

1996/Aug BRIAN JACQUES - Publishing News

Larger than life is not an unfair description of Brian Jacques. An in-your-face Liverpudlian, and immensely proud of it, his loud, ebullient personality, taken only at face value, all but masks the huge warmth of the poet, actor, writer, broadcaster and natural communicator that lives cheek by jowl behind it.

He has, he replies when I ask when he started to write, always been a writer. "I suppose it's whatever you find your natural ability is...I was a good descriptive writer from an early age, a good reader and a picture-house kid as well," he says.

He left full-time education ("St John's School for the Totally Bewildered!" - his description), with one aim in mind: "I was 15, and I wanted to go away to sea...I worked the tugs and dredgers for a few weeks to get my seaworthiness certificate and then left, as an Able Seaman, for Valparaiso. And the romance," he grins, "was all a load of rubbish." Two years later, on a lonely Saturday night watch, he decided to quit. "There I was, surrounded by all this vast expanse of ocean, me on a tiny ship, and back home all the lads were getting dressed up for a night out, and I realised I must be off me cake!"

It was the beginning of the Sixties and back on dry land the folk club boom was just beginning. As The Liverpool Fishermen, he and his brothers sang for beer money and Brian started to write songs; from the songs came humorous monologues - which he can still burst into at the drop of a hat - and these were collected into seven slim, locally-published volumes, the first of which, he's proud to relate, became the most stolen title from the University bookshop.

He was working in the Liverpool docks when BBC Radio Merseyside offered him a programme, and thus began *Jakestown*, a show he's still doing. The day he was made redundant in 1979 was also the day he won the Sony National Award for Light Entertainment. "And I thought, what the hell, have a go at writing."

He didn't write books, though. "I was made resident playwright at the Everyman Theatre, where I worked with Willy Russell and Alan Bleasdale. But I also met Alan Durband, who'd been Paul McCartney's English teacher and was on the board of the theatre, and he really believed in me, became something of a benevolent Svengali." Durband told Brian he was spreading himself too thinly and, because he was distinctly unimpressed by the standard of books he found himself reading to children at the Royal School for the Blind, he decided to try writing his own. "And that's where *Redwall* came from," says Brian, "an old-fashioned story in the Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard way."

Redwall was written longhand on pads of cheap recycled paper and it took him seven months to complete. "I was taking it to the school to read to the kids and I stopped off at the Everyman on the way. I saw Alan [Durband] there and he asked me what I'd written and I held up a carrier bag full of 800 recycled pages." Brian recalls, toying with Liverpool's answer to worry beads - a pack of cigarettes. "He took my only copy away with him on holiday and came back raving. He said he'd sent it to his own publishers, Hutchinson, and told them they'd be foolish if they didn't publish it...and then he went off for four months!"

Durband had omitted to give Hutchinson any details of where the author of the work lived (or that they had the sole copy of the manuscript) and so it wasn't until his return that Brian discovered that they wanted to buy it. The book was published in 1986 in England and, a year later, by Putnams in the States. "I organised the first UK tour myself through radio contacts," says Brian, "but I had no idea until we went to America how well we were doing there - by 1990 you could go anywhere in the States and find the books!"

He has a special affection for the US, and the country for him; it is, he says, a magic place, a land of enchantment where there were once real cowboys. "They're so enthusiastic when we go there, it's amazing!" he says. "*Redwall* is a real cult now - and the state of Delaware has even asked permission to do an opera of the book next year!"

Redwall won the Lancashire County Libraries Children's Book of the Year Award in 1987, the second in the series, *Mossflower*, won the West Australian Young Readers' Book Award in 1990 and the third volume, *Mattimeo*, won the Lancashire award again the next year and worldwide he has sold over two million books. This has been achieved, he says, "by putting classic books on shelves for kids".

So does he have any idea why he's been so successful? "The stories are timeless, not topical - they're high adventure, and the kids aren't kept waiting around in my books," he opines. "[They] get a sense of security in *Redwall*...it's a place I want to go back to, and for four months of the year I drop out and return there...kids have a universal need to go back to once-upon-a-time, long ago and far away, and I'm a writer of 'good yarns', like my dad would say - romantic adventure and escapism, not sword and sorcery."

This self-described working class boy with a French/Irish lineage grew up as an inner city kid with a local park the only piece of country available to him. "But it was everything to me through my imagination," he says, "and I learnt through watching and reading...and was too good a boxer to get into trouble for having my head stuck in a book!" Greek classics, pulp comics, like *The Wizard* and *The Hornet*, and boarding school stories were all part of his literary diet and he'd spend hours down in the market at an old second-hand bookshop.

From this eclectic and colourful milieu has emerged a truly exotic world that's drawn people of all ages and from all around the globe into it. Of the many characters he's created, I asked which was Brian's favourite. "The one I like the best is Gonff the Prince of Mousethieves - he's a rogue and a thief, but all for the right reasons...he's me as a lad in the docks!" he answers with his own roguish smile. "In fact, a lot of characters in my books are based on real people - Arula is Laura, an American girl who gave me a full CV of why she should be a mole, and Sir Harry the Muse in *Mattimeo* was based on the Liverpool barrister Sir Harry Livermore."

Art and life intertwined to make a real fantasy come alive. That, I think, is Brian Jacques' gift.

I have used the first person, and not surname as is the Publishing News style, in this article at the express request of Brian Jacques. He says that in Liverpool surnames are only ever used in the accusative and, house style notwithstanding, only likes to see himself referred to by his first name.

