and elsewhere, for that matter, can sympathy and repulsion exist comfortably side by side, or must one eventually triumph?
6. How does the young Maisie of the flashback chapters differ from the mature Maisie?
7. What obstacles does Maisie have to surmount, both personally and professionally, because she is a woman? How does her feminine identity influence her professional demeanor and investigative style? How do the obstacles of gender in the novel contrast with the obstacles of class?

8. Maisie finds herself situated between two powerful father figures: Frankie, her natural father; and Maurice, her intellectual “father.” Both of these men represent different parts of Maisie’s life and character though they have very little in common. How successful is Maisie in balancing their influences?
9. Despite the sinister nature of the Retreat, Billy Beale initially finds the compound somewhat attractive and feels respect for Adam Jenkins. Why?
10. Is Maisie as skilled at resolving her own inner conflicts as she is at dealing with those of others? Are there any relationships in particular that you think she mismanages? Why?
11. Imagine Maisie Dobbs as the basis for a screenplay. Choose a scene and discuss how you, as the director, would want to film it.
12. What is your response to the ending of the novel, particularly the last meeting between Simon and Maisie? Is Maisie more focused on her suffering or Simon’s? Is her focus where it ought to be? Does the scene resolve the tensions of the story or heighten them?

Courtesy of Penguin Group