

'The kind of book you
want to escape normal life to
read at every available opportunity'

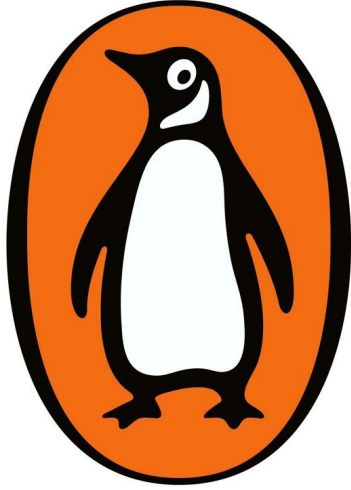
Elizabeth Day

THE
WHALEBONE
THEATRE

'A book that will be
loved unreasonably and life-long'

Francis Spufford

JOANNA QUINN



Joanna Quinn

THE WHALEBONE THEATRE



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Acknowledgements

About the Author

Joanna Quinn was born in London and grew up in Dorset, in the south-west of England, where her debut novel, *The Whalebone Theatre*, is set.

Joanna has worked in journalism and the charity sector. She is also a short-story writer, published by the *White Review* and the Comma Press, among others. She teaches creative writing and lives in a village near the sea in Dorset.

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The Whalebone Theatre

‘Magnificent. As capacious, surprising and magical as the whale that lends its bones to Cristabel’s theatre: a tale of intertwined lives and braided fates as deftly managed and heartbreaking as a Dickens novel’ Rebecca Stott, author of *In the Days of Rain*

‘Playful, inventive, sharp, funny ... sheer, undiluted delight from start to finish. It breathes fresh, bracing air into the lungs of the multi-generational saga – and the very form of the novel itself. Few people writing today can match Quinn for the energy and precision of her prose: sentences begin boldly, proceed to hit every nail on their path, then land, gorgeously, in a totally unexpected place. In Quinn’s hands, archetypes are re-born: character damaged by the usual unsavoury traditions of the British aristocracy are depicted with piercing efficiency, then found to be loveable despite it all. Catchphrases from the past are dug up, tossed wittily around, and suddenly understood for the very first time. Most importantly of all, perhaps, Quinn gives us Cristabel, the sort of intelligent heroine that has been sorely missing from every other classic since *Middlemarch*: disinterested in marriage yet capable of immense love. It’s impossible not to be charmed by this book, its cast of characters, and Quinn’s constantly striking prose. It is both reassuringly familiar, and startlingly new: a big fat Victorian novel written by someone from the post #metoo years’ Susan Elderkin, author of *Voices*

‘I defy any reader not to fall in love ... it transported me wholesale to another time and place and while I wandered its pages, I forgot the world for a while’ Wyl Menmuir, author of *Fox Fires*

‘A beautifully written, completely immersive read that I can’t quite believe is a debut. Very highly recommended’ *Bookseller*

‘Can there be a better proscenium arch than the salvaged ribs of a beached whale? Framed by these giant bones, Quinn’s story passes like a fabulous pageant, richly coloured and packed with incident, taking us from the lonely

and orthodox Dorset childhood of the extraordinary Cristabel to the
poignant aftermath of her heroic Second World War' Frances Liardet, autho:
of *We Must Be Brave*

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For Nancy and Abi

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What cares these roarers for the name of king?

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

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William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*



Act One

1919–1920

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The Last Day of the Year

31st December, 1919

Dorset

Cristabel picks up the stick. It fits well in her hand. She is in the garden, waiting with the rest of the household for her father to return with her new mother. Uniformed servants blow on cold fingers. Rooks caw half-heartedly from the trees surrounding the house. It is the last day of December, the dregs of the year. The afternoon is fading and the lawn a quagmire of mud and old snow, which three-year-old Cristabel stamps across in her lace-up leather boots, holding the stick like a sword, a miniature sentry in a brass-buttoned winter coat.

She swishes the stick to and fro, enjoying the *vvp vvp* sound it makes, uses it to spoon a piece of grubby snow to her mouth. The snow is as chilly on her tongue as the frost flowers that form on her attic window, but less clinging. I tastes disappointingly nothingy. Somewhere too far away to be bothered about, her nanny is calling her name. Cristabel puts the noise away from her with a blink. She spies snowdrops simpering at the edge of the garden. *Vvvp vvp*.

Cristabel's father, Jasper Seagrave, and his new bride are, at that moment, seated side by side in a horse-drawn carriage, travelling up the driveway towards Jasper's family home: Chilcombe, a many-gabled, many-chimneyed, ivy-covered manor house with an elephantine air of weary grandeur. In outline, it is a series of sagging triangles and tall chimney stacks, and it has huddled on a wooded cliff overhanging the ocean for four hundred years, its leaded windows narrowed against sea winds and historical progress, its general appearance one of gradual subsidence.

The staff at Chilcombe say today will be a special day, but Cristabel is finding it dull. There is too much waiting. Too much straightening up. It is not a day that would make a good story. Cristabel likes stories that feature blunderbusses and dogs, not brides and waiting. *Vvvp*. As she picks up the