



Authorgraph 223 Jane Ray

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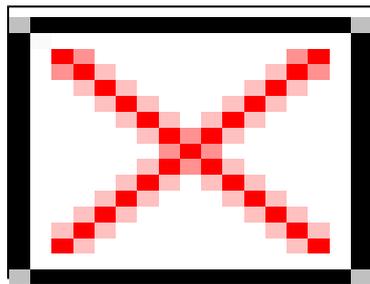
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Jane Ray interviewed by **Clive Barnes**



By the time Jane Ray came to the end of her degree course she knew she had chosen the wrong subject: 'I did three dimensional design ' furniture design, jewellery, glass making and ceramics ' and I specialised in ceramics. Almost from day one I knew this was a mistake. I knew I wanted to be an illustrator.' Nevertheless, Roger la Borde, who had just started his card company, commissioned four cards from her on the strength of drawings that he saw at her degree show, giving her confidence that she could make it as an illustrator. And, even though she hasn't touched a pot since, she says that ceramics and the student research that she did in the British Museum 'informed the way my work developed. I was doing a lot of drawing onto flat clay, making tiles, incised drawings, sideways figures and friezes, very influenced by Egyptian art. I am not sure that I would have arrived at where I am if I hadn't done that first.'

It's been a long time since then, and, in Jane's studio, I knew we had an impossible task in covering such a fruitful career in such a short space. So we mixed chronology with the kind of preoccupations that seem to characterise her work, somewhat tracking the influence of that early interest in design and ceramics. Behind her, on her noticeboard, was a collection of images, including a green tree and a washing line, favourites that you can trace through her books.

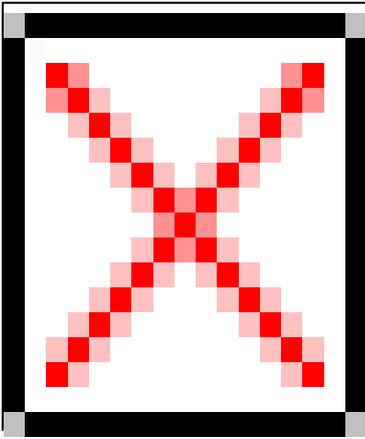
Jane's first colour picture book was **A Balloon for Grandad** (1988), with a text by Nigel Gray, now sadly out of print. It's a tale of a balloon which flies across continents to visit a boy's African grandad. Nearly sixty books later, it is hard to appreciate how fresh and exciting Jane's illustrations for the book seemed then. Mixed race families rarely appeared in picture books and Jane's illustrations celebrated both difference and the way that peoples and cultures have always met and melded. It also introduced the hallmarks of a lot of Jane's subsequent work, the framing of illustrations with intricately decorated borders, faces in profile, and an attention to domestic design.

Jane's early ability to reach back through her illustrations to times when European culture was shaped in the ancient Middle East and the Mediterranean, and when myth and history were entangled, was shown in a number of books that followed: retellings of Bible stories and books of mythical birds and beasts, including **The Story of Creation**, which won a Smarties Award in 1992. There were also two books by Mary Hoffman, **Song of the Earth** (1995) and **Sun, Moon and Stars** (1998), which offered an imaginative multicultural history of the human relationship to the environment. Beautiful books, again sadly out of print.

And then came the fairytales. Yes, she admits, 'One does get typecast, which can be frustrating, but it's also reassuring

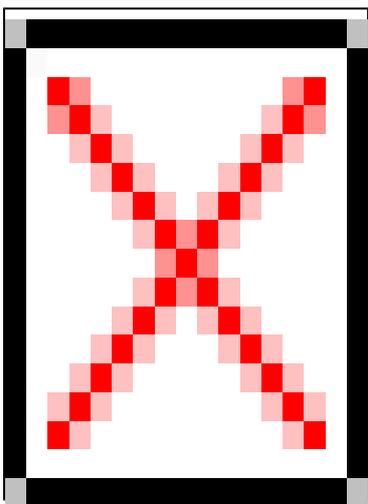
because that's what I enjoy doing. I do like the shape of traditional tales. Their language cuts corners and it's universal, archetypal.' She believes their timeless quality can make an immediate connection with a modern audience but, at the same time, the universal reference has to be made explicit in the illustration: 'Most of the schools I go into are multicultural and I would be embarrassed if the children I was talking to weren't in the books.' So it is an African prince in Jane's illustrations for Berlie Doherty's retelling of **Cinderella**, and an Asian princess in **The Frog Prince**.

The dozen retellings of traditional tales in which Jane illustrated Berlie's text, and which were published together in



Classic Fairy Tales (2000), are among Jane's favourites of her own work: 'A whole lot of things came together and I was able to do the paintings I wanted to do.' Perhaps they are the perfect expression of one aspect of her work: sumptuous colours; minute attention to decoration and pattern; the use of gold and white highlights; the recurrence of patterned natural forms, particularly trees, leaves, feathers and birds; a diversity of cultural inspiration; echoes of archaic illustration; and figures in iconic stance or gesture. It was also the first time that she had used silhouette, suggested to her by Amelia Edwards, the art director at Walker.

Jane says that with each of the stories in the **Fairy Tales** collection, she began with a single painting, 'an image that somehow said something to me about that story. A lot of them were a kind of dream imagery.' I notice that Jane has two small toy theatres pinned to the noticeboard in her studio and, remembering, too, the curtains that sometimes frame her illustrations, I suggest that there is an aspect of stage setting in her work, not so much directly dramatizing the narrative as creating a world and a mood. She was thrilled when three of her books were made into plays: 'That was a joy. It's like looking at a page and seeing it animated, especially the Birmingham production of **The Lost Happy Endings** because they were so faithful to my illustrations.'



Jane says that she has little interest in historical accuracy, and will happily bring together inspiration from a number of times and places: 'basically, it's things I like?'; and her intention is usually to create a world of the imagination 'historic fairy tale land' - that is appropriate to the tale. The exception is [Heartsong](#) [3], her collaboration with Kevin Crossley-Holland, where the story is specific to Venice in the seventeenth century and was based on a notebook and sketches of her visit to the Ospedale there.

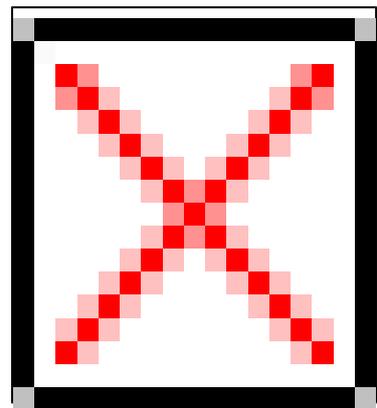
Jane belongs perhaps to that group of children's illustrators whose work appears closely related to fine art; and Brian Wildsmith, whose Mother Goose she treasured as a child, is the illustrator she feels most influenced her. She does paint on a larger scale, being one of the illustrators involved with the Nightingale Project, providing artwork to improve the

environment of psychiatric patients. There is an exhibition of her work for the project currently on view at the **South Kensington and Chelsea Mental Health Centre**. Asked to name favourite artists, she mentions Paul Klee and Marc Chagall, but adds: 'More than artists, I am drawn to cultures, aspects of Indian art, aspects of Japanese art and the folk art of every culture. Just that desire to decorate. It feels a natural thing to do. I don't have any tattoos, but I know where that is coming from.'

Looking back, **Fairy Tales** might be seen as marking a change for Jane. Afterwards, while she continued to illustrate traditional stories, she also began to illustrate picturebooks by modern authors, usually with a fairy tale theme: Jeanette Winterson's **King of Capri**, Berlie Doherty's **Jinnie Ghost**, and Carol Ann Duffy's **The Lost Happy Endings**, for instance. She also began to write and illustrate her own picture books: **Can You Catch a Mermaid?**, **The Apple Pip Princess**, **The Dolls' House Fairy**, and [Ahmed and the Feather Girl](#) [4]: 'There were images in my head I wanted to make into stories. I am intrigued by the modern fairy tale, using a folklorish structure with contemporary resonances. It says to children there's magic still around: that lyrical imaginative aspect to life that's so important.'

Despite her pride in what she achieved with **Fairy Tales**, she says, 'You have to keep moving on. What keeps the work fresh is that you're not satisfied and you want to do something better.' Part of that has been not only taking on the role of author or adapter of her texts but also the use of new techniques. She is particularly pleased with the three recent collections for Boxer Books, which brought together some of her favourite stories and poems, both traditional and modern: **The Emperor's Nightingale and other Feathery Tales**; **The Little Mermaid and Other Fishy Tales**; and **The Lion and the Unicorn and Other Hairy Tales**. Here she used scraper board. 'I had used it as a teenager in the seventies. It's a board with black ink on it and there's a layer of white clay underneath. You're scratching with a needle, white into black, bringing light into the image. I completely fell in love with it.'

Belying the detail that Jane has achieved in the Boxer illustrations, the images that she was working with were tiny,



sometimes as small as a postage stamp, often needing a magnifying glass. 'David Bennett at Boxer is a wonderful designer and took them and added colour and blew some of them up to make the final illustrations in the books. The art and craft of wood engraving is complex and takes a long time to learn. This is a bit of a cheat way to do it.' The result, however, is a brilliant tribute to that tradition.

Jane's latest work for Boxer, **The Elephant's Garden**, due to be published in April, is another departure. A picture book re-telling of an Indian folk tale in vivid colour, it uses bold paper cut collage against a white background. Jane has always used collage but often with a subtle use of tissue paper in 'dreamy layers' that is difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to detect. **The Elephant's Garden** makes obvious and exuberant use of it. 'It's nice to produce something for younger children and, following the scraper board, which is so intense and detailed, it's nice to do something where you are just cutting something up and sticking it on. Very infant school.' Remembering the exhibition of Matisse paper cuts of a few years ago, it is, of course, remarkable what can be achieved just with paper and scissors.

A consistent thread in Jane's work is a concern with the environment, human rights, diversity and inclusion. This can be tracked in some of the books she has illustrated for texts by other people: for instance, Mary Hoffman and Rhiannon Lassiter's **Lines in the Sand: New Writing About War and Peace**; Kathy Henderson's **Lugulbanda: the Boy Who Got Caught Up in a War**, and Kenneth Stevens' **Stories for a Fragile Planet**. Two of her own books, **Can You Catch a Mermaid** and **Ahmed and the Feather Girl**, deal with themes of confinement and freedom. And **Heartsong**

tells of a girl who is dumb but whose freedom comes through music and the benign confinement of an orphanage. All these concerns have been reflected not only in the books but in her work in schools and the community.

In 2005, Jane worked with Joyce Dunbar and hard of hearing children at The Meridian School in Greenwich. There was wonderful teacher there called Nati White who was passionate about deaf children needing myth and magic and this really seized Joyce and I. The result was **The Moonbird**, the tale of a deaf prince who is taught by a mysterious bird to use his hands and eyes to communicate. And, from this experience, Jane was introduced to **In the Picture**, the project started by the charity **Scope** which aimed at encouraging the inclusion of children with disabilities in illustration for children. This is an interest she continues with the [Inclusive Minds](#) [5] initiative. Presently, she is working with author Sita Brahmachari at the [Islington Centre for Refugees](#) [6]: 'Myself and the children have been working with silhouettes, shadow puppets and paper cuts. And Sita weaves what the children are saying about their work and what it sparks in their minds into a poem or a narrative.'

Jane finds this fascinating and stimulating: 'the to and fro' between author, illustrator and audience, in which everyone takes part in the creation of a story. She is now working with Sita on a novella set in the Orkneys about a mixed heritage family and which includes a refugee theme. She is especially pleased that, like **Heartsong**, it gives her an opportunity to illustrate a book for older children: 'I grew up with them. Now, once again, there are wonderful novels with fabulous illustrations, like **A Monster Calls**.'

Finally, we talk about the seductiveness of her illustrations and how they invite the reader to enter into the world of the story: a thought Jane takes further: 'One of the things that gives me huge pleasure is when primary schools use my illustrations as a starting point for children telling their own story. As a child I can remember having a Beatrix Potter frieze on my wall and just going into those pictures in my imagination. Fantasy journeys: going down the lane with Tom Kitten or into the dolls' house. That's what I would love to do for children. They go up the stairs, they enter that door, and they go into that garden.' Much of our conversation has been about the relationship of text and illustration, of author and illustrator, and of the past and the present. All resolved, perhaps, in that obligation to the child reader and to the future

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

A booklist of Jane Ray's books can be found [here](#) [7].

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