

## An Interview with Julie Christine Johnson

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by *Lauren Davis*



A native to the Pacific Northwest, Julie Christine Johnson transitioned from the world of wine and food to writing full time in 2013. In February 2016, her first novel *In Another Life* hit the shelves, then went into a second printing three days later. Johnson holds undergraduate degrees in French and Psychology and a Master's degree in International Affairs. Her stories and essays can be found in various journals such as *Mud Season Review* and *Cobalt*.

In a small coffee shop near the Port Townsend Bay, over the loud clatter of mugs and dishes, she shared with me the journey of publishing her debut novel.

**Lauren Davis:** I am intrigued by your transition from the corporate world to the writing world. Did you have to shed your identity almost to do that?

**Julie Christine Johnson:** The transition coincided with a change of place and a change of pace. I had started writing *In Another Life* in Seattle while working full-time as a wine buyer. But moving to Port Townsend from Seattle, slowing down, quieting down, made the transition so organic. Initially, I was afraid of the silence. I was afraid of being alone all day. Would I have the discipline to maintain a routine? Would the loneliness take me down? Would I get discouraged by working with no feedback or validation?

I'd never not had a day job, never not earned a paycheck since I was in college. So I did go through a long period of doubt and anxiety, feeling that I was wasting my time because there wasn't any guarantee that I could support myself writing. So I set a three year plan. If I haven't found an agent or some kind of solid indication that I could earn an income doing this, then that would be it. I would keep writing, of course, but I would have to find other means to support myself.

**LD:** So was it that plan that kept you going?

JCJ: Absolutely. Home alone every evening, as the day wound down and the quiet set in, I would think, *My God, what*

*am I doing? No one cares. No one is waiting for my material. Who am I doing this for?* And the novel was still such a mess at that point. I felt so isolated and ridiculous. The imposter syndrome loomed large. I just had to let the doubts filter through and allow myself this planned window of time to keep going. My choice was to quit or just dig in and do it.

**LD: Was it the process of writing that eventually allowed you to not feel like an imposter?**

JCJ: That feeling still hasn't gone away. I still feel like an imposter. Do artists ever lose that feeling? I think it's often what pushes us on, never to take our work or our creativity for granted. What saved me was the work itself. The moment I sat down and committed myself to that day's work, I lost myself in it. It's what I held onto--the bliss of writing, the discipline, the routine. At last, I came to the point where I was ready to pitch the novel. Not pitch it out, mind you. But pitch it to literary agents. A month later I had an agent and a book deal with a publisher, the offers coming in the same day. It was that simple and that ridiculous and complicated.

**LD: You said that you felt like the novel was a mess. What do you mean by that?**

JCJ: I didn't write scenes for *In Another Life* in chronological order. I didn't have a way forward because I didn't know where I was going or how the novel would end, I hadn't laid anything out in advance. I was two-thirds of the way through the first

draft when I accepted I had a loosely knitted together collection of scenes, but no central narrative. So I stopped. I wrote an ending scene and worked my ways backward and then went to the beginning and worked my way forward and just kept carving away and knitting things together until I recognized the story.

**LD: Most of the novel centers around religion. How were you raised?**

JCJ: This may be surprising to those who have read *In Another Life*, but I'm not Catholic. I was raised in a variety of Christian churches: Lutheran, Pentecostal, Evangelical. I attended a Baptist school until the 4th grade. I had this full range of Christian religious education and experience, with the exception of Catholicism.

So there's very much a theme of religion in the novel but also a theme of faith--how we develop our faith--and how much we allow religion to steer what we believe about the past. Which is certainly a role that the church has played since the advent of organized religion. Our churches have steered our understanding of the past, and have dictated our approach to history, not just religious history, but how we look at historical record. I set out to challenge that, but within a story of adventure and romance that offers up an alternative to the traditional historical narrative. The story points out the holes and then fills them in.

**LD: Reincarnation is also an important concept in your novel. Was**

**the writing process at all an exploration of your beliefs about reincarnation?**

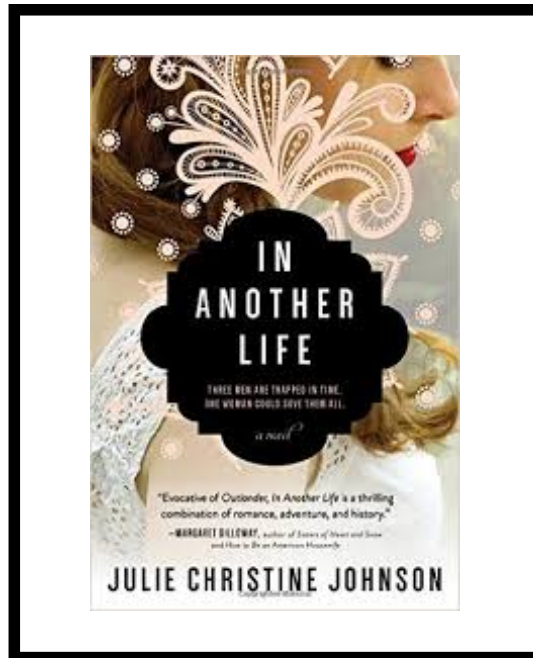
JCJ: You know, I still can't say that I believe in reincarnation. It was fascinating to explore how a religion like Catharism could bypass the Resurrection yet still believe in reincarnation, and the theological distinction that they made.

I believe that we do continue our lives after we pass on in some form or another, whether it's reincarnation or an afterlife. I take comfort in that. But it occurred to me as I got into this exploration and research of Cathar theology that it simply doesn't matter what I believe. The truth exists regardless.

**LD: How does it feel to have something outside yourself, to have your book beside you? Does it feel disembodied?**

JCJ: I turned in the final proofs in late October 2015 and I knew it was over. The novel wasn't mine anymore. I went through a sort of strange, elated mourning. I was so excited to be done with it. I was so thrilled that it was going to be published and this whole huge adventure was about to begin. But there was this part of me that was terrified for the book, and afraid of what was going to

happen to it. I couldn't be there. I couldn't protect my work. There's a certain sense of surreality to it, to be standing with this book that has my name on it, containing a story that I created, yet it doesn't belong to me anymore. From the front cover design to the back cover blurb, the novel now fulfills someone else's vision. That's the thing when you publish. Your work becomes a team project.



Even the writer I was throughout this process, who wrote the first words of *In Another Life* four years ago, who launched the novel this February, is not the same writer she is today. I have to let go and accept that this work as the writer I was at that time. And accept that the work is finished.

I think it is true of every writer, that to promote a book you have to circle back and reconnect with

the work. For most of us, it's been a years-long process. You've gone on to other things and your brain and heart are engaged elsewhere, in other stories and projects. That all has to be put in a separate drawer to open up *this* novel's drawer and return to the story and the writer behind it.

But the beauty of this process for me--and something completely unexpected--has been to fall in love again with Cathar theology, Languedoc, and this era of European history. I thought I had

finished with this world, that I was done with this story. But in the process of talking and writing about *In Another Life* and the profound beauty and imagination that are inherent in Cathar philosophy, I know I'm not finished with their stories. Perhaps not even with these characters. Maybe this particular story, but not with Languedoc or the Cathars.

**LD: So another reincarnation?**

JCJ: Unavoidable, if we're talking about the Cathars.

**LD: If there's anything you want to say to your readers, what would that be?**

JCJ: One of the themes I explore throughout *In Another Life* is the difference between history and the past. I would love for readers to follow the threads of their own doubts and question the way history has been presented. Consider the source and challenge it. The past cannot always speak for itself.