

# Inspiring Reads: *Jeanne: Seeds of Infinity*



Mary Bruton Sandifer, a member of AW Aquitaine, is the author of *Grapes and Old Stones*, the chronicle of her French-American family's adventures and adversities developing their 5th generation winemaking property in the Bordeaux area of France. She was born in Washington DC, where she earned her university degree from The Catholic University of America in Literature. After a peripatetic life in New York, London and Paris she now lives on a hilltop above the Dordogne River, where she works with her husband and children making wine.

**What was your inspiration for the book?** There were a few dovetailing events that thrust me into this novel: First, after decades of caring for the ancestral family home, the only place where our children had roots because we had moved so often - it was sold. We were heartbroken. Especially my eldest daughter, who was very close to her grandmother.

At the same time the subject of seed sovereignty came to my attention. Communicating publicly about officially "unrecognized" ancestral plant remedies came under legislation (for example, the concoction made from stinging nettles in your back yard to treat your plants). People have been making such remedies for hundreds of years, and sharing them, but quietly, and suddenly those who put such remedies in books or on line had become outlaws. I was shocked. After bitter fighting, the laws have eased, but it taught me that where high profits are at stake, nothing is actually off limits.

These diverse events led me to imagine the consequences that a brave botanist defying such laws would face, including the impact on their family, especially a daughter on the cusp of adulthood. I thought a lot about the Coming of Age phenomenon. How we react to crisis is an indicator of our character. But crisis can also etch and forge character by pushing us to take a stand, take risks, make sacrifices for what we truly believe in. Sometimes such a crucible forces

people to make difficult inner changes, which in turn steer them to react nobly rather than fearfully to a great challenge. And then sometimes these previously ordinary people become heroes, almost against their will. That is the case with Jeanne as she "comes of age."

## **How long did it take you to write the book?**

Because our wine business is demanding, I can only write in the winter months when the tasks ease up. In 2015 I declared a sort of "quarantine" so I could isolate for five hours every morning to concentrate. When you're writing a story, the first part is - imagining! Sitting with a notebook and cup of tea, visualizing and hearing the progression of your characters' lives... Even the most innocent interruption can steal a chapter if you haven't jotted it down.

That spring I gathered my family (ages 22 to 60) to tell them the story. I needed to know from diverse age groups and predilections if it was worth pursuing. They asked hard questions and were very enthusiastic, so I decided to plunge. It then took two winters to write a first draft I felt I could show to professionals. They pointed out things like "this character's motivation for that reaction is missing" or "the pacing in these chapters needs adjustment." They also said they loved it and one said she was so absorbed she missed her stop on the train. They said, "Go!"

I am a perfectionist, so it took two more winters to finish. A bit of valuable advice I once received: "Before you commit to a large writing project, be sure you really care about the subject. It usually takes longer than you estimate, so you need to be glad to stick with it." In fact, I loved my winter mornings with Jeanne so much, I was quite sad when they ended. I miss her company, her friends, her world.

**What kind of research do you do, and how long do you spend researching before beginning a book?** There is a writing adage, “write about what you know.” Most of the topics in *Jeanne* and the locale are part of my life. In that sense I’ve been researching for decades.

For example, the magic of a forest. Forests and their effects on our psyche have been part of my life since childhood. When I was sad or felt the victim of an injustice, I always went to the forest for solace. There is something eternal about the myriad, intertwined lives there, from the above-ground parts of trees and plants and the insect and animal life they harbor, to the root systems and the mycorrhizal relationships underground



that connect everything to everything. Scientists are now exploring how plants and trees have consciousness, something mystics have talked about for centuries. But they vibrate at a frequency different from ours, so it’s difficult to tune in. Be that as it may, most of us “feel better” after a walk in the forest. When I’m with trees I always feel a sense of eternity; that I and my problems are tiny but I am also part of something very big and grand.

One of the “characters” in the story is the family *château* with its generations of lives, spirits in the stones, art work, attachment, love... This was something we lived. Same for the farm and the vineyard. My research was daily life over decades of caring for an ancestral home, then adapting to a farm life, making wine.

But the book also pushed me to research areas that fascinated me - a healing herbal garden, for example. I was inspired by the gardens of the Middle Ages in monasteries and planted one here in the hope of nourishing pollinators and making a few curative remedies, if only of stinging nettles and horsetail or garlic etc. for treating our fruit trees. For more technical areas such as the backgrounds of the botanists and healers, I did informal study with a biologist and with a specialist in essential oils. I now dream of having my own alembic someday.

**What is the most important thing you want readers to take from your book?** That the natural world is our mother, our progenitor, the source of our life, of our physical nourishment and our psychic sustenance. It seems suicidal not to take care of what sustains us. My story is a call to wake up!

And for those many who are already awake, it is a gift to remind them that whenever we allow our minds to think higher thoughts and overcome our anger and fear, we get closer to the frequency of the old trees in the forest, those sentient beings who hold eternity in their roots and boughs. And when we feel that frequency, it is a subtle but powerful charm that unlocks the door little by little to bright, mysterious worlds.

**When did you start writing?** Very young, I made up stories to myself and my sister when we were upset and couldn’t fall asleep. The stories took us to happier places where our lives were fun and full of love and ease. Also, play acting was a big part of our childhood. Neighborhood kids gathered in the back yard and I told them the story we were going to act out, assigned roles and then we all improvised. When I think about that now, we had no experience of “acting.” Children are naturals at entering roles and riffing off their playmates. We got completely lost in our story for hours. Gosh, I wish I could go back now and observe us.

**What’s your favorite under-appreciated novel?** Perhaps *Et La Lumière Fut (And There Was Light)* by Jacques Lusseyran. A young boy in France with a happy childhood is blinded in an accident. At the age of 18 he joins the Resistance in Paris (1941) and becomes a leader of the youth corps. Eventually he’s imprisoned in a war camp and survives. It’s a fascinating inside look at idealistic youth resistance fighters who felt a freedom to risk their lives (without spouse and children) that their elders did not have, full of inspiring anecdotes of courage, strength, faith and hope.

**If you could tell your younger writing-self anything, what would it be?** “Don’t put down the pen.” There is a fine line between self-delusion and following your dreams. Until you’re experienced enough to be objective, don’t let anyone discourage you from trying. Like any craft, it takes hours of practice to find out if you have talent and hours to become skillful. One inkling of talent is the willingness to put in those hours, to show up, try, fail, learn, do better, accept constructive criticism, try again. It’s ok to not be the first to get to the finish line. Sometimes the tortoise does ok.

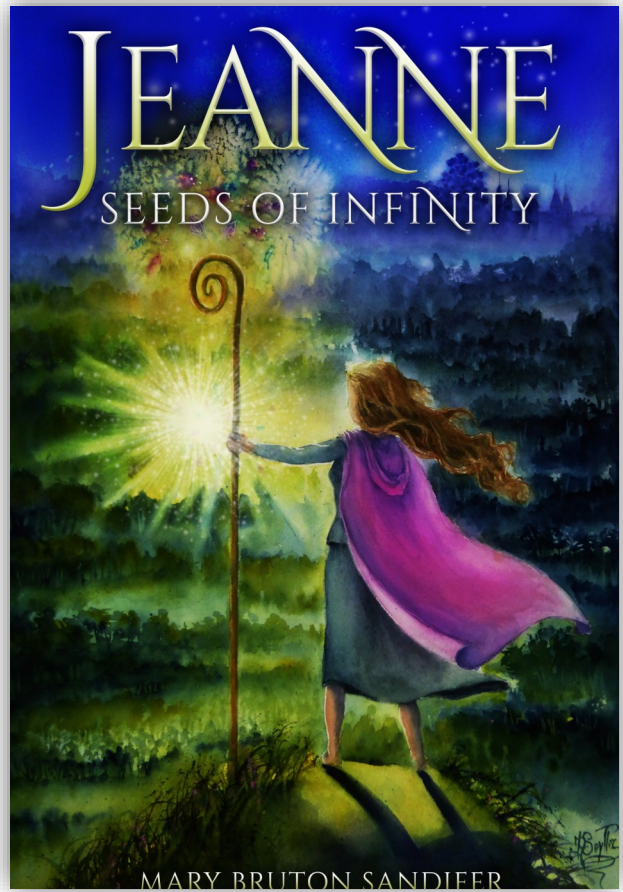
I am probably a tortoise but there is enormous pleasure and gratification to be still moving toward my goal.

**Short Summary of the book** *A distant province in France. A miracle hidden in an ancient forest. A young woman desperately seeking her ancestor's magical remedies, as an evil syndicate is hell bent on destroying them.*

Hours after Jeanne is sworn into nobility, her family suddenly loses everything - chateau, power, friends. Banned and impoverished, they move to a decrepit farmhouse near a mysterious forest, while Jeanne mourns her childhood dreams and all that meant *home*.

Until the forest reveals secrets. When elemental spirits propel Jeanne into her grandmother's resplendent realm of botany and secret medicinal remedies, she is called to fulfill her ancestor's promise: protect the miracle hidden in the forest.

But she is no match for the vile, parasitic netherworld of the enemy. Only the spirits can gird Jeanne with essential weapons: a glimpse into the Divine and a warrior's mastery of herself.



**Books presented in the Inspiring Reads feature are available for purchase via the FAWCO website in the [Books by Members](#) or [Books by Clubs](#) sections. Enjoy!**



# BUY SELL INVEST

**Your source for  
Real Estate  
Referrals and  
Service**

**CALL JANET DARROW**

**Keller Williams Coastal Properties  
DRE#01977602  
+1 562 243 53 17**