



## **Creative Writing**

*Jane Rogers on Adapting for Television*

### **Derek Neale**

Jane Rogers adapted her novel Mr Wroe's Virgins into a four part television serial. I wanted to know how she came by the story.

### **Jane Rogers**

Mr Wroe's Virgins was actually based on a true story. Which is the story of a prophet in the eighteen thirties in Lancashire, a self-styled prophet, who founded a church which was basically apocalyptic, it said the end of the world is coming very soon, if you join our church, you will be saved. And he got a massive following amongst factory workers and people whose lives were pretty grim. And he operated in the Ashton-under-Lyne area of Lancashire and built a church. And one of the things that he did was that he stood up in his church one Saturday and said to his congregation that the Lord had told him that he needed seven virgins to give him comfort and succour and his congregation presented him duly with seven girls. And this is historical fact. So I read this and thought that's a pretty good story. [Laughs] And there's very little record of what actually happened apart from the fact that the household was broken up after a year. So I knew I had a year to play with and that's where the novel came from. And it is meticulously researched in terms of the history so it is accurate as far as one knows, but obviously, there's no record of what the women actually did or thought, so that was the area that I could invent in.

### **Derek Neale**

How did you arrive at the structure for the TV adaptation?

### **Jane Rogers**

The structure of the novel is four inter-cut voices which cover chronologically the year of the women's life in the house of the prophet. Now when it came to making that into a television adaptation, once the book was sold to the BBC and commissioned, we were given four hours. And then it was a question of, well, how do we use that four hours, and to begin with, I was looking at the novel and thinking, Well, you know, the first hour will take us up to, say Easter, and the second hour will take us up to summer or whatever. It wasn't clear in my head how that would work. And then I remembered a great piece of television, which I guess has had a huge influence on me as a writer which is the John Hopkins quartet, Talking to a Stranger, and in that very wonderful play, you've got four characters who each give their own story covering the same period of time. Now in John Hopkins' play, it's just a day, but I borrowed that technique. Each of my four women narrators had her own play and told the entire year from start to finish and that meant that I could restrict the point of view and play games with what the viewer thought they were understanding from one episode to the next so it actually, for me, generated a very interesting way of re-telling the story.

It was a fascinating exercise, to disentangle the stories and to reinvent a way of writing it so that suspense would work in a completely different way than it does in the actual novel. I think I learned a huge amount doing that adaptation. It was very hard in the sense that once the first story was told, which was Leah's story, I didn't want to be telling the viewer the same things again and yet you've always got this problem with a drama serial that people might tune in on episode two or episode three and not know the back story so you can't count on them understanding everything. Creatively, that was a challenge, it was an interesting challenge.

**Derek Neale**

Did you write all of the cuts between the scenes or did the director intervene? Was there any collaboration in the script writing?

**Jane Rogers**

No. There were two distinct processes, really. There was the script writing where I worked with an excellent script editor and there was a lot of re-writing and a lot of re-working. The directorial input and changes came in filming and most specifically of all in editing, and at that part of the process, I did have some problems and found it difficult on occasion. I mean, I think that Danny Boyle, the director of Mr Wroe's Virgins, did a fantastic job with it and I'm very, very proud to have worked with him and to see the end result. But there were strands in the story which were lost in the editing or which were not pursued in the filming, which were written, which I very much wanted and which I was quite angry about at the time.

To give you an example, the most specific difference, really, between the ways that Danny and I saw the story, were that Danny saw it as a story of a series of relationships between a man and a number of women. And he saw it as very sexy. And I saw it as the journeys of four women to which the man was almost coincidental but very important. And I had a number of woman to woman scenes in it where Mr Wroe was not present and I think the way that Danny edited it was to make sure that pretty much every scene has Mr Wroe in it. And there was one crucial scene that I felt was very important between Hannah and Joanna which was cut.

**Derek Neale**

I mean, that's one of the crucial differences from the TV version and the book is that Mr Wroe is more prominent in the TV version. He doesn't say necessarily more lines but he's, he's visually there.

**Jane Rogers**

Mm. For me as a writer, that was actually fascinating because the book is premised on this kind of extraordinary absence at its heart, I mean, there is this character who is apparently central but you never see his point of view; you only get these different women's descriptions of him. And they see him so differently that you have to make up your own mind what you think. Whereas in a film version, you see the man so he's got to have a character, and I found that very difficult in the writing because it pushed me to make him literal in a way which I had been able to escape doing in the novel.

**Derek Neale**

Danny Boyle went on to direct films such as Train spotting and The Beach and there are some incredibly cinematic elements about Mr Wroe's Virgins.

**Jane Rogers**

In terms of looking at Danny's work on Mr Wroe's Virgins and then looking at later stuff that he did, you can see connections and you can also see the brilliant sense of, sequence and space. He did put in some things that I hadn't written and some of them were absolutely fantastic. There's a point in Joanna's story where it's just completely terrible; she's lost her baby and she's feeling that she's just been brought in as a kind of work horse to keep the house going and all her hopes of being a missionary are thrown down, she's completely downcast, she's completely unhappy and then people start to die, Dina dies. And the story's at a very low ebb for her and what Danny did was to insert the shot of her grieving over Dina's dead body, he inserts a mourning scene of her looking out and there's just a whole shot of green, she's looking at a field and the whole screen just fills up with this green. And it's a punctuation point and then the story moves on. And that's the kind of thing that he inserted which actually made the rhythm of the piece and the pace of the piece work brilliantly in a visual way. I think that that's one of the things that a great director or a great editor or the combination will bring to a movie is the variety that your eye needs, it's almost like it underlines the moment, if you like. But it's not, I mean, obviously, it's not dialogue, it's not really a scene necessarily. As I said, I didn't write it. But he put it in. And I was glad he put it in.

**Derek Neale**

Novelists are said to like the thought of voice-over in films. You've resisted this in Mr Wroe's Virgins. Did you consider the possibility?

**Jane Rogers**

I was told I couldn't have it. I was actually told I couldn't have it. And I'm glad, it was a sensible, intelligent instruction because it is the first thing you reach for as a novelist and it's lazy. And I don't think it's dramatic. And I can think of very, very few films where voice-over works actually. And the job of a dramatist for the screen is to actually dramatise the material, not to read it aloud with pictures. They tell the story through dialogue; they tell the story through action; and they tell the story through images. I mean, you have to find different ways of story-telling. I think writing for the screen is really, really different than writing a novel. You can't just get inside someone's head and let them tell their story, it doesn't work like that.

**Derek Neale**

Can you say something about how you arrange time in the adaptation and how that differed, maybe, from the novel?

**Jane Rogers**

Yeah. I think, to me, passage of time is a real problem or something that's an interesting challenge in screen as opposed to a novel. Because for example, in a novel, you can have a sentence which says, 'For a year, she worried at the idea of what her father would think and eventually she managed to bring herself to do ... blah'. Okay. In a film, okay, you can put up One Year Later, but that's clunky. And that sense that she worried for a year is very, very difficult to convey. And so, for example, one of the things in Mr Wroe's Virgins that I struggled with was that I had Joanna being very depressed after the loss of her child, and that depression lasted a long time and when she came out of it, she came out of it very gradually and different things started to happen in her life. Now, that's not dramatic, it's not dramatic to have somebody being depressed for a year, and I get over it in three sentences in the novel quite economically. It's very hard in film. And what I decided to do was that I actually had to really change the story and, okay, flag up that she's depressed but then, have one specific incident which would burst her out of depression so actually change the story if you like, because I couldn't do the long, slow recovery because it would be too boring and it would be too pointless. So we moved from a scene where she clearly was depressed to a scene where she discovered that Martha had apparently taken on board all her ideas about religion and she's absolutely overcome with joy and realises that she has achieved something useful after all, so you've got this kind of epiphany for her which is completely absent in the novel. That, in a way encapsulates what I think about one of the differences which is that you have to dramatise the changes in a script, you have to show them in a scene where action is occurring. You don't have to do that in a novel and quite often you, you would choose not to do that in a novel. And, the other thing that I think is a very interesting difference is the kind of imagery that you use. I mean, obviously a novel is full of imagery and the language is rich in various ways, but, to help the viewer actually understand what's going on with characters, I found that I was quite consciously, for example, in an intertwined story of Joanna and Martha, using imagery to do with light. And that was imagery that was not specifically focussed in that way in the novel. So that Martha's very first realisation that she might be somewhere where things are good is in the chapel when she looks up and she sees blinding white light come through the window and I put that in as an instruction in the script and there are various key moments in her story where light and the obsession with flame as well which is not in the novel, those things are increasingly important in her story.

**Derek Neale**

Each of the characters goes on a spiritual and emotional journey. But I suppose one of the most marked journeys is Martha's because she starts in the adaptation and in the novel with no language, and from a very brutalised, bleak background. Could you talk a little bit about Martha's journey in the adaptation?

**Jane Rogers**

The adaptation really was a gift for Martha and Martha's part in the adaptation is much stronger than her role in the novel. Because she's an inarticulate character; she has very little

language and she hasn't really even been kept inside a house and she doesn't understand what's going on, she's terrified. Now, what I could do in her drama was to actually allow the viewer to experience life as she experiences it so her drama opens with her simply as a spectator of this extraordinary nonsensical life that's going on around her and what you get is a deliberately distorted soundtrack so that, because she's unable to prioritise speech, I mean, in the way that the rest of us, if we move into a crowded room, will start to tune into people's speaking, she doesn't understand to prioritise speech and she hears other noises, she hears something being dropped on the floor and a dog barking outside and her eyes are drawn to the light, she stares at a candle flame and she looks round, she doesn't look at the faces of people who are speaking to her. So you can use film and sound to give the sort of distorted jumbled sense of the world which she experiences, and I couldn't even attempt to do that in the novel because in her early stages, she doesn't have language and therefore I couldn't give her point of view. I mean, I set this huge obstacle for myself in the novel. And film, for me, was a great way of being able to explore that character further.

### **Derek Neale**

Her journey is a very internal journey to do with realising this link between imagining, dreaming and memory. And she finally becomes able to remember things by the end of the adaptation. And yet you manage to dramatise this internal state.

### **Jane Rogers**

The premise is that she has blocked certain memories because they are so horrible and have led to such bad things in her life. And there are two levels of memory and I made a suggestion which Danny accepted and I'm very happy that he did, which was that we should actually use black and white for the traumatic memories of her earlier life. And that when there was a kind of resolution, those memories would move to colour. But we used black and white of the memories when she was actually being kept like an animal by her father and also the very, very early memory of the loss of her brother which is where all the problems started from.

### **Derek Neale**

At the end of the novel, she states that she would like to think that she eventually will be able to remember her brother but in the adaptation, you realise this memory, you see the brother.

### **Jane Rogers**

That's partly because, of all the characters in the novel, Martha has a very short voice. Although there are four inter-cut voices in the novel, you'll notice that Martha's doesn't begin until more than halfway through because she's inarticulate so it can't. So that meant that in giving her an hour of television, there was actually a space for her story to expand and I could actually take the viewer on the whole journey for her, whereas it's kind of sketched in the novel and left for the reader to assume that she will achieve it.