



Authorgraph No.25: Jan Mark

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Jan Mark interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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Jan Mark's first novel **Thunder and Lightnings** was published in 1976, winning both the Penguin/Guardian competition and the Carnegie Medal. In the intervening eight years her stature amongst English writers for children has grown with each new publication. Her latest novel **Handles** finds her in most 'English' vein and returning to the Norfolk village setting of her first book. A measure of her stature is her nomination this year as the British entry for the international Hans Andersen award. For the past eighteen months she has been attached to Oxford Polytechnic's Education Department, on an Arts Council Writer's Fellowship.

Few writers are as coherent as Jan Mark when talking about their intentions as a writer or more trenchant in their views about children as writers.

She makes clear distinctions about her work as a short story writer - a form she clearly enjoys returning to (**Nothing to Be Afraid of, Hairs in the Palm of the Hand, Feet**): what she calls her 'observational' novels (**Thunder and Lightnings, Under the Autumn Garden, Handles**), and the 'heavies'. her 'speculative' novels (**The Ennead, Divide and Rule, Aquarius**).

These distinctions depend for her much more upon the different demands of the short story and the novel rather than on the audience she's writing for - children or adults:

'Novels are linear but short stories aren't. The best analogy is the movie. A film is made up of thousands of still frames and if you isolate one frame, as with a paragraph in a novel, you learn very little. In a short story you're stopping the movie at one frame, isolating a particular moment, the seminal moment at which development begins to happen. It may be the moment when someone is jolted out of inertia and it's your job as a writer to justify the moment. In 'A Little Misunderstanding' (**Feet**), I deliberately chose that title because the boy entirely misconceived the situation and it's only at the very end that he realises what he's let himself in for. So in a short story, you've got to know the moment towards which you're working... the end is in the beginning.'

Moving on to discuss her first two novels and the latest **Handles**, Jan used a different analogy - that of the artist 'working from life'. **Handles** is a 'look at a relationship', a developing relationship - that between the eleven-year-old, bike-mad Erica and 'Elsie' Wainwright, the ex-teacher who runs a failing motor-cycle repair business:

'It's very episodic and, like **Thunder and Lightnings**, it's got no plot. It's a love-story - Erica is in love with 'Elsie'. It's the beginning of a sexual attraction which she doesn't understand.

I doubt if many children would realise that or many adults - they're so conditioned to thinking that eleven-year-olds couldn't feel like that. Taken one way it's a very depressing book - it's certainly not light. But I'm not trying to make any points. I'm observing day-to-day situations. An adult would speculate - that Erica's probably not going to realise her dream and become a mechanic or that, 'Elsie's' business will fail. I don't think a child would pick up the

implications...?

The novels in which she 'works from life' are all about children and the narrative is shaped by the child's perception of the world. They also impose their own demands on the writer:

'You owe it to the audience to provide a story. Children are not experienced in the way that adults are. They haven't got the equipment so you have to give them something more concrete to work on. There has to be something there other than hints, clues, allusions which you can expect a more experienced reader to pick up (as in **Aquarius**). I like writing about children. I don't want always to be writing about children...'

So what about the novels, the three 'heavies', which are not 'about children'? 'In them, I'm setting up situations and inviting the reader to explore the situation along with the writer. They're for a sophisticated reader and they're deliberately written to discourage an unsophisticated reader.

Critics picked up that the opening of **Aquarius** was 'convoluted'. It's meant to be. I'm not working from life, I'm inventing an environment. So they're more abstract. Through the situations I'm speculating about manipulation - emotional, religious, political. Isaac, Harris and Viner are all different developments of the same basic pattern - the survivor. Harris (**Divide and Rule**), who is a liberal, SDP, **Guardian** reader in an extreme and bigoted society, is the least successful and probably the most sympathetic of the three.

Aquarius is the only time I've played a consciously, literary trick. Readers excuse Viner's behaviour because they think he's the hero. In fact, he's totally self-interested, too intelligent to be the hero. He's a manipulator and completely ruthless. But we accept certain kinds of behaviour because we're conditioned to accept them.'

It was clearly **Aquarius** which she felt least happy about appearing under a 'children's' imprint:

'They are very literary and I don't like being explicit. I like to make the reader work hard...'

There was a strong sense, too, in her remarks of a desire to go on to do new things:

'They (the 'heavies') could get very much more self-indulgent. I didn't think so at the time but I think I'm coming dangerously close to covering the same ground by doing three books so similar in treatment.'

The experience of working at Oxford Polytechnic has contributed a great deal to that sense of new directions:

'The input is going to take years to work through and it's had a tremendous effect on what I want to write. I'd had five years of almost uninterrupted writing in an empty room, in an empty house, eight hours a day. If you're writing as a profession, you atrophy. The world dwindles to you and a typewriter - there's no input. Suddenly I was with students, colleagues - involved in an institution and its arguments and politics. It's been an unrivalled opportunity to study people... so there's something else to process now.'

Those at Oxford who may feel uneasy at that remark will be reassured to hear that, whatever else she may be planning to do, it isn't going to be a 'History Man' on Polytechnic life! Whatever she may have gained from the experience of working with student teachers, there can be little doubt about what they will have gained from her. She has encouraged them to write though she hasn't set up 'creative writing workshops' - 'that's anathema'. Rather she's asked her students to write that they might better understand the demands teachers so thoughtlessly impose when they ask children to write fiction. It was here that the connection became clear between her own intentions as a writer and her work with children and students.

Her students, she remarked: 'have no confidence in their personal lives. Yet each one of them is uniquely qualified to write about themselves... the first duty of a teacher is to convince the pupils of the immense value of what they know.'

This emphasis on the personal knowledge of the writer emerged again when Jan talked about how she researched her books. None of her readers can have failed to notice the expertise she shows - the knowledge of bikes, for example,

which she displays through Erica in **Handles**. Authenticity and integrity are closely related in her writing.

?The research for **Handles** was more a matter of checking with living people... I do myself like to know how things work. It is essential you know and you've got to let it show. It weakens the reader's confidence in the writer if you generalise and gloss over. You need to demand to be believed. Your knowledge gives you an authority which transmits itself to the reader.?

In talking about the novel she's working on at the moment, Jan gave an interesting insight into how the elements she'd described work out in practice. The raw materials are there in personal experience and her scrupulous observation of the world around her and these elements are transformed by her interest in 'looking at a relationship' at the point when it's beginning to develop.

?It's based partly on a trip I made with my brother who's a long distance lorry driver... then I went to Rochdale to visit a school and I had to travel through Oldham from Manchester and I saw the cotton-mills. They've got names on, proper names, about 190 of them all with names. I linked this with the idea of the long distance lorry driver... a man who's still getting to know his stepdaughter. They're still at the stage of being fearfully polite to each other and he coaxes her to come with him up North in the lorry to see one of the mills that's got her name on it. That's the basis of the story...?

At some point in the future we can also expect a picture book illustrated by Anthony Maitland. The starting point this time is not personal experience but an incident from Gorky's **My Childhood** ? a story his grandmother tells of thousands of little furry, kitten-like devils being released one time when the oven door blew open. It's a story that Jan obviously relishes:

?It's quite unlike anything I've done... I wasn't trying to make a new departure for picture books based on Russian classics. It's purely personal pleasure and a sort of perverted enjoyment of knowing it comes from such an unlikely source. I know four-year-olds won't give a damn where it came from but it amuses me to think I've got a picture book out of Gorky. And it's also the only animal story I've ever written. All the others have been about people. It's really about keeping a pet, featuring a responsible adult who says 'Put that back where you found it!' In this case, it's a devil that's supposed to be going back into the oven...

Whatever we may expect from Jan Mark in the future we can be sure that she will go on resisting 'covering the same ground' to the despair, no doubt, of those same critics who wanted her to go on rewriting **Thunder and Lightnings**. It's her own 'personal pleasure' she'll be pursuing in her writing. Otherwise, as far as she's concerned 'the excitement would have gone out.'

The Books

(Titles published in hardback by Kestrel and in paperback by Puffin unless otherwise stated.)

Aquarius, 0 7226 5793 5, £5.95 hbk

The Dead Letter Box, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10804 7, £2.75 hbk; 0 14 03.1619 3, pbk

Divide and Rule, 0 7226 5620 3, £5.50 hbk

The Ennead, 0 7226 5477 4, £5.50 hbk; 0 14 03.1354 0, £1.50 pbk

Feet and Other Stories, 0 7226 5839 7, £4.95 hbk

Hairs in the Palm of the Hand, 0 7226 5728 5, £4.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1441 5, 95p pbk

Handles, 0 7226 5857 5, £5.50 hbk

Long Distance Poet, CUP, 0 521 25500 7, £2.50 hbk; 0 521 27510 5, £1.25 pbk

Nothing to Be Afraid of, 0 7226 5677 7, £4.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1392 3, £1.10 pbk

Thunder and Lightnings, Heinemann Educational (New Windmill series), 0 435 12238 X, £1.70; 0 7226 5195 3, £6.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1063 0, £1.10 pbk

Under the Autumn Garden, 0 7226 5347 6, £4.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1248 X, 90p pbk

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