

Whatever happened to beloved French literary adventurer Angélique?

Samantha David sets out to solve the mystery of the popular novels of historical derring-do

The Angélique series of historical novels took the world by storm, topping the best-seller lists, being translated in to 32 languages, and selling millions of copies worldwide.

Fans were entranced, eagerly awaiting each new instalment of the saga – but then the books suddenly stopped and Angélique disappeared.

What happened? Not just to the author, but to Angélique herself? Some fans know more than others.

The series was written by Anne Golon, and her daughter Nadine said the strong, adventurous heroine's character was very similar to her mother's. "My mother was born in Toulon in 1921. Her father was a marine officer. She was brought up in Cherbourg, and the family went to live in Versailles when she was 16, by which time she had already started earning money by writing articles for magazines."

Her real name was Simone Changeux, but she used various pseudonyms including 'Joëlle Danterne'. She was a compulsive writer, producing her first story when she was just six years old.

She also adored history and always wrote period fiction, producing several successful historical adventure novels in her teens and early 20s.

During the war she started writing screenplays but found it hard to break into cinema, so when she won a literary prize she used the money to travel to Brazzaville in the Congo. "Setting off to Africa all on her own was a very Angélique thing to do," said Nadine. "But that was my mother; brave, adventurous, romantic."

While in Africa, she met Russian émigré Vsevolod Sergeevich Goloubinoff, the son of an ex-diplomat of Imperial Russia.

Born in 1903, he was an adventurer, explorer, and geochemist, had written various books using the pseudonym Serge Golon, and was in Africa searching for gold.

"My father was a bit like Indiana Jones or Marco Polo. After the Russian revolution, he arrived in France alone at the age of 17, and studied geology and mineralogy before setting off on his first geological mission."

For Angélique fans, it is easy to imagine how the romance between two kindred spirits leapt into flames. The pair married in 1947, in Pointe-Noire, and when they returned to France in 1952, as he was unemployed she supported them both by writing articles.

To make ends meet, she helped him write about his travels and experiments and together, as Anne et Serge Golon, they wrote a book about Serge's encounters with wild animals called *Le Coeur des Bêtes Sauvages*, which was published in 1954 in France and Germany to critical and commercial success.

When Anne started writing the first Angélique book, Serge used his experience to research background material. "He didn't write the books," said Nadine. "My father was a scientist, although he took up painting in 1960. At that time he invented things, and to help my mother he researched the slave trade, and the history of travel during the 17th century.

"My father had lived in Persia, and had seen slave markets and harems first-hand, so his anecdotes inspired the plots in the books, as did his knowledge of the history of science."

Angélique's story marches arm-in-arm with 17th century French history.

She comes from a family of impoverished minor aristocrats, and while still in her teens, reluctantly agrees to an arranged marriage with Count Joffrey de Peyrac, a renaissance man with a vast knowledge of music, science, poetry, philosophy and maths.

Eventually Angélique falls deeply in love with her husband, seduced as much by his intellect as by Joffrey de Peyrac's physical appeal. The character, according to Nadine, was very much based on her father, as was the transcending love affair between the fictional couple, who were repeatedly separated throughout the books but always managed to find one another again.

"The passionate relationship between Angélique and Joffrey de Peyrac was very much a reflection of my parents' relationship," said Nadine. "Theirs was a massive love affair. He died in Quebec in 1972 at the age of 69. It was awful for my mother. So if readers want to know – is a love like Angélique's possible? I can tell them yes, it is!

"My mother spun accurate historical facts together with a fantastical plot and bound it all together with her own experience of an overwhelming, passionate love. Perhaps that was what lifted the books out of the ordinary."

The first book was published in Germany in 1956, and then in France the following year and very quickly became a hit. The publishers had insisted on hav-



Anne Golon at a book signing. Below, left, Golon at the height of her popularity

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ing a man's name on the cover, so the books were originally attributed to 'Serge et Anne Golon', and later on to 'Sergeanne Golon' before finally being solely attributed to Anne Golon.

"My mother was always the sole author of all the novels," said Nadine. "Including my father's name was just sexist nonsense of the period.

"My father only contributed research. But people at that time weren't ready to believe a female author could write about war, science, geography and history."

In the novels, Angélique's marital bliss is short lived; jealous of their popularity, King Louis VIX has Joffrey de Peyrac burned at the stake (neither the reader nor Angélique know that he survived).

Subsequently, she joins a gang of bandits in the countryside, runs a chocolate shop, marries her aristocratic but heartless cousin and is received at the court of the Sun King (Louis XIV), and has dealings with the infamous poisoner Catherine Deshayes, aka La Voisin.

She also, at various times, takes refuge at the Court of Miracles (the Parisian slums in which beggars who are 'cripples' by day are miraculously healed every night), becomes a tavern keeper, has a relationship with a police officer, winds up with a family of Huguenots, and when she learns that her first husband (the second had died in battle by this point) survived the stake, sets sail to find him – only to be captured by pirates and sold into a harem from which she escapes with the aid of another slave.

The historical background is accurate, the adventures breathtakingly exciting, the heroine tenacious, indomitable and always escaping disaster at the last minute.

She always survives to fight another day



and, despite multiple pregnancies, she retains all her beauty and sex-appeal.

Eventually reunited with her first husband Joffrey de Peyrac, the series shifts to the New World, but then suddenly, much to the dismay of the fans who had been eagerly reading the books, gasping in anticipation of the next instalment, they came to a complete stop.

After 10 blockbusters (11 if you buy the first volume in two parts) the books stopped appearing in English. After the 10th book, *Angélique and the Ghosts* aka *Angélique and the Conspiracy of Shadows* was published in 1976, fans were left hanging. How would the story end?

Three more volumes were published in French: *Angélique in Quebec*; *Angélique, the Road of Hope*; and *The Victory of Angélique*, but they were never translated into English. Two more volumes – the final two of the series – were never published at all.

The explanation is as old as the hills – Angélique was so popular and so financially successful that the sharks had gathered and were biting hard.

Despite being one of the world's most successful novelists, as various agencies, editors and publishers grabbed an ever increasing share of the profits, by the late 80s Anne Golon was having trouble making ends meet.

Her husband had died in 1972, leaving her with four children to support and suddenly she was receiving less and less royalties from her books and almost nothing from the films, until in the 90s she was poverty-stricken.

"It happened to so many writers at that time, they were tricked into signing illegal contracts. Many publishers were unscrupulous, and stole writing," said