



How first-time author Jo fulfilled her lifelong dream in the Night Lagoon

by Jennifer Cartwright

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“Dark, full of twists and intoxicating.” This is how University of Leeds graduate Jo Morey describes her debut novel *The Night Lagoon*. The literary suspense follows hearing-impaired chef Laelia Wylde as she finds herself trapped in the Belizean jungle 5,000 miles away from home. Perfect for fans of *The White Lotus* or *Where the Crawdads Sing*, *The Night Lagoon* is a thrilling escapist read, perfect for your next vacation.

The idea for *The Night Lagoon* initially came to Jo around seven years ago. Without a clear plot or setting, the first-time author had an image in her mind of a woman “who was lonely but not alone”.

Jo said: “I didn’t know at that point who she was or where she was exactly but I scribbled down a page of notes about this woman and I put it to one side.”

For years, Jo kept this image as an idea at the back of her mind. When time passed and she decided to realise a lifelong ambition to write a novel, she found the old piece of paper and decided to explore this concept in greater depth.

The Night Lagoon is set in the Belizean jungle. In Jo’s opinion, this setting where anything can take an unexpected turn and danger lurks in the shadows provided “the perfect cocktail for a literary suspense”.

While writing the

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Jo promises that *The Night Lagoon* is a novel perfect for fans of *The White Lotus* or *Where the Crawdads Sing*.

novel, Jo travelled to Belize with her family and here she found herself talking to locals, Mayan healers, orchidologists and doctors, all of whom influenced the direction *The Night Lagoon* took.

For Jo, the setting also enriched the impact of sensory experience in the story as in the jungle, all sense are heightened.

Particularly important in the novel is sound – as protagonist Laelia has hearing loss and tinnitus.

This mirrors the experience of Jo herself, who first started experiencing tinnitus, a chronic sound without an outside source, often ringing, and hearing loss,

15 years ago.

By embedding an experience of hearing loss and tinnitus in the novel, feelings of miscommunication and disconnection are heightened.

However, it was a challenge for Jo to figure out how to convey an auditory experience solely through words.

She explained: “Laelia has high-pitched hearing loss as well and through the novel I explored how to get that across on the page.”

“In the text version of the novel I’ve actually missed some words out or some letters off of words just occasionally just to get across that sense of

miscommunication and mishearing.”

Writing a book has been a lifelong dream for Jo that she hasn’t realised until now. After graduating with a degree in English literature and French from the University of Leeds in 2002, she spent 20 years working in headhunting, a job that paid bills but provided limited fulfilment.

However, in lockdown, when she saw her eldest son, aged eight at the time, write his own book, she

was inspired her to change path and pick up the pen.

Jo said: “I was so impressed with him and I remember just thinking it is so cool that you’re so into writing this book that you’ve got in your brain.”

“That’s exactly what I was like when I was eight, that is what I wanted to be.”

“I realised that the thing that I’ve always wanted to do I’ve never actually really had a go at doing.”

After watching her son write, Jo decided to herself take writing



more seriously. She gained a place on the Faber Academy and the Curtis Brown Disability Mentoring Scheme and this was where *The Night Lagoon* transformed from a few notes written on paper to the start of a full story.

The novel quickly garnered great attention as it came runner-up in the Cheshire Novel Prize and the Primadonna Festival Prize, and was shortlisted in Killer Nashville’s Claymore Award (Literary) and the Plaza First Pages Award. Soon Jo found herself with three agent offers in one week: any writer’s dream dilemma.

After signing with Madeleine Milburn, she received a two book deal with top publisher HarperCollins.

In this whole process, she’s been able to connect with others who love reading and writing.

Jo said: “I’ve been so lucky to meet the most amazing other debut authors”

“Everybody is so kind, so lovely and so enthusiastic”.

Driven by character, *The Night Lagoon* has been a story lingering in Jo’s mind for years.

From July 3 when copies of the novel hit UK bookshelves, it will finally be shared with an audience.

Jo said: “It’s all felt like a dream really. I’m living the dream that I always wanted to live.”

■ *The Night Lagoon* is available to buy from UK retailers from today.

20
years Jo spent working in headhunting before deciding to try her hand at writing