

## 2007/August LAUREN St JOHN - Publishing News

If award-winning children's author Lauren St John is anything to go by, success is all about knowing what you want and not stopping until you get it. All of it. Born in the '60s in what was then Rhodesia, a troubled country that was shedding blood along with the last of its colonial traces, she had a string of ambitions as long as your arm. "I wanted to be a famous horse rider, a pop singer, an actor, a set designer, an artist - I just wanted to be all these things; when I was about 14 I wrote out a list, near the top of which was 'write a book and get it published' because I figured that when people grew up and became adults, they forgot what they wanted to do because they had no record of it." The weird thing is, she says, in a way she got to have a go at just about everything she wanted to do.

Her parents got divorced when she was 17 and the family left Rainbow's End - the name of the farm they lived on as well as the title of her African memoir, published in May by Hamish Hamilton - and she went to art school in Cape Town for a couple of months before telling her mother she was leaving for England to become a pop star. It was the start of an extraordinary journey that was to take her all over the world.

She came to the UK, taught riding for a week, quit and worked as a veterinary nurse for a year ("I *really* wanted to be a vet"), then went back to Zimbabwe and joined a band; tired of her daughter lying about not doing very much, St John's mother enrolled her in a journalism course. "I spent the whole year talking politics, eating goat curry and becoming mad about golf; I was so obsessed that by the time I left the college all I wanted to do was play it...and in the end I thought, if I've got to earn a living I want to be a golf writer, so I got on a plane and came back to England."

By now it will come as no surprise to learn that St John got a job on a golfing magazine, but it wasn't all coming up roses as she didn't see eye to eye with the editor and had a pretty good idea that she was about to be fired. Determined to leave with something more than the dole to look forward to she set out to get a book deal, from scratch, in seven days.

Starting on a Tuesday, St John researched who was publishing the kind of book she wanted to write, and a week later Bill Campbell of Mainstream in Edinburgh gave her a deal, based on the first synopsis she'd ever written, for *Shooting at Clouds*, her book about the men's professional European Tour. She was 22.

"I think Bill Campbell and Mainstream are the only publishers in the UK who would have given me that kind of break and the only downside was that here in Britain you do seem to get pigeonholed." After one golf book, she says, golf books were all she was being offered and she had lots of other ideas. "Not only will they not let you write anything else, if you're a sports writer you're not a 'real' writer, which is rubbish. It drove me nuts, but I couldn't seem to get out of the box."

Once again, no surprises for guessing that St John did eventually break out of the box she'd found herself placed in. After being let go by *The Sunday Times*, for whom she was the golf correspondent, she spent a year in Nashville - another of her many obsessions is, she confides, country music - and wrote *Walkin' After Midnight* (Picador) about the experience. Her entry into the world of children's books, though, was completely unplanned and came about by chance some two years ago.

"I was walking down the street in Greenwich and this image popped into my head of a little girl on a giraffe and I thought, wouldn't it be the coolest thing on earth if you could actually ride a giraffe? It was the weirdest thing, just there on the street the whole story came in to my head, pretty much totally formed, right down to the girl's name. At the time I was supposed to be writing some sample chapters for *Rainbow's End* for 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, which I could not do, so I wrote down the giraffe idea instead and couldn't stop thinking about it...I ended up writing the first chapter, kept on coming back to it and finished the first draft of *The White Giraffe* in a month."

As there was a publisher waiting for the memoir, her agent was not best pleased but she did agree to send the manuscript out. It came straight back. "I knew it was flawed, but I was convinced there was something about it and that there was somebody, somewhere who would recognise that. So I just kept working on it, but I did begin to lose hope." Right about the time

when hope was finally running out, St John decided she had to talk to the person she most respected in publishing and ask his advice. Clive Priddle, who had been her editor at 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, was now in New York, so that's where she went. For lunch.

It turned out to be the smartest move she could make. Priddle listened to what she had to say and asked if she'd thought of changing agents. "Funny you should say that..." St John replied. 24 hours later, back in London, St John got a call from Priddle saying that she should get in touch with Catherine Clarke at Felicity Bryan in Oxford. And the rest, as they say, is history. Within a month St John had a new publisher for the memoir, a three-book deal with Orion Children's books, since increased to four books, and her debut children's novel is about to be made into a movie. Not something, funnily enough, she ever had on her list.