

2008/Jan JOANNE OWEN - Publishing News

You might well think, seeing Joanne Owen's name and picture on this page, that the interview would be about the marketing of children's books, Owen being the Children's Marketing Manager for Bloomsbury. Not so. Along with her extracurricular career as bass guitarist and sometime accordion player in the indie rock band Naevus, Owen is also a writer who has her debut novel, *Puppet Master*, about to be published by Orion in April. Time management, one imagines, just has to be her major core skill set.

While Owen never played an instrument as a child, and still doesn't see herself as "a musician", the music started to happen during her second year at St John's, Cambridge, where she was studying Social Anthropology and Social and Political Sciences, when she bought a bass guitar and taught herself how to play. And there is, she says, a circuitous link between what she studied and what she has subsequently written about through her love of European folk tales.

"Being a writer was, actually, the first thing I ever wanted to be, from a really young age...the music just came first," says Owen, who has been at Bloomsbury for three years, and was before that senior children's book buyer at Borders. "I always hoped the right idea would come along, and then that I could stick with something long enough so that I could actually finish it." The right idea finally did occur to her about eight years ago while on her first visit to the Czech capital, Prague. "Everyone kept telling me I was going to love the place because of the atmosphere, the buildings and the marionettes - I've always had a thing about puppets - and I'd also been reading a lot of Czech literature, especially about the city and the mythical 'mother of Prague', Libuse."

Here, then, was the spark, but why did it take so long for the flame to catch: did she know too much about the business? "No...I think my knowledge just made me more pragmatic and more realistic than I might otherwise have been, rather than putting me off. I knew the ropes, knew that it was going to be a lot of hard work and that it would be a good idea to get an agent...I understood the process and how it all worked." Having

said all that, Owen's route to market had more to do with chance than meticulous planning on her part.

"I'd done quite a lot of research, had written a few thousand words and I knew, vaguely, what the outline of the story was when Catherine Clarke [of the Felicity Bryan Agency] approached me...I'd mentioned to [book consultant] Wendy Cooling that I was working on something and she'd told Catherine, which was an amazing thing to happen because I was a long way off thinking I could send the idea to someone."

Clarke told Owen not to worry, that she'd read whatever she had knowing it was early material, and the next thing Owen knew the idea was on Fiona Kennedy's desk at Orion and she not only had an agent, she had an interested publisher. As simple as ABC - *Agent! Book! Celebrate!* - except it wasn't, as that was actually four years ago, while Owen was still working at Borders, and *Puppet Master* has only just recently appeared in bound proof form, with its many attendant decorations, trimmings and steel engravings (all courtesy of designer Dave Crook). What happened? Life, and a full-time job happened, "...and I didn't do enough planning, I just ran with a lot of different ideas and there was a lot of work trying to solidify the plot."

Threads of Czech myths, legends and fairy tales are delicately woven through this book, which wears the mantle of its research remarkably easily, never letting it get in the way of the telling, as Owen spins her tale of Milena, an orphaned girl whose father used to run the House of Dream Delights - the best marionette theatre in all Prague - and the swaggering, somewhat psychotic Puppet Master, a megalomaniac who is constantly shadowed by Zdenko and Zdenka, a pair of extremely creepy twins. "The story started with the myths and the idea of the Master of Marionettes and his Incredible Travelling Theatre of Bohemia, and setting it in turn-of-the-century Prague came later."

The rich concoction that is *Puppet Master* is now on the final leg of its somewhat lengthy journey towards the launch pad, so what does the future hold for Owen - has one book been enough, or are there more to come? "I've started the next idea, which is set in Prague again, in the late 16th century; it's still taking shape, so I can't say too much about it, but it takes

place between Vienna and Prague, at a time of great scientific, artistic and alchemical exploration, and will centre around the figure of Rudolph II, the Holy Roman Hapsburg Emperor, who was completely obsessed with magic and collecting curiosities for his *Kunstkammer* [Cabinet of Curiosities, or Memory Theatre].” This should, says Owen, be a quicker book to write, “but I still have to do a lot of research and plotting.” More trips to Prague would appear to be on the cards.

Musician and performer, marketeer and market expert, Owen, with her love of the theatrical, has now brought the three rather disparate strands of her working life together as an author and put them to work in book form; quite an achievement. For someone who has, during this part of her career, been involved in most aspects of the publishing business, what, I wondered, had been the most surprising part of actual authorship - being at the sharp end, if you like. The question stops Owen in her tracks for a moment. “I suppose,” she says, finally, “even though I’ve now got a copy of the proof, and what I’ve always wanted to happen *is* actually happening, it does feel really strange, almost unreal, that I’m about to be published.”