



Creative Writing

Liz Jensen, Development and Decisions

Bill Greenwell

Liz Jensen is the author of six highly acclaimed novels. She told me about the origins of two of them, *War Crimes for the Home* and *the Ninth Life of Louis Drax*.

Liz Jensen

War Crimes for the Home had a very strange evolution because originally I had wanted to write a book from the point of view of a five year old boy because at the time of writing, my children were about four and eight and I liked the way they talked and I wanted to do a sort of kiddie voice. And I wrote a whole chapter from the point of view of this child going on a fishing trip with his brother. And at some point, I thought well, actually, there's not very much difference between someone very young and someone very old, when they talk, because, you know, young children are quite, I suppose, what we would call inarticulate; they don't have the range of vocabulary that we have. And they're very direct. And they don't mess about, and old people are like that too. I mean, they have a wider vocabulary but they're very direct, they're quite rude sometimes and I thought I could just turn this boy into a very old lady. Because then they can have memories. I wanted someone to have memories and five year old children don't have much in the way of memories. So suddenly I had this seventy nine year old woman on my hands and of course, if she was goanna have memories, they would have been of the war and so that's how the war came in. I never planned to write a book about World War Two. Absolutely not.

Bill Greenwell

The heroine, Gloria, has a form as Alzheimer's which means that her memory is either selective or repressed and I think when we're reading it we don't really know which. How do you set about creating a voice like that?

Liz Jensen

Well, it's a, I suppose, a classic inconsistent unreliable narrator, really. She has a form of selective, elective Alzheimer's which she can turn on and off like a tap depending on what she wants to remember and what she doesn't want to remember. And then, of course, there is something in her past that has caused her to forget certain things. So, it was, it was a challenge, and fun, and it's all about fun for me, to write from the point of view of someone whose memory's sort of full of holes and sort of not at all full of holes.

Bill Greenwell

It's similar to the *Ninth Life of Louis Drax* in the sense that he is a boy of nine years old and there are holes in his memory. Is he selective in his memory, do you think?

Liz Jensen

Yes, I think he is, he has to be because it's his only way to survive. I think it's quite common in people, especially young people, who've experienced some traumatic event, I think you see it a lot in times of war as well. They lose their memory. Young boys who lose their mothers very often lose their memory at the same time. It's a form of self-preservation, I suppose. But then, of course, these things can pop back; they can pop back in dreams or they can pop back, triggered by something unexpected. And that's very fascinating because what you're doing with the reader is, you're getting them to kind of put some of the pieces together, you, you're almost asking your reader to be a kind of detective and to sieve out what's real and what isn't real and what might be a sort of made-up memory and what might be true fact dressed up as something else. But I think, with me what happens is, I don't always know. I don't always know what they're going to find out at the end, and I find out sometimes round

about the same time they do. Whatever the buried horror is or whatever the buried secret is, it's not as though I plan in advance what the mystery is going to be.

Bill Greenwell

Another thing about your writing is that it's not dark writing, it's constantly entertaining and it's filled, sometimes literally with jokes as in the case of War Crimes, since Gloria has a good repertoire of foul-mouthed jokes.

Liz Jensen

Well, do you know, I put those in because it was very dark. It was actually a very, very dark book and I read it through at some stage of my drafting, and I thought No, no, this is, there's not enough fun here, we got to have some fun so I just very simply [laughs] because I love jokes as well, I thought, stick some jokes in. So I think that lightened it a lot because it would have been quite gloomy without them. I think there's an extent to which writing is about self-entertainment. It's about living in a world that you can't live in, in real life and probably wouldn't want to. It's about really flexing the muscles of the imagination and going to places you couldn't possibly go. I love all that, I mean, I love the idea of, you know, I can be anyone I want to be. It's like being an actress as well, you get into the skin of somebody and then you, you know, you can be a nineteenth Danish prostitute or you can be a nine year old boy or you can be an old lady with Alzheimer's or you can be a Victorian freak, you can be whatever you want.

Bill Greenwell

You were saying that, when you were devising War Crimes, that you'd started off with the idea of the child and you'd ended up with a woman who was eighty, nearly, and therefore you'd had to research her past. Can you say something about the way in which you set about that research?

Liz Jensen

Well, I didn't know anything much about the war except what I'd seen on endless war movies. But it was the home front that interested me and in particular, GIs and young silly girls, it wasn't about heroics at all, it was about the nitty gritty of living through the blitz and everything else. So I read a wonderful book by a woman called Pamela Winfield about GI brides called Sentimental Journey and I went and talked to her. And she was enormously helpful and her book was very inspiring and then I got a travel grant from the Society of Authors and I went to the States and interviewed another GI bride over there and her husband. So I did far more research than I had planned to or really wanted to, because I do like to make things up, I don't really like doing research, or I thought at that point, that I didn't like doing research. So I rather surprised myself by the amount that I ended up doing and how much I quite enjoyed it. You have to get it right with World War Two, you can't mess about too much with what's in living memory in what's a very important era, you can't make things up in the way I did for Ark Baby, I mean, I made up whole species of animals and nobody noticed. I made up science and nobody noticed. And I mixed it in with real science and still nobody noticed. [Laughs] Or maybe they did but they were too polite to say anything.

Bill Greenwell

I'm thinking in particular with War Crimes and the Second World War, you'd have to think of getting the language correct, or the slang, at least, correct. I mean, how much work do you do on that?

Liz Jensen

Oh, that was lots of fun, that's great fun. I mean, with Google, you can do everything very quickly to be honest, you know, you just type in Second World War slang and up pops a list. You know, it really is very, very straightforward and I love the internet for that reason; you can just find out whatever you want very, very quickly and then find the book you need to read and order it.

Bill Greenwell

And did you test the slang on anybody from that generation?

Liz Jensen

Pamela Winfield read the book for me and she corrected me on a few things and then there were certain things I had come across elsewhere that I put in the book that she said, 'No, no, no, that would never, we never did that'. So she was quite strict with me about it. But then, of course, her experience didn't tally necessarily with the experience of other people. But, yeah, there were certain things that she said, 'No, people never said that'. I think there was an expression, someone said, 'I should cocoa' and she said, 'I never heard that'. I thought, Well, I really like it so I'm going to leave it in anyway. And I did.

Bill Greenwell

War Crimes for the Home has also been adapted for the stage, not by you but by Leila Borris. Did you go and see that?

Liz Jensen

Oh, sure I went and saw it, I went and saw it about five times. [Laughs] And I loved it. And she did a wonderful job because there were a lot of characters in the book and she had to cut them right down so certain people just went out the window and she managed it very well and it's such a joy to see your own work being transformed into another medium because you are given it back in a way. The problem with being a writer is you can never really read your own books. And enjoy them in any way. But if they're turned into something else, you can, and it was wonderful.