



Creative Writing

Jane Rogers as Novelist

Derek Neale

The basis of much of Jane Rogers' dramatic work is her own original fiction. She regards herself primarily as a novelist. I asked about the voices in her novels, particularly in *Island* and in *Mr Wroe's Virgins*. You'll hear the author reading in the voices of the four different narrators from this last novel.

'The Lord has instructed me to take of your number seven virgins for comfort and succour.'

Seven. They say his wife is sickly but seven? Judith touches my elbow, I know, I'm trying not to giggle, it's so quiet, it seems no one breathes in the whole of sanctuary. I mustn't laugh. I must not.

Will he really? Will they let him? Who? Once Abigail Whitehead said to me, 'Can you imagine doing it with the prophet?' We laughed with our heads beneath our quilt work for fear God might have overheard.

Jane Rogers

I wanted to take four women on four very different journeys, and Leah is interested in proving herself and finding her identity through being desired by men, through her sexuality. Hannah is looking for some kind of intellectual achievement and satisfaction. Joanna finds meaning through her religion. And Martha starts from a very low point, with almost nothing and kind of discovers pleasure, discovers a passion for life. And some sort of spiritual understanding which is very different than the others. It's much better than where she's come from. And that that trajectory is very important, I mean, each of the women's stories travels in a different direction but for Martha, it's pretty much a straight line from low to high. Even though it involves what looks like fairly exploitative sex with Mr Wroe at one point.

Derek Neale

Martha is a character without a voice, without language at the start of *Mr Wroe's Virgins*, yet you choose to give her some of the narration. Why and what were the difficulties?

Jane Rogers

Well, the reason why is because she was part of my original concept and I wanted one of my four characters to discover the world as a child does, to just find physical sensation, sight and smell and taste and so she had to begin from that very low base. The other thing about Martha is that, obviously, from the point of view of the other women, she's horrible, I mean, she's a blundering, smelly, foolish nuisance. And bringing her voice in very late allowed me to build up for the reader a very clear picture of this kind of idiot stumbling around the house and then it's quite a dramatic moment when I actually take you inside her head. Leaving that gap buys me the time to be quite dramatic in terms of the sort of realism, if you like, of her development. While she has no language, I can not give her point of view, I can't give her voice. And when I do bring her in, she's pretty inarticulate; it's kind of very broken sentences, almost stream of consciousness and it's not told in a logical narrative way in the way that the others tell their stories. So it was important to me as another way of seeing the world, as another way of story-telling and also as a very dramatic counterpoint to the other three voices.

Eat. Eat. Stuff. Hot cold sharp sweet. Much. Cram it in. Tear bread crust. Eat. Dough. Soft. Mouth-filling. Yellow cheese crumbling sour. Hard egg slippery white. Try inside. Eat. Shove in mouth. Chew. Swallow. Is more. And more. Apple-sweet. Musty. Cooked flesh.

Red brown grained tough. Teeth. Go go go. Choke when swallow. Eat more. Pale melting, oh yes. Cram.

'No. Not fish', she say. 'Stop. The bones.' They take it away. In a rough brown edge, stiff sweetness. Tarts. Eat. Stuff. Cram.

Derek Neale

And yet, the other journeys as you say, Joanna, for instance, they're not straightforward because they're fraught with complications. Could you elaborate on that a little?

Jane Rogers

Joanna moves from a high-ish point in that she thinks she's going to be a missionary and she's going to have a significant role in bringing about God's kingdom.

'The Lord has instructed me to take of your number seven virgins for comfort and succour.'

Praise God. This is the sign the women are not forgot. My heart leaps to his words as the instrument to the hand of the craftsman. The joy of that moment will never leave me. Nor, I think, will it be easily forgotten by any of those blessed enough to be present. God was indeed among us. He spoke to our hearts. He called us to join his glorious service. The joy within was so overpowering that I could do nothing but fall to my knees and thank him a thousand times for calling his unworthy handmaiden. When I became conscious again of the world around me, I saw that a similar feverish joy had gripped the hearts of many. The sign we have waited for has come. Southcott's call to the women, the time of the women approaches.

Jane Rogers

Joanna finds herself used and abused in various ways and I think, by the end, although she appears to be fairly ecstatic, I think the reader realises that she's pretty deluded. As a premise, in a novel, to say the central character has to change, I think it's generally true. I mean, you'll find exceptions, you'll find novels where the central character doesn't change but in general, it is more satisfying if they do change in some way, I think. It may be a tiny journey. It may be, you know, they lie in bed all day and then decide to get up, I don't, [laughs] it doesn't have to, it doesn't have to be earth-shattering.

Derek Neale

What part did imagination play in writing about a subject matter which was so factual?

Jane Rogers

I'd never written a historical novel before and I'm not a historian but one of the things that I was interested in doing in this novel, was to explore possible ways of engaging with life for a number of female characters. And I think people are more open-minded about dealing with ideas which are current now if they're set in a historical setting; they come to them with fewer pat assumptions. So I was looking for a piece of history, a moment in history which would actually make it possible for me to explore different ways of tackling life, if you like, for women. And of course, the problem with moving back in history is that woman's lives are very circumscribed by breeding. Most women have endless children and that means that the whole notion of, you know, what they can do with their life is, is already determined. So I was actually looking for a situation where women would not be in families and would not be trapped in that role, and that's what so perfect about the Mr Wroe's Virgins situation because he asked for these women to come into his household and they were removed from family, they were removed from family duty. Now, okay, he gave them domestic duties but there's a sense in which kind of emotionally and spiritually, they actually had to find their own direction because they've been de-vaccinated. So, as soon as I actually read the description of his household, it hit me that that was a perfect vehicle for the sort of exploration that I wanted to make and it was even more perfect that nothing was known about these women, so I could make it up. And, okay, he asked for seven virgins and to begin with, you think of seven beautiful little sixteen year olds. But then you start to think, actually, what girls would they give away? Well, you know they'd give away difficult ones; they'd give away un-marriageable ones. People would have their own motives for the girls they got rid of. And so then it was

easy to start to think about the kinds of women that there might be and for example, to seize on a character like Hannah who's highly intelligent and whose father has died and she's therefore an expense to her aunt and uncle who don't even like her and don't know what to do with her. There's no role in society at that point for a poverty-stricken, intelligent, well-educated woman.

My aunt and uncle have given me to a prophet. Given. Handed over with less heart-searching than they would undergo in parting with a crust to a beggar. It is a Christian Israelite, I have been called once to their meeting place which they call sanctuary. The prophet is a small, crazed hunchback with the manners of a bear who foretells the end of the world. The elders of their church resemble tribesmen one might have found wandering the deserts of Palestine three thousand years ago in full length robes and hair and beards uncut bedecked with outlandish jewellery. From the hands of the meanest pair of scavenging crows on earth, I pass into the care of a lunatic band of would-be ancient Jews.

Derek Neale

One of the things that are most striking about the novel is that you actually develop these contrastive characters and one is religious, one is intellectual, as you say, but also, what is striking is the voices that are realised in the novel, for these individual characters. How difficult was it to create those voices? Define those voices?

Jane Rogers

I like writing in the first person, and I link that preference to the similarity between writing and acting. A writer particularly working in first person, kind of puts on a character in the way, perhaps, that an actor does when they really try to get into role and think and see and speak as that character does. And, very interestingly, looking back, I think I found it much easier to write the voices of the characters who were less similar to me. I found Martha's inarticulate voice when I started off actually surprisingly easy to write, and I found Joanna's voice very easy to write. I found Hannah the most difficult and I really, really struggled to make her voice feel of that period rather than feeling too modern because she is a very modern woman, Hannah. I mean, more modern than the others, I think. People say write what you know and there's clearly a huge value in that. But I think there's also a problem and I've come across this with a lot of student writers who are working in the first person, where they just find themselves writing themselves. And it's almost like, yeah, you need to put on a false nose and a wig. [Laughs] In order to break out of yourself and find the other voices that you can bring, that will draw on your own experience but won't be you talking.

Derek Neale

That is what is most striking about Mr Wroe's Virgins is the fact that they're four first person voices, they got to be the same, aren't they? But they're very, very different.

Jane Rogers

Technically, it was absolutely vital to me that I made them distinctive. I wanted to create four visions of the world, which you would believe were completely different and came from inside completely different heads and I wanted to leave the uncertainty for the reader, whose version is true because these versions actually conflict diametrically in certain points. And I mean, for you to be interested in the conflict, you need to believe that these really are distinct voices.

Derek Neale

The way Mr Wroe, Mr Wroe's Virgins is arranged, it's quite filmic, in the way it crosscuts between different strands. Could you talk about how you arrived at this method and whether it was arrived at in the editing of the novel and did you write individual strands from beginning to end?

Jane Rogers

It's quite ironic, actually, because the journey from original novel through to published novel through to film script involved writing four individual stories and then inter-cutting them for the novel and then writing four individual stories for the film. But of course, it was very, very different because I wrote the four individual stories for the novel and I worked in that way, always thinking that it was likely that I would inter-cut them but writing each individual story

from beginning to end because I needed to stay in one voice, to get the continuity and to keep the sound of the voice in my head, I couldn't chop and change between them. And then, when I came to inter-cutting them, I found that, obviously, I had to write new bits and I had to lose bits. There were certain key scenes that were in my head; it was very complicated novel to plot and it had all sorts of charts and drawings of who was coming in where but there were certain key scenes where I wanted the scene to be shown from at least two different points of view, or possibly three. And strategically deciding where those would be placed was quite complicated. It was a massive re-structuring job after the writing if you like.

Derek Neale

What might you achieve by splicing the strands like that?

Jane Rogers

I wanted the inter-cutting in the novel, I guess for a number of reasons, the most obvious of which is the obvious reason why a lot of novels are inter-cut story strands and it's because it's great for suspense. You know, you go so far with one character and you leave them with a dilemma or something happening and you move on to another character and if you just look at the way that traditionally the nineteenth century novel, a George Eliot novel, for example, is structured – Middlemarch is a number of inter-cut story strands – and that's a great way to put a novel together.

Derek Neale

In all the characters you've achieved a sort of a sense of historical vernacular there; there's history in the voices. How did you go about that?

Jane Rogers

That was quite a challenge. Because I'm a very good mimic. I'm not very proud of this necessarily but in terms of writing voice I am a mimic. And that's why I have to be quite careful what I read while I'm writing because I will copy. So one of the things that I did while I was researching the book was to immerse myself in early nineteenth century prose and I can do it a treat, [laughs] but it's cod, it's, you know, horrible fey girly nineteenth century prose and nobody actually wants to sit down and read a novel written like that, and I had to break myself of that and I actually found myself going to other writers to see what they've done and looking at people who've set novels in the early nineteenth century to see what kind of language they used, how they're creating the illusion of that period without it being just sort of plasterboard and paint and historic scenery. And one of the writers I found most helpful actually was Peter Carey, who I admire hugely. I looked at Oscar and Lucinda and a few other writers, and it's very, very easy, once you look at the way that other people are doing it to realise that you can create a sense of period, simply by using perfectly accurate standard English with no contractions and by avoiding all anachronisms, and maybe, because this is a northern book, there's a touch of sort of dialect words but only ones that are going to be absolutely obvious to the reader. But those hints in the language are enough for the reader to make the jump. It's obviously more modern; it's a hybrid, it's an invention.

I think the most useful things that I've found to read have been first person accounts. So not actual history books giving all the facts and so on but, but individual people's stories, I mean, for example, for Mr Wroe's Virgins, a book that was very, very important to me was The Diary of Ann Lister which is, a gentlewoman who lived in the area at that period and who just wrote a diary of a few years in her life. And, although obviously, her prose is of that period and I wouldn't aim to copy the cadences of that prose, I found myself returning to it again and again, because it just gave details of the fabric of life which were really, really useful. Practical things that you don't think of that take time, like just having enough clean clothes to last you through till the next wash day.