

## Annabel Abbs: On the Woman Behind Recipe Writing

Award-winning author Annabel Abbs discusses the process of writing her new historical fiction novel, *Miss Eliza's English Kitchen*.

ROBERT LEE BREWER • NOV 16, 2021

Annabel Abbs is an award-winning writer of fiction and nonfiction. Her books have been translated into 25 languages. She is a Fellow of the Brown Foundation and lives in London with her family. Find her on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

In this post, Annabel discusses the process of writing her new historical fiction novel, *Miss Eliza's English Kitchen*, how it differed from the process of writing her previous books, and more!

**Name:** Annabel Abbs

**Literary agent:** Claire Anderson-Wheeler, Regal Hoffmann & Associates

**Book title:** *Miss Eliza's English Kitchen*

**Publisher:** William Morrow at Harper Collins

**Expected release date:** November 16, 2021

**Genre/category:** Historical fiction

**Previous titles:** *The Joyce Girl*; *Frieda: The Original Lady Chatterley*; *Windswept: Walking the Paths of Trailblazing Women*.

**Elevator pitch for the book:** A fictional retelling of how English poet, Eliza Acton, became the world's first modern cookery writer and inventor of the recipe as we know it.

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### What prompted you to write this book?

I was casting around for a new story and decided to take a look through the 200 antiquarian cookery books I'd acquired from my mother-in-law. She'd built the collection while teaching cookery in the 1950s and passed it to me in the 1990s. I wondered if I might find some inspiration there.

An early edition of Eliza Acton's bestselling cookery book, *Modern Cookery*, grabbed my attention because the recipes were so beautifully written—like small poems. I began researching and discovered, to my surprise, that Eliza Acton was a poet with a mysterious past. Her publisher had rejected her second volume of poems, demanding that she write a cookery book instead. Eliza had never boiled an egg but she spent the next 10 years learning to cook and writing the first cookery book to include weights, measures and lists of ingredients—all in perfect prose.

Cookery books hadn't been written like this before, so she was a real pioneer of food writing. Her book sold like hot cakes, but her story became lost in the long shadow of Mrs Beeton. Even her grave had fallen into such disrepair I couldn't locate it. I decided her story was compelling enough to warrant a novel, so I spent a couple of years researching and slowly cooking my way through her 600-page cook book!

### How long did it take to go from idea to publication? And did the idea change during the process?

It took about four years in total. The book's structure and characters came very quickly so nothing much changed in the edit process. I spent far more time doing research than writing—but that's the nature of biographical fiction. I also spent a lot of time honing my descriptions of food—I

wanted my readers to feel hungry as they read!

## Were there any surprises or learning moments in the publishing process for this title?

My biggest surprise was how it's been received. I assumed only a few English people would be interested in the story of an English spinster cooking in her kitchen—but the book has sold all over the world, in countries as diverse as China, Korea, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Russia, for instance. And CBS Studios are planning a TV series. I still can't quite believe it...

There were plenty of learning moments in the research process. I learned a lot about how our ancestors ate and was continually surprised by how well the rich ate and how terribly the poor ate. I was particularly surprised to discover that processed, frozen, and fast food were available in Victorian England.

By 1850, powdered custard and canned food were readily available and frozen meat was being shipped from Australia to the U.K. The vegetables our ancestors ate were also quite different—often tougher, woodier and in need of much longer cooking. These sorts of discoveries constantly surprised me.

## Were there any surprises in the writing process for this book?

The voices of my main characters came very quickly, almost as if they had been living in my head for several years. That was a surprise as in my previous books I had really grappled with creating characters, often rewriting them over and over. In fact, my previous books went through 30-odd drafts each.

But for this novel the process was much easier, perhaps because I'd learned from earlier attempts. Or perhaps because I'd chosen less well-known people to write about (my earlier novels were biopics featuring the family of Irish writer, James Joyce, and then DH Lawrence and his Lady Chatterley.)

Either way, it was a welcome surprise to find my characters lurking, almost fully formed, in my imagination!

## What do you hope readers will get out of your book?

I hope it enables readers to escape into a very different—but uplifting—world, to better understand the difficulties and complexities faced by our ancestors, and to feel the joy of making and sharing good food. It would be wonderful if any reader wanted to try cooking one of Eliza Acton's recipes too!

## If you could share one piece of advice with other writers, what would it be?

Invest in a decent chair and move around for 10 minutes every hour. I wrecked my back writing my first novel, and I really wish I'd known about spine support and regular movement.

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