



TITLE: THE BOOKSHOP DETECTIVE

Author: Jan Ellis

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About this book:

When a ghost ship is spotted on the horizon one spring evening, bookseller Eleanor decides to investigate the myths and legends of Combemouth, the seaside town where she runs The Reading Room. As Eleanor digs deeper into the town's history, she becomes intrigued by a Victorian crime report and is determined to find out what happened to a boy at the centre of the court case.

As she begins to uncover the truth – aided by the vicar but somewhat stalled by the local librarian – she has a challenge on her own horizon. Daniel – her husband of six months – is determined that they give up their separate homes and find a new place together. But Eleanor adores her cottage by the sea and resists, guaranteeing that things turn a little frosty as the summer begins. A book launch, an exploding dress, some salsa-dancing pensioners and an ageing rock star make this a mystery with a difference.

About the Author:



Jan Ellis began writing fiction by accident in 2013. Until then, she had led a blameless life as a publisher, editor and historian of early modern Spain. She fell into fiction when a digital publisher approached her to write a history book, then made the mistake of mentioning women's fiction, which sounded much more fun.

Jan's stories have small-town settings with realistic characters who range in age from young teens to eighty-somethings. She is somewhat surprised to find herself a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association.

Available for events.

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Chapter 1: The Reading Room

It all began when Maureen saw the ghost ship.

"I'm telling you now, I saw it with my own eyes, as clear as day."

"But I thought you saw it at night," said Connie, pedantically.

"Twilight, actually. The sun was setting right behind it, which is why I saw its spidery outline so clearly."

"What's all this?" Eleanor, who had been gathering books off the shelves to make up a customer's order, now returned to the front of the bookshop to find her mother Connie chatting with their neighbour, Maureen.

Eleanor had been talked into giving Connie a part-time job and now her mother was half-heartedly tidying up greetings cards in between gossiping with her friend from Ye Olde Tea Shoppe across the high street. "Maureen's been making rum babas again and I think the fumes have gone to her brain."

Maureen, who had popped over to Eleanor's shop for a break from her customers, folded her arms under her substantial bosom and huffed. "You can mock if you like, Connie, but I know what I saw and what I heard."

"And what was that?"

"As I was telling your mother," she said, turning towards Eleanor, "I was up on the moor taking

Peanut for a walk when I heard this strange groaning sound."

"You hadn't trodden on the dog, had you?" Connie was really a cat person and thought her friend's Chihuahua was especially ridiculous.

"Ignore her, Maureen," said Eleanor, pulling up a chair and sitting beside her. "I want to know all about it."

"I was walking towards the headland when I heard a sound like timbers creaking or branches rubbing together, except there aren't any large trees along there, as you know." Eleanor nodded in agreement. "The wind had come up and was blowing in off the sea, which isn't unusual, but it was carrying this odd noise with it. Peanut had had a good scamper so we were heading back to the car, but there was something about the sound that made me stop and turn around." Maureen was pleased to see both women leaning in, apparently gripped by her story. "So I looked across to the horizon and there she was – as plain as the nose on your mother's face."

"There's no need for personal attacks." Connie leant back now, looking cross.

"Sorry dear," said Maureen, tartly. "It was the first comparison that came into my head."

"Okay ladies. I don't want any cat fights in my bookshop, thank you," said Eleanor. "Go on with your story, Maureen."

"There she was in the distance – a big wooden ship, just like the ones pirates have. And Johnny Depp."

Connie waggled a bookmark at her friend. "And how precisely could you see what kind of ship she was, at night and with your cataracts?"

"I had them done after Christmas and now I can see perfectly well. Doubt me if you will, Connie, but I know what I saw, and whether you choose to believe me or not is entirely up to you."

"What did your little dog do?" asked Eleanor.

"In what way?"

"Did she howl or anything? Aren't animals supposed to react to ghostly presences? I'm sure Bella would run off and hide if there was anything scary around. You're not much cop as a guard dog, are you?" Eleanor's Welsh spaniel, Bella, had wandered over and rested her head on her owner's lap.

Maureen's brow furrowed in concentration as she thought back to the event. "Now, it's funny you should say that, but Peanut did squeak a bit."

"Conclusive proof," said Connie, laughing. "If Peanut squeaked, it must have been a ghost ship."

Maureen pursed her lips. "I don't expect you to understand the ocean's mysteries, being a Londoner. You don't have the sea in your blood like I do."

Connie tried not to smile. "No, mine's full of Thames water," she said, patting her friend on the shoulder.

"Thanks for coffee." Maureen picked up her bag. "I'd best go back across the road and see how Anton is getting on with the cottage pies."

As she stood by the shop window watching their neighbour cross the street to the teashop, Connie turned to Eleanor. "All that 'sea in the blood' stuff is nonsense, of course. She's from the Midlands, which is as far from the sea as you can be in this country."

"So she's not local, then?"

"No!" Connie laughed. "I think she kissed a sailor

once in Weston-super-Mare and her late husband was a Devon man. But now she has Anton in her life . . ."

"Mother, really! You make it sound like they're up to no good when in fact he's young enough to be her grandson."

"Ever heard of cougars?"

Eleanor guffawed. "Yes, but I'm pretty sure Maureen is not about to pounce on Anton."

"I wouldn't be too sure. We may be ancient ladies but there's life in us old girls yet, you know." Connie winked and went to tidy up their coffee things.

"Spare me the gory details."

Eleanor stood at the cash desk and looked around her empire. The bookshop was empty apart from a Belgian couple in matching beige anoraks examining the postcard rack and an older gent looking at historical biographies. In the past, Eleanor would have fretted when the shop was this quiet but, in the six years she'd owned The Reading Room, she'd become familiar with the rhythms of the week.

Monday mornings were always deathly quiet, but she knew the following day would be better and trade would pick up even more on Wednesday, when the farmers' market was held in the town square. At the weekend, visitors came to Combemouth to walk along the prom, paddle in the sea and enjoy the town's seaside charm. Plenty of them also made a point of visiting Eleanor's shop to rummage through her enticing selection of books and pick up some postcards or a storybook to keep the kids quiet on the journey home.

While it was quiet, Eleanor decided to refresh

the shop window. Easter had been and gone and the bunnies and plastic daffodils decorating the space were beginning to look tired. It was time for a change.

Smiling to herself, she dashed back and forth between the shelves, going from science fiction and self-help to crime and romance, seemingly picking up books at random. When she'd finished the arrangement, she asked Connie to join her on the pavement to admire her work.

"What do you reckon, Mum?"

Her mother pursed her lips. "It's interesting, dear, but what's the theme?"

"I'll write out a title, then you'll see." Eleanor went into the office and found a blackboard and a piece of chalk. "This should do it," she said, slotting the board into its stand and placing it in the window. On it she had written "I Can't Remember the Title, But the Cover's Blue".

Connie chuckled. "That's very clever and I think it'll be helpful for those of us whose memories aren't as sharp as they were."

"That's an excellent point," said Eleanor, laughing. "Perhaps I'll do a red display next time."

Across the road, she could see Maureen and Anton giving her the thumbs up from the teashop, which now appeared to be full of shoppers eager for tea and a bun.

"We seem to have the Latvian vote." Eleanor waved back, smiling with satisfaction at a job well done.

* * *

Anton had appeared in town some months before, having journeyed from Latvia via London and

various music festivals where he'd had a great time until his money ran out.

Graham, who ran the hardware store a few doors down from the bookshop, had found Anton sleeping in his doorway one morning and was not best pleased. He asked the lad to move on, which he did during the day, but in the mornings when Graham came to open up the shop, there he'd be, curled up on the tiled floor in his thin sleeping bag, his boots and few belongings in a tatty carrier bag to one side.

They weren't used to homeless people pitching up in Combemouth, so no one knew quite what to do. Being a civilised and friendly bunch, the locals talked to Anton, gave him warm clothes and bought him hot drinks and Cornish pasties from the bakery. But everyone knew that "something had to be done", not least because a pale young man sitting on the pavement rather spoiled the jolly effect of Graham's brightly coloured plastic windmills. Eventually, Eleanor called the police who gave Anton a lift into the closest big town, where there was a shelter for the homeless.

After a week, Anton was back in Graham's doorway saying the shelter was full of "druggies and alkies" who shouted all night and he was too frightened to stay. Could he perhaps sleep in the doorway again in return for helping out in the shop? And so Graham reluctantly let him work there. He also lent Anton a tent and allowed him to camp out in the tiny garden at the back of the premises. At the end of a fortnight, the tent was abandoned and Anton was kipping in the back room and making himself useful in the hardware store. The only problem was that

Graham couldn't afford paid help and Anton needed to earn some sort of living.

A meeting was held at the community centre where the shopkeepers decided to share out Anton amongst themselves – everyone needed help for half a day or a day here or there. So, the young man ended up working in the high street shops and sleeping at Graham's place in return for a few hours spent cutting up roofing felt and selling bin bags. It was a solution that suited everyone, not least Maureen who was happy to have a smart young man's help in the teashop.

Chapter 2: A Surprising Supper

When Eleanor told her husband Daniel what Maureen had seen from the cliff top, she was surprised by his reaction. Rather than laughing at the ghostly tale, as she had expected him to, Dan seemed to take it quite seriously.

“Oh, that’ll be the *Santa Ana*. She’s occasionally seen at this time of year, though not normally so early in the evening.”

“Hang on a minute,” said Eleanor, pausing from dishing out the bangers and mash they were having for supper, “are you saying Maureen saw a real ship instead of an apparition?” Daniel was such a sensible individual that Eleanor found the idea of his believing in supernatural events quite surprising. Her husband was an architect, a man focused on measurements and straight lines; a man who thought deeply and could be undemonstrative. When they had first met some two years before, she was sure Dan didn’t like her. In fact, he liked her a great deal, but was struggling to cope with the fallout from a recent divorce.

Since then, Eleanor had discovered that Dan was sensitive and creative, which she guessed was what allowed him to believe in the unbelievable. They’d only been married for six months and Eleanor loved the fact that her husband constantly surprised her.

“I guess you could say she’s both ship and

apparition. There have been similar sightings on and off for years."

"Sorry – you're going to have to explain this to me."

Daniel took the plates from Eleanor and laid them on the kitchen table. "According to legend, the ship Maureen described was a Spanish ship that was blown off course by the weather. She was on her way home, became lost off Ireland and foundered on Bonnie Sands."

Eleanor frowned. "Foundered? You're talking to a landlubber here."

"She was stuck on the sandbanks that lie four miles off the bay. It may look calm and beautiful out there, but this part of the coast can be treacherous at low tide."

"Couldn't the captain wait until the tide came back in then sail away?"

Daniel topped up their wineglasses. "That's not how it works, unfortunately. As the tide goes out, a ship will keel over and be broken up by the incoming waves, which is what happened in this case, apparently."

"How awful," said Eleanor, in between mouthfuls of mashed potato. "How did the crew get off?"

"Ah, now that's the interesting part. There was a terrible storm followed by a dense fog that meant no one could go out to the *Santa Ana* until the morning. All night long the cries of the sailors – and some of the womenfolk they'd picked up in Ireland – could be heard. The water was coming in, you see. When the rescue boats did eventually make it over there at dawn, she was gone. Completely disappeared."

"Sailed away? Sunk?"

"No one knows. All that was left was the anchor

and chain, which had been ripped away from her side."

Eleanor looked thoughtful. "But if she'd been broken up, wouldn't there be debris?" She winced at the thought. "Bodies?"

"You'd expect there to be tons of debris given the circumstances, but everything was gone. Sails, cargo, people. Puff! She disappeared into the fog. And the story goes that those poor Spanish sailors can still be heard praying and calling out, *Madre mia, sálvame*. Save me." Daniel came around from the other side of the dining table, grasped Eleanor's shoulders from behind and whispered the words into her ear in a singsong voice.

"Stop it Dan." Eleanor shivered and pulled away. "That's creepy. To think all those Spanish sailors died at sea – and so close to where we're sitting now drinking Rioja."

Daniel shrugged, pushing away his plate. "Do you think so? For one thing, we don't know for sure they actually died and in a way I find it comforting to believe old sailors keep sailing on."

"Don't say that – I worry about you enough as it is." Eleanor's husband loved to sail and she did sometimes fret when he went off alone for hours on end. "To wander the oceans forever, never able to go home or see family and friends. It sounds awful. When I'm gone, I want to be properly gone, not pacing up and down the aisles of my shop, endlessly rearranging the non-fiction shelves and chasing up orders."

Dan smiled. "You do that anyway, darling."

"Exactly, but I can always stop for a cup of tea, which I doubt will be available in the afterlife. Ugh.

Fancy spending all eternity without tea. This is getting morbid. Put the kettle on, will you darling?"

When the dishes had been cleared up and they were settled on the sofa, Eleanor turned to Daniel. He'd been so unfazed by their earlier topic of conversation that she had to ask. "Have you ever seen a ghostly vessel?"

Daniel frowned, rubbing his chin. "You know, I'd completely forgotten about it until now, but I did see something once."

"Ooh, what happened?" Eleanor pulled up her legs and rested them over Daniel's lap. "I enjoy a spooky bedtime story."

"Let me think, now," he said, frowning. "I must have been about nine or ten years old and I was out in the boat with Dad when we saw what appeared to be a large ship in the distance."

Eleanor's father-in-law Malcolm was a retired engineer and mathematician and absolutely the last person she could imagine believing in creatures from the afterlife. "I'm stunned you and Malcolm saw a ghost ship and neither of you thought to mention it to me!"

"It was nearly forty years ago, El. And neither of us really knew what it was we'd seen."

"Fair enough. Go on."

Daniel dredged his memory for the details. "We'd been fishing for mackerel outside the bay, so I guess it was late spring. After a couple of hours, we had three nice fat ones for supper, so Dad decided to head back to shore. It was getting dark and we knew my mother worried if we stayed out too late – exactly as you do," he said, playfully squeezing Eleanor's toes in their stripy socks.

"Too right!" she said, wriggling around to face him.

"Anyway, that's when we saw a craft very like the one Maureen described. I remember the ship seemed immensely tall from where we sat on our little boat."

Eleanor sipped her tea thoughtfully. "Call me an old cynic, but couldn't what you saw have been a large yacht? Or a container ship?"

"What Dad and I saw definitely wasn't a regular boat – she had three or four massive sails and she wasn't displaying any lights, which was most irregular."

"Creepy!" Although it was evening, the curtains weren't yet drawn. Outside, the spring sky was turning deep blue as Eleanor tried to imagine the scene.

"I agree it's hard to rationalise. I guess you could say the *Santa Ana* is the Combemouth version of the Loch Ness Monster – no one has been able to prove the truth of her existence one way or the other. Personally, I think the vision is most probably all down to a trick of the light caused by the way the sun hits the horizon at this time of year. Or perhaps a play in the waves."

"I'm surprised I've never heard about this before." Eleanor was quiet for a moment, thinking about the shop. "Are there any books about this ghostly phenomenon?"

"I suppose there must be lots of books about ghosts, but whether there are any on the *Santa Ana* in particular, I couldn't say."

"I'd better find out and order some copies – they could be the focus of a great window display."

Daniel laughed. "Ghosts and ghouls? Isn't April a bit early to be thinking about Halloween?"

"It doesn't have to be about ghosts – we could have

something about pirates. They always go down well with the kids."

"And don't forget smugglers – folk like to hear about people bending the rules."

"You're right. What a shame there's no smuggling going on around here any more."

"That's what you think! Don't you remember the ship that foundered a few years back?"

Eleanor shook her head. "I guess it was before I moved to the area. What happened?"

"The hold broke open and huge containers littered the entire beach. Of course, being a tidy community we had it all cleaned up in no time."

"What was in the containers?"

"You name it: motor bikes, washing machines, footballs, bread machines . . ."

"Bread machines?"

"Yes, really good ones, too. And some rather smart trainers. Oops." Dan made a show of crossing one battered shoe behind the other. "Nothing to see here!"

"You're joking, right? You wouldn't take something that wasn't yours?"

"Salvaging an item or two from a beach isn't the same as helping yourself to something that's fallen off the back of a lorry in the high street. Things are different at the coast: it's a question of tradition." Daniel winked. "The first rule of the sea is: finders keepers. Second rule: ask me no questions and I'll tell thee no lies." He kissed his wife's cheek. "You didn't know you were married to a smuggler, did you?"

"Every day I learn something new about you."

"You don't know the half of it," said Daniel, with a smile.

Chapter 3: No Place Like Home

As Eleanor walked down the narrow staircase from the bedroom the next morning, she stopped and patted the rough white walls of her terraced cottage, the way you might the neck of a horse. It was a bit eccentric, perhaps, but no more eccentric than believing in ghost ships and she was convinced that houses absorbed traces of the people who had lived in them over the centuries.

Daniel raised an eyebrow when he saw his wife stroke the wall as she entered the kitchen. "Is there something wrong, darling?"

"Wrong? No, why should there be anything wrong?" Eleanor looked up smiling, her hand dropping down to her side as she stepped into the sunny room and poured herself a cup of tea from the pot Dan had prepared.

"I could have sworn I heard you say good morning to the wall."

"Not to the wall, silly." Eleanor grinned as she tipped muesli into a bowl. "I was saying good morning to the house. Don't you ever do that?"

Daniel shook his head slowly. "No, I honestly can't say that I have ever had a conversation with the masonry."

"It's not any old masonry – it's rock and rubble and

bits of horse hair and lime plaster. You should know that, Mr Architect."

"I'm fully aware of the vernacular building methods and materials, cheeky, but I have never felt moved to address a house, that's all."

"Ah, but you should. It's terribly rude not to."

"Sorry House."

Eleanor put her ear to the wall, listening. "House says you're forgiven. What about plants? Surely you speak to them?"

"Depends. I may speak to flowers but not veg."

"No wonder your carrots don't thrive."

"I wondered where I'd been going wrong. I certainly won't have anything worth entering in the summer festival yet again."

The social highlight of the year was the grandly named Summer Festival and Country Fair, an event organised by the vicar and a committee of fierce ladies in stout skirts. Although Combemouth was technically a town, it was the size and had the atmosphere of an overgrown village. Part of this was down to its position squeezed around a quiet bay on the North Devon coast.

The town never felt more rural than during the festival, which ran for a week in June. Most of the activity took place at the sea front, but the event kicked off with a country fair in the grounds of St Cuthbert's Church where delights included ferret racing, falconry displays and fruit- and vegetable-growing contests. The "Best in Show" categories for these were earnestly fought over by dedicated gardeners. Anyone was free to enter their produce, but the prizes tended to be won by the same few highflyers every year.

"Having lived here all your life, I'd have thought you'd be used to the disappointment of constant rejection by now," said Eleanor. "The allotment crowd are impossible to beat."

"A man can dream." Daniel smiled. "Seriously though, we do need to make a decision soon."

"We do?" Eleanor wandered over to the window to look out at the pretty courtyard garden that ran along the back of the house. It was too early in the year for anything much to be growing, though she had managed to fill pots with multicoloured tulips. Down by the end wall was a patch of lawn dotted with crocus and grape hyacinth, and pale pink hellebores were starting to bloom in a shady corner. "The strawberry plants are in and maybe I'll try courgettes in the raised bed again this year."

"I'm not talking about fruit and veg." Dan came up behind his wife, resting his chin on her shoulder as they watched blue tits and sparrows dart between the bird feeders. They had married in the autumn. Christmas had come and gone, it was now spring and they continued to live in their own, separate houses. "I mean coming to a decision about where we're going to live, Mrs Pearce."

Do we have to decide, thought Eleanor? Couldn't they stay the way they were? But she couldn't say what she thought. She knew she had to get her head around moving sooner rather than later. "Yes, of course. Absolutely. I couldn't agree more."

Daniel allowed himself to feel a flicker of hope. This was what he wanted to hear. "Seriously? Good, because I've lined up a couple more places for us to see."

"Great," said Eleanor, turning to kiss him on the cheek. "Can't wait."

Daniel watched as his wife opened the kitchen door and stepped out into the cool spring day, causing the birds to scatter in alarm. Dan couldn't help noticing that Eleanor hadn't bothered to ask him anything about the houses he'd found for them and his heart sank at the thought of another fruitless afternoon of house-hunting ahead.