

Remembering Jan Mark

Been meaning to write all year — hopelessly swamped by deadlines, always put letters aside to answer properly and end up with pathetic excuses at Christmas.

I'll actually be passing over you en route to NZ in March, for the Arts Festival in Wellington. Not quite within spitting distance but closer than usual. Looks as if it's going to be a long dark winter here so it'll be good to get away for a southern autumn and come home to a northern spring.

So Jan Mark wrote to me at Christmas. The image on the card (produced by the Bodleian Library) was of a sumptuous array of spines of nineteenth century Christmas titles for children. I planned to write back and say: 'Don't just pass by in the sky! Why don't you drop in?' Now it's too late.

It seems fitting that there was an aeroplane in Jan Mark's last note to me, because when I first encountered her it was through the book *Thunder and Lightnings*. Given that the Lightnings of the title are a type of bomber-plane, this is not the sort of book I would normally pick up. However, in 1977, when I was living in England for a few months, I happened to hear about some author's first novel recently winning the Carnegie Medal. It was this that sent me to get a copy of *Thunder and Lightnings* from my local Clapham library.

I distinctly remember the experience of reading that book. I remember how I was captured by the author's voice, and the voices of her characters. I remember being struck by the sharpness of the writer's eye. (Without even checking the novel I remember, nearly thirty years later, a description of how two boys *sidled like Ancient Egyptians* around the wall of a room, in order to avoid treading on the carpet and getting into trouble with a house-proud mother.)

At this particular time, I should maybe explain, my own first novel for children had begun its long and weary circle of the Australian publishing houses. Yet although I had started writing for young readers, my reading in the genre was still limited to my

childhood favourites, plus a couple of newer titles such as Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* and *The Mouse and His Child*, by Russell Hoban. *Thunder and Lightnings* was the first contemporary *realist* children's book that I read, and I felt as if it opened a new pathway into the world of writing for young people.

On reflection, I think what was so revolutionary about the novel was the way in which there was no adventure or mystery or quest. There wasn't even much of a plot. *Thunder and Lightnings* is a story about the growth of a friendship between two misfits — Andrew (a newcomer to rural Norfolk) and the oddball Victor, who has a passion for a particular type of fighter-plane which is soon to be phased out.

Another radical thing about this story is the way it ends. On the last page, Victor and Andrew simply watch an aeroplane, which may be 'the last Lightning of all' take off. Victor grins, and says 'What a way to go out, eh? *Whaaaaaaaam!*'

If there is no real climax, there is even less sense of closure. There is no feeling of the author tying the characters' lives up in a neat bow. This indeed is the point in this mode of writing which mimics life in all its vivid ordinariness. Asked in a recent interview about the open ending which she often employs in her novels, Jan Mark replied:

'I used to be very unpopular with that until people got used to it. I think it's partially the way I approach my characters. I'm intervening in somebody's life — it may be only two days, it may be months or a couple of years — but presumably they will go on after I've finished with them, as they were living before I got hold of them'.¹

Perhaps you expect me to say that, on reading *Thunder and Lightnings*, I wrote forthwith to the author and she invited me to meet her, and so a wonderful friendship began. But of course that didn't happen. After twelve months or so in England and Greece, I returned to Australia, where I re-wrote my own first book and a few others. Over the years, however, I read every book I could find by Jan Mark.

These included *Under the Autumn Garden* (1977), which followed in the realist tradition of the author's first book, and then the speculative fiction of *The Ennead* (1978) and *Divide and Rule* (1979). As well as the steady stream of novels, there were

short stories in anthologies such as *Nothing to be Afraid of* (1981) and *Feet* (1983). Rather than seeing stories as some kind of makeweight mode, Jan Mark maintained that she preferred writing them. (Her understanding of this challenging genre would later be put to good use, when she was invited to edit *The Oxford Book of Children's Stories*.)

If Mark's reputation still needed any boost, this was provided by a second Carnegie Medal, awarded in 1983 for the novel *Handles*. I recently read that Jan (who was born during the war) 'spent an unsettled childhood in and around London', and did not go to school until she was eight.² This is perhaps why a number of her characters have to deal with some kind of uprooting or dislocation. Yet they always find some place and some role for themselves. In *Handles* (one of the great comic anti-pastorals), Erica is sent to stay with ghastly relatives in the country, but finds an unlikely mateship with some young men in a motorbike repair shop. And in *Trouble Half-Way* (1985) the worrywort heroine Amy loses her debilitating sense of anxiety when she goes on an odyssey in a truck with her stepfather. Their relationship develops as they deliver gimcrack furniture to suburban housing estates in the land that the English call 'Up North'. (Incidentally, Mark's passion for planes and trucks and motorbikes may seem at odds with the fact that she did not drive a car, and used a pen and a Smith Corona instead of a computer.)

In 1987, I felt as if I had struck gold one day when I discovered, in the adult shelves of a bookshop, a new Jan Mark novel titled *Zeno Was Here*. This is the book I grabbed and re-read when the news came in January that Jan had suddenly and unexpectedly died of meningitis-related septicaemia. I cannot say it is my favourite Mark novel, because I have three or four Jan Mark favourites, but it is probably the book that tells me more about Jan herself than any of the others. No, it is not about cats or rats or gardening or red wine or archaeology. However, through the dialogue of an alter ego novelist named Geneva, the author manages to slip in some of her theory about the writing of fiction. (Over the years, Jan Mark taught a number of creative writing courses. *First, isolate the loony*, was her advice to fellow teachers.³)

I don't know why there is only one adult novel among the eighty-odd books of Jan Mark's oeuvre, but I suspect it was because the publishing world and the reading public had her typecast as a children's writer. (Perhaps that early Carnegie Medal was a mixed blessing.) If Mark's formidable talent had been let loose in adult literature, it is unlikely that she would have had to scabble so hard for a living. Her friends David Fickling, Phillip Pullman and Jon Appleton, in a moving obituary for the *Guardian*, note that:

Like many writers of children's books [Jan] found herself obliged to write fast and publish widely, and never found the reputation that would have enabled her to claim the advances, and take the time, expected as a matter of course by those whose books are read by adults.

Yet though for many years the need to support a household singlehanded was a spur to produce starter readers as well as novels, Jan Mark gave every writing task her full commitment.

In late 1988, when I was invited to talk at a summer school at Sydney University, I was excited to discover that Jan Mark was scheduled to speak at the same event. Spotting a gap in the program of a few days between her two sessions, I dared write to Jan before she arrived in Australia, and invite her to stay with me in the Blue Mountains. (I was careful to hedge this blind date with the suggestion that she was welcome to meet me before making up her mind; which she sensibly did.)

I remember that it was about midday when I went to collect Jan from Blackheath station. By the time we got home, a neighbour had arrived unexpectedly with a few bottles of beer. I felt that maybe my guest might have liked to lick the butter off her paws before settling in to a booze-up, but she remarked, 'Do you know, I have been in this country a week and this is the first time I have been offered a beer!' Over the next few days there was more beer, and wine, and whisky, as well as lots of talking.

I have to say that more of the talking was about art than about writing. My partner, Ken Searle, was in the process of finishing a series of paintings of Sydney's western suburbs, and Jan — who had a diploma in design from Canterbury College of Art, where she had studied sculpture and stone-carving — was one of those rare writers

who knows how to look at pictures. (Although Mark produced a number of picture books during her career, she saw her role to be that of telling the story in words. 'I can draw but not illustrate,' she said.⁴ This is an important distinction.)

When I think of Jan Mark talking during those days and nights in the Blue Mountains, I always think of her fiercely intelligent eyes blazing out from behind her English-sheepdog fringe. And yet, although Jan took no prisoners in her attitudes to politicians and publishers, I remember too how genuinely interested she seemed in chatting with my twelve-year-old stepdaughter, who was not a bookish child. And indeed Jan talked to us about her own children, Alex and Isobel, who were then teenagers.

After returning to England, Jan published some of her perceptions of Australia and the Australian children's literature scene in an article for the *Times Educational Supplement*. She was acute enough to realise that to read English fiction in another country is often to read a different book from the one intended by the author. I remember her comment that it was odd to be in a place where the natural sympathies lay with Mr McGregor rather than with Peter Rabbit.

After that visit, Jan and I exchanged annual Christmas letters but, as time went on, the correspondence lapsed. I still bought her books when I could, although not many of them seemed to be distributed here. I managed, however, to get *The Hillingdon Fox* (1991), a reflection on the Falklands conflict and the first Gulf War, and also the brilliantly titled *God's Story* (1995). This retelling of certain episodes from the Torah, the Old Testament and the Koran weaves together common threads from the Abrahamic tradition. It should be on the shelf of every school reference library.

It was close to Christmas 2002 when I wrote to Jan again. She was still at the same address, in what she called 'the people's republic of East Oxford'. I was in Rome, and planning a visit to England. Jan sent me a copy of *The Eclipse of the Century* (1999), and an invitation to come and stay.

By the time I arrived, it was the middle of February 2003. That week, as Hans Blix pleaded for more time, Heathrow was surrounded by a cordon of soldiers with rocket launchers and Tony Blair began hysterically trying to instill the spirit of the Blitz into a populace that just wanted to keep the peace. Jan was at her most acerbic: ‘We do not vote for a Labour government, to have it take us into war.’

This was a gloomy time in the history of the world, and it seemed to both of us that children's literature — or at least children's publishing — was not as healthy as it had been when we had last met. That, of course, had been before the industry was struck by the double whammy of economic rationalism and the Potter phenomenon. Jan complained of the encouragement of ‘*hooptedoodle*’⁵ (as she characterised the over-written fantasies that she was constantly sent for review) and of publishers not wanting a book unless it was going to be part of a trilogy. She also spoke of them dumping authors of the stature of Katherine Paterson off their backlists.

Something of the same sentiments were expressed in the interview published last year in the Irish literary magazine, INIS. In response to the question, ‘*Has the recent boom in children's books been a good thing?*’ Mark replied:

The public don't rush out to buy books unless they're hyped. Carnegie winners are ignored. A lot of good books go out of print because the publishers are pushing a book they think will sell. Everyone is sacrificed for that one book to become a bestseller.

The author also noted that: ‘What I really hate about fantasy [is that] it's utterly humourless. You can be heroic or tragic or evil, but you can never be ridiculous — yet that is the human condition.’

Although Jan Mark's most recent novels show a return to the speculative fiction of her early period, this is not fantasy in the broomstick-and-sorcery mode. In novels such as *Useful Idiots* (2004) and *Riding Tycho* (2005), Mark posits other worlds, or alternative histories, as a way of commenting on contemporary society and politics. These are the kind of books which, in our current dumbed-down climate, are often dismissed as being too difficult for young people. (In contrast with this attitude, Mark maintained that what she called ‘a full reader’ was ‘up to anything’.)

At the end of *Zeno Was Here*, Jan Mark dispenses with a character in a way that completely pulls the rug out from under the reader. That was how I felt in January, when I heard that Jan had died. I still hadn't packed away the Christmas cards and so I read her message over and over. *'Looks as if it's going to be a long dark winter here so it'll be good to get away for a southern autumn and come home to a northern spring.'* Somehow these words, looking as they did into the future, made it impossible that she was dead.

As I write this now, it is already autumn here, and spring is no doubt starting in the people's republic of Oxford. In keeping with Jan Mark's fondness for open endings, I like to think that she and her characters and their stories will go on and on, just as they were living before I encountered them.

¹ Audrey Baker, 'Chatting with Jan Mark', INIS, Autumn 2005, issue 13

² Nicholas Tucker, Jan Mark, Obituary, *The Independent*, 18 January 2006

³ David Fickling, Philip Pullman and Jon Appleton, Jan Mark, Obituary, *The Guardian*, 24 January 2006

⁴ Audrey Baker, 'Chatting with Jan Mark', INIS, Autumn 2005, issue 13

⁵ *A word defined as 'inflammation of the story caused by infectious or toxic writing'*. See David Fickling et al.