

# Award-winning Scottish author's latest novel set in 1920s Shanghai

## Editor's note:

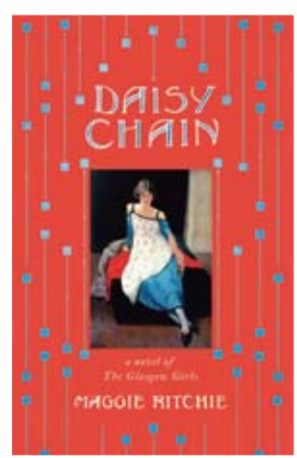
Two fellow Scots recently decided to immerse themselves in Chinese culture for different reasons: one to research a novel set in 1920's Shanghai, the other to explore the splendor of China on a bicycle with his faithful Border Collie dog, Talisker.



Maggie Ritchie

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Maggie Ritchie is a journalist who was awarded a grant to do her research for *Daisy Chain* in Shanghai. Her debut novel, *Paris Kiss* (2015), won the Curtis Brown Prize, was runner-up for the Sceptre Prize and longlisted for the Mslaxia First Novel Competition. The German edition has appeared on bestseller charts, and the novel has also been translated into Czech. Her second novel, *Looking for Evelyn*, (2017), was shortlisted for the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize for Best Published Novel 2018.



*Daisy Chain*, published by Two Roads, can be obtained here: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Daisy-Chain-novel-Glasgow-Girls/dp/1529366380>

## Will Scott

Don't judge a book by its cover," is a well-worn idiom first coined by 19th century novelist George Eliot. And this is certainly the case with Maggie Ritchie's latest novel *Daisy Chain*. The cover, designed by Scottish artist Dorothy Johnstone, looks rather quaint at first glance, and evokes a sense of innocence and naivety. Yet, turn inside and the award-winning author takes readers on a dark, mysterious, and cruel journey at times, with an unexpected twisted narrative.

*Daisy Chain* is a novel Eliot, Jane Austen or the Bronte sisters would have penned had they been born in 20th century Glasgow, brought up listening to the Bay City Rollers, and *The Clash*. Don't be fooled by the musical juxtaposition, the novel's main protagonists, Lily and Jeanie, like the rock and pop bands, couldn't be any more different. Lily, an only child of two loving middle-class parents, and Jeanie, one of ten children from a broken home in a struggling lower working-class environment. Class differences aside, the two girls bonded at school in spirit, friendship, and ambition: Lily to be an artist, Jeanie to be a dancer.

The author was inspired by real-life artist Eleanor Allen Moore, a pioneering woman painter who defied convention to make her way in a man's world before leaving Scotland for Shanghai in the 1920s.

"Eleanor Allen Moore was a talented artist from a group known as the Glasgow Girls," the Curtis Brown Prize winning author said. "The Glasgow Girls, who were students and teachers at Glasgow School of Art around the turn of the last century, achieved fame at the forefront of Scotland's Art Nouveau movement, only to sink into obscurity, their ground-breaking work shunned by the art world.

"They were rediscovered in the 1980s, and it was at an exhibition in 2010 that I first saw their work. I was swept away by their romantic book illustrations, embroidered panels, and striking paintings among many other things. Eleanor Allen Moore's self-portrait was chosen for the exhibition poster, which caught my eye. Bright eyed and full of spirit, I had to find out more about her, and wasn't disappointed. Her amazing life inspired my heroine who, like the real artist, attended Glasgow School of Art before traveling to China with her husband, a doctor, and their daughter."

Following the success of her first two novels, *Paris Kiss* and *Looking for Evelyn*, the writer was awarded a Society of Author's grant to research her third book, and set off, embarking on an adventure to research the artist's exotic life in the busy metropolis, and follow in her famous footsteps.



"Chinese children" by artist Eleanor Allen Moore

"Eleanor and her husband, Dr Robert Cecil Robertson, and their infant daughter Ailsa sailed to Shanghai in 1925 for Robert to take up an appointment in Public Health," Ritchie said. "To begin with it was a difficult and dangerous time as there were serious anti-foreigner riots. Eleanor's husband was even abducted once but managed to escape from the kidnappers' car with a bullet hole through his coat. But when things settled down it was possible for them to explore the Yangtze Delta region in their houseboat and visit the ancient walled cities of Soochow (Suzhou) and Wusih (Wuxi).

"I stayed in the (former) French Concession, just off Huaihai Road — Avenue Joffre in Eleanor's time — and was bowled over by the European style buildings and the plane tree-lined boulevards. They reminded me of Paris and Madrid. Like Eleanor, I admired the shops along Nanjing Road E., which was known as Bubbling Well Road, and the department stores she would have frequented, such as Sincere and Wing On's. I spent days wandering the streets, walking in Eleanor's footsteps, peering into the crowded alleys and seeing the sights, sounds, and smells that would have become familiar to her.

"The first sight Eleanor would have been greeted with upon arrival after six weeks on a Glasgow steamer, was the imposing grandeur of the trading houses, banks, and grand hotels of the Bund. The opposite bank of the Huangpu River fascinated me and the curve

of immaculately preserved Beaux Arts buildings. This was where wealthy, pleasure-seeking foreign taipans carried out their business before relaxing at the Long Bar in the Shanghai Club, ordering crates of champagne by the dozen. They and their wives and mistresses amused themselves with a social whirl of glittering balls, betting on the thoroughbreds at Shanghai Race Club, and dancing at swanky nightspots where jazz bands played through the night."

Shanghai became known as "The Paris of the East," and the New York of the West," during the glamorous 1920s and 1930s. But at the same time, the metropolis also had a dark, seedy side. It was once a dangerous place, with a criminal underbelly run by warlords and vicious gangs.

"Much like Glasgow at the time, there was a huge disparity between the rich merchants and the poor who toiled long hours for pitiful wages in the factories, pulled rickshaws, and served the foreigners, and the wealthy Chinese with their Westernized first names, their wives and daughters dressed in the latest Paris fashions and hair marcelled and bobbed," the 57-year-old author said.

"As I marveled at Frenchtown's mock Tudor villas, and at the luxurious Art Deco hotels, I began to understand why Shanghai in 1921 saw the birth of the Communist Party of China, just as Glasgow's popular protests and radicalism in the same period led it to become known as 'Red Clydeside.'



Eleanor Allen Moore self-portrait



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Maggie Ritchie

"Despite this background of unrest, daringly, Eleanor braved the walls of Shanghai's Chinese old town, dashing off street scenes of people playing cards or Mahjong over green tea, as they still do in the parks, and *lilongs* I wandered through. She also ventured into the notorious opium dens to sketch those smoking languidly inside.

"Eleanor painted the landscapes and townscapes they sailed to, so it was a delight to travel to Suzhou, by bullet train not boat, and see these quaint canals, pagodas, and arched bridges for myself. I also visited Hangzhou, a UNESCO world heritage site and was taken with the grey-blue expanse of West Lake and heavenly Phoenix Mountain.

"I was so glad I had the opportunity to experience this and gain insights into 1920s Shanghai with the help of Patrick Cranley of Historic Shanghai, and John D Van Fleet from the Royal Asiatic Society of Shanghai. Patrick told me all about the life of foreign women like Eleanor, who with their cars, domestic staff, amahs, chauffeurs and gardeners, enjoyed great freedom from household chores and child-minding. But unlike other expatriate wives, Eleanor used this time to observe the world around her and paint it.

"Eleanor's independent spirit and courage were typical of the colourful Glasgow Girls, who clashed with respectable society, and I brought elements of their strong characters into my novel, which spans a period of dramatic change from 1909 to 1929 and moves between Kirkcudbright in southern Scotland, Glasgow and Shanghai.

"There are many more amazing Glasgow Girls, each of them breaking new ground in their own inimitable style and living life as they wanted. I hope I have managed to capture their courage and spirit of adventure in my book, and would love it if their art could be admired once more, and if more people could discover the charms of old Shanghai."

# Talisker's Travels, One Man and his Dog, a Chinese Odyssey

## Will Scott

SCOTLAND is well renowned throughout the globe for its famous explorers and travellers. Dr David Livingstone, George Forest, and the poet Robbie Burns are just three of the nation's more illustrious adventurers and pioneers. So, it came as no surprise to the family and friends of Adam Hyslop - a Burns fan who grew up in the poet's final resting place of Dumfries - when he decided to take a sabbatical from his job in data analytics to explore the splendour of China with his faithful Border Collie, Talisker — named after a single malt Scotch whisky distilled on the Isle of Skye.

"I worked in an office job for nearly 20 years and decided that I needed a break and wanted to explore China in a more rudimentary, hands on way," said Hyslop, who has spent nine of his 15 years in Asia living in Shanghai. "Longer-term travel or sustained travel is something I've wanted to do for a number of years and I finally had the opportunity to take a career break to try."

The Scot's preparation was meticulous. After careful research, an e-bike was chosen on account of the trailer needed to carry his canine pal through some brutal mountainous terrain. And, after several test runs around Shanghai, the 42-year-old office worker set off from his Shanghai home to embark on 1,200 kilometers bike ride deep into the unspoiled rural Chinese hinterlands.

It sounds like a Boy's Own story adventure, and it was to a certain extent, but certainly not as perilous as fellow countryman Forest. The 19th century explorer narrowly escaped with his life while on a plant collecting expedition in Yunnan Province near the Tibetan border in 1905. Politics at that time in China was complicated and all foreigners were under the suspicion of the Lamas. Fortunately, local indigenous people disguised Forest as a Tibetan and he escaped through the jungle to safety.

Hyslop's journey wasn't as fraught or dangerous but it certainly wasn't without incident. One day, while



Adam pointing at Daming Mountain, Zhejiang.

enjoying the beautiful scenery of a nature reserve, he lost his footing and tumbled 15 feet down onto some rocks, resulting in bruised ribs and gashes on his shin, hands, and backside. The setback didn't unnerve him, thankfully, and after a couple of days he was back in the saddle and on his way.

"We must adventure into the unknown from time to time to know we are alive," said the Scot. "I wasn't totally sure if Talisker would react well to the trailer and I'd only booked the first few nights' accommodation because I was unsure of what lay ahead.

"I knew China was beautiful but was pleasantly surprised at how diverse the scenery, culture, and history is, and the amount to do and see that's on offer. I've had many comments from friends that they had no idea China had so much varied beauty and sightseeing.

"Getting into the lower tiers and villages was an eye opener; to see how much of the land is cultivated, and how many people work in agriculture. Basic tools and methods are still used in the fields, yet at the same time, I could buy items in the village shop through mobile payment.

"The people were great, urging me on as I passed by, and many people were very kind and offered help in terms of food, accommodation, and

local advice on things to see and keep the route moving forward."

The six-week odyssey saw one man and his dog travel across five provinces, taking in some breathtaking sites.

"It was an amazing journey and Talisker had just as much fun," Hyslop said. "Talisker's instinct was always to run, so I had to make sure he was out of the trailer and running as much as possible.

"He did get sore feet about 10 days into the trip, so my wife, Valeria, bought him shoes to help protect his feet after a few days of rest. He got through several sets of shoes throughout the trip.

"Valeria, my wife, used the high-speed rail network to come out and visit me on several parts of the trip, which was great so we could enjoy some of those times together. However, I was really glad I pushed to make it happen and just got pedalling and enjoyed experiencing the unknown.

Most memorable sights included Mount Sanqing, a World UNESCO site of Outstanding Universal Value; the sacred Taoist mountain just north of Yushan in Jiangxi Province, where one man and his dog experienced an exhilarating cable car ride with stunning views of the surrounding National Park of forest, waterfalls, lakes, and springs.

"If I had to pick one highlight it would be Mount Sanqing. My main objectives were to go to as many mountain areas and UNESCO sites as possible," Hyslop said. "I had one goal in mind to reach Mount Wuyi site and go via Mount Huangshan.

As for the future, Scotland's latest adventurer plans to get back in the saddle for part two of his existential journey into the unknown. Dr Livingstone once said, "It was easier to travel than to write about it." But maybe the final word should be left to American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said, "It's not about the destination, it's about the journey."

Will Scott is a Shanghai-based journalist and author of "Pavel Is a Geordie."



Adam and Talisker take time out to rest from their arduous journey through the Chinese hinterlands.