

<http://www.foyles.co.uk/Jo-McMillan>
About The Author

Jo McMillan has lived and worked in China, Malaysia and the UK, and is currently based in Berlin. She has a PhD in anthropology. Her writing has appeared in Granta, Traveller and the Times Higher Education Supplement.

Motherland, her first novel, is a tender mother-daughter story and a tragi-comic portrait of a childhood overcome with belief. It opens in Tamworth in 1978. Jess is thirteen and already has a reputation - as the daughter of the only communist in town. But then, it's in the blood. The Mitchells have been in the Party since the Party began. Jess and her mother Eleanor struggle to sell socialism to Tamworth - a sleepy Midlands town that just doesn't want to know. So when Eleanor is invited to spend a summer teaching in East Germany, she and Jess leap at the chance to see what the future looks like. On the other side of the Iron Curtain they turn from villains into heroes. And when Eleanor meets widower Peter and his daughter, Martina, a new, more peaceful life seems possible. But the Cold War has no time for love and soon the trouble starts.

Below, Jo talks about where her and Jess's experience converge - and diverge - about missing out on normal teenage life, being Public Enemy Number One and revisiting the town for research.

The Author At Foyles
Tamworth Never Forgets

Tamworth never forgets. Especially its own history: Offa's Dyke. Robert Peel. Butch and Sundance, the runaway Tamworth pigs that escaped the abattoir and made it onto national telly. So I shouldn't have been surprised that after thirty years away, the owner of a B&B - a man I didn't know - would remember me.

'You're that Joanne, aren't you.' Not a question. This was a town where I'd been Joanna-without-an-a. 'You're that Joanne. With that mother. And them Russian papers. Who'd of thought you'd be back.'

I'd just flown in from Berlin and this was Day One of fieldwork. I'd forgotten the town where I grew up. I'd blanked it out. But now I was back to remember. I wanted to map where Motherland plays out and relive its Tamworth scenes.

The B&B man slid a plate in front of me with two fried eggs and a gap where the bacon should be. 'Got something against pigs?' he said.

There used to be no love lost between Tamworth and me. I was born in Tooting and moved to the town when I was eight years old. It meant I'd never be a Tammie. Just opening my mouth announced the gulf between us. And it wasn't just an accent I had to learn. They spoke a different language here: they had pumps, cobs, and took the buzz to Brum. On my first day at primary school, I was cornered in the playground and asked if I wanted a scrap.

'Of what?' I said, then felt the land of a fist.

For the first few weeks, I collected bruises. Then I put on gold face-paint and went to school and announced in a Dalek accent that I was from Mars.

I thought you couldn't get more alien than that. But, actually, there was Russia. When my mum set up the local Communist Party branch, she didn't just bring the Soviets to town; she brought the sworn enemy. Thanks to Offa and his Dyke, Tamworth had a history of repelling invasions. But now, thanks to my mum and me, the Russians had an outpost here. We were Moscow's advance party living in Church Lane.

And we didn't even try to hide it. We were a very Public Enemy - possibly Number One. We set up a pitch in the shopping precinct and sold the Morning Star. Our letters appeared in the Tamworth Herald. We marched through the Pleasure Grounds against bombs and the dole. We decked the house in Soviet bunting when the Queen came to town. Most of Tamworth gave us a wide berth; some stood close and told us where to go.

And that was the problem with being the enemy. You had no friends. I watched teenage from a distance. I listened to girls in the playground belt out hits from Top of the Pops and all I had was The Little Red Songbook. I sang to myself - sometimes into tape-recorders, over and over till I sounded like the masses. I kept a Black Book. And maybe it was having a bedroom window that looked onto a graveyard, but I spent a lot of time planning my funeral, the instructions always up to date. Other young people dreamed about what they wanted to be when they grew up. I dreamed about how I wanted to die. Heroically. For the revolution. That was the main thing.

'You will, dear,' my mum said. 'And cheer up about friends.' I had lots of penpals, after all. International friendship dropped onto our Willkommen doormat from the GDR, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia. 'You might not have friends in Tamworth, but you have more than enough in principle.' Theoretically, I was friends with the entire Eastern Bloc.

And that was where I belonged: in the socialist future, the other side of the Iron Curtain. In Motherland, the protagonist, Jess, makes a bid to defect. I never did. I defected instead in my head. I had a GDR shrine facing East, with all my points of reference: the plug-in TV tower, the plastic Palace of the Republic, the paperweight Brandenburg Gate. And in the meantime, St Editha's church counted down the hours till I was old enough to leave.

At the end of my fieldwork trip, the B&B man saw me off. I stood in the hallway in the smell of Pledge and bacon. 'So where's home now, Bab?'

'Berlin.'

'Burnley?' He said I could sign the visitors' book if I wanted. 'And have a mint for the journey - two as you're going that far.' He tilted his head to read my message. 'Tamworth in an actual novel? In a real book?' He fingered his Pigs'll Fry apron, then took my hand and shook it. 'And does it have a title?'