

1999/Aug LYNNE REID BANKS - Publishing News

“I saw a future with my name up in lights, just like my mother,” says Lynne Reid Banks, referring to the first, all-encompassing love of her life, “and I was quite sure that I was God’s gift to the theatre...which, it turned out, I wasn’t.” Ms Banks is one of those people about whom you get the strong impression, very soon after meeting her, that she was always going to become famous at something. She has an attitude of complete assurance, a faith - which she later tells me is not down to a belief in God - in her own abilities. It’s a faith that’s been nothing if not fully borne out over the years.

Banks left the stage when her father died and actually earning a living became a priority. She began working as a journalist and then started writing plays. “It was my way back into the theatre,” she says. “I wrote short stories and articles and a shelf-full of mainly unproduced plays, because it was always the theatre for me... that was my *métier*.” Then she got freelance work for various new magazines that had sprung up to serve the soon-to-be-launched second TV channel.

“I heard that there was to be a news service radically different from the BBC, no more dickie-bowed, po-faced zombie news readers,” says Banks. “I went to interview the editor, Aidan Crawley, for the magazine and found out he was going to use women reporters...so I put my notebook away and he ended up interviewing me.” She got the post as one of the two female reporters in the ITN launch team. Her greatest coup came on the night she happened to be on duty outside the House of Commons when Malenkov, the Soviet Premier, who up to that point had refused all interviews, came out. “I stuck my microphone under his nose and he made some statement...it wasn’t in any way a good interview,” comments Banks, “but no one else had got one at all!”

She went on to make her personal territory the world of theatre and entertainment, interviewing Satchmo, Charlie Chaplin, Margot Fonteyn, Maria Callas and Julie Andrews, among many others. Banks left TV news when she met the man who was to become her husband, but not before she’d written her first book “on ITN’s time, typewriters and stationery!” she

says, smiling broadly. “Everyone was amazed when ‘old Lynne’s book’, as they called it, finally appeared.”

The L-Shaped Room, published in 1960, was a success; but, says Banks, she had no idea it was at all special until the hoopla began, culminating the following year in the premiere of the film. “It was a real premiere,” Banks remembers, “and I got an amazing sense of power, a feeling that they were all there, this was all happening because of me...but I got over it and went to live in one room in a kibbutz in Israel and my ego calmed down.” She and her family came back to England nine years later. “It was a career move...we needed to see if we could recover creatively.”

With a family of her own, Banks now started to write for children, and in 1982 *Indian in the Cupboard* was published in the States “I got this buzzy feeling it was going to be successful,” she tells me. “Then came the phone call from my agent that the paperback rights had gone at auction for \$15,000 - it was so exciting!” And the rest is a matter of record: the original book has sold over 7m copies, the series over 9m, with a new instalment - *The Key to the Indian* - just out. But the fact is, this was never intended to be series.

“There wasn’t going to be another one,” says Banks, “but the letters asking about a sequel got more and more hectoring, and then someone asked me why the time travel element could work in reverse - why the boys couldn’t go back in time themselves...which led to *Return of the Indian*.” Inevitably that book generated yet more correspondence, this time pointing out that she hadn’t finished the story. Banks realised that the readers had been right, there were some loose ends that needed tying up - cue *The Secret of the Indian*.

This very organic process of creation continued quite naturally when Banks herself became curious as to where the magic, so pivotal to the story, was coming from, admitting that the fourth book, *The Mystery of the Indian*, was written to satisfy her own curiosity. “But at the end of the book I left a door wide open which I knew I’d have to go through,” she says. “The dad had found out, and there was an adventure to be had - I really wanted to write that one!”

An Indian and a cupboard. Not the first ingredients you'd think of as central to a hugely successful modern fairy tale, but Banks seem always to have created from experience. She was evacuated to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, for the duration of the war and, although she says they weren't bumping into Indians there, she became fascinated by the local Cree "and watching movies I was always on the Indians' side - although I've got into plenty of trouble with Indian militants, who've attacked the books for stereotyping."

The cupboard? It's nothing like the Hollywood movie version (surprise, surprise) and was hanging in the bathroom of the first house she and her husband bought. "It came with us when we moved, but I don't actually know how," says Banks. "I found it in the garage of the next place, under some deflated dinghies, when we moved again." The cupboard, understandably, has achieved a certain iconic status, not only with Banks and her family but her public as well - she was told, in no uncertain terms, that she had to take it with her on her first US tour or the whole visit was off.

And then there are the boys' names, Adiel, Gillon and the boy himself, Omri. I had thought they were a product of pure imagination, but they turn out to be Hebrew, and the names of her three children. "I asked them if they minded," says Banks, "and they all said no...but then neither they nor I thought the book would do anything special." Omri, who's named after the Israeli king who was Jezebel's father-in-law, is now a 30-year-old computer animator at present working on bringing one of Banks' recent books, *Harry the Poisonous Centipede*, to life.

Banks has been a tireless school visitor since her first trip to the US to pick up a California Young Readers' Medal. "I was," she says, "welcomed like the Queen of Sheba by a school in Sacramento...they had a trolley of 325 pre-sold copies of my one and only hardback, and I thought - this is it, this is where you sell books!" Publishers, she goes on, are only just beginning to find out about schools - that they'll pay and they'll also accept what she calls her 'terms of service': she'll do three presentations per visit, but the children must have read at least one of her books "because this makes an author visit so much more exciting for them."

If there's anything you get from even the shortest meeting with Banks it is that she's an intensely passionate person who suffers no kind of fool gladly. Her whole career seems to have been a voyage of discovery, trying to find out what the limit to her talents might be, and the great thing - for her and her many fans - is that, while the story of Omri and the Indian may be 'mined out' as she puts it, the journey hasn't finished yet.