

2004/Dec JANE JOHNSON - Publishing News

Jane Johnson leads something of a triple life. Known inside the trade as the publishing director of HarperCollins' Voyager list, as well as the publisher of several of their thrillers, she was one half of the writing persona known as Gabriel King in addition to being the author Jude Fisher. And now, with the forthcoming publication of her first children's novel *The Secret Country*, for the first time she's appearing in print as herself. "I've come out of the closet," she says, "and it's a bit weird to see my true name on a cover."

Gabriel King was created when she began writing with her ex-partner M John Harrison; while two heads may well be better than one behind the scenes, two names on a cover, says Johnson, definitely aren't what you want and they felt an alter ego was needed. "We were looking for an ambiguous, cross-gender name, which eventually came from about 300 postcards cast on the floor. We wrote four novels together under that name and then, when I went solo with the *Fool's Gold* big fantasy series, I had to come up with another one."

This would, you might think, have been the perfect moment to come clean, but, being a fantasy publisher *and* a fantasy writer, Johnson wanted no agenda attached to any submission, wanted her book to be judged fairly for what *it* was, not because of who *she* was. Surrounded by the fruit of her labours and her passion - Johnson's office is an Aladdin's cave of books, manuscripts, posters, PoS, figurines and fantastical paraphernalia - she, of all people, knows both sides of this particular fence intimately well.

A qualified English Literature lecturer, Johnson had thought she'd end up somewhere in academia. A chance conversation 20 years ago with a neighbour put paid to that plan when it led to her getting a job as a secretary (with no secretarial qualifications, or indeed ability) at Allen & Unwin, the publishers of her all-time favourite author JRR Tolkien. Six months after joining the company she was an editor. "Secretarial skills don't matter in publishing, it's all about having a bit of nous, enthusiasm and knowledge. And luck, luck always comes into play because it's a fairly static business when it comes to jobs and they

basically created one for me because of my expertise in the subject of Tolkien. I'd been a huge fan of his ever since I first read *Lord of the Rings* at the age of 12 - it had informed everything I'd done, and it still does because the Jude Fisher name established itself because of my Visual Companions to the movie series."

How big a fan of Tolkien is she? She did a *Masters in Old Icelandic* because she loved his work so much, and ended up with a Viking rune tattooed on her arm; it's the ideogram for Odin (correctly pronounced, please note, Othin) who's the Norse god of both war and poetry. Johnson went under the needle after selling her first book, but hasn't since done a Jacqueline Wilson, adding tattoos instead of silver rings, for each subsequent title she's had published.

Johnson, the author, has always had a pretty intense day job, meaning that the writing has happened in whatever spare time there's been left over from her other obsession, rock climbing. So when did she decide to add to her workload and write for children? "Life isn't about making decisions, it's about what happens to you, and I woke from a dream about five and a half years ago with the seed of a story in my head." The story concerned a talking cat, a magical other world and a boy called Ben. At the time she was deep into a big fantasy series and the idea was, she says, miles away from what she was supposed to be writing but it just would not go away.

"I sat down one weekend and wrote and wrote and wrote, and kept this going for about four or five weeks, in between the adult stuff. I didn't know why I was doing it, but I really liked the characters and the story and it just ran away with me and suddenly I had half a book. I looked at it and thought 'what am I doing?'; I hadn't got a commission, I was going to run over deadline on the adult stuff and so I put it away." Then the whole JK phenomena exploded, and she felt as if the bandwagon had rolled over her and she left the book where it was - in today's equivalent of a bottom drawer - somewhere on a laptop.

That would have been that had not Jonathan Lloyd, her agent for Gabriel King, harassed her for something to sell. "I told him all I had was a half-finished children's book that I'd put away five years ago, not something I ever

imagined he'd be interested in. Having *finally* found it on an old hard disk I read it again and I really liked it and thought it would be great fun to finish. I gave Jonathan what there was and didn't have any expectation at all at that point as I didn't write it for a market or an audience, just wrote it because I liked it."

Several weeks went by and Johnson was beginning to think that no news wasn't, in fact, good news when Lloyd phoned to tell her there was going to be an auction. At which point, she says, she had to go and sit down and have a quiet moment. "Having got it into my head that the idea wasn't going to be a life-changer, then it was. I had the adult fantasy under commission, I had the visual companions to deliver and now I had two children's books to write. And a job." The Monday after the deal was done Johnson went to see Amanda Ridout, HarperCollins General Books MD, and told her that she was going to have to change her life and go part time. Everything in the garden rosy, then? Yes, except the idea which started out too big for one book has now become way too big to fit into two...