

2007/June JOANNE HARRIS - Publishing News

Joanne Harris first appeared on the literary radar in 1999 with her third novel, *Chocolat*. She was still working as a teacher when the book was published to much acclaim, and then went on to worldwide success and a subsequent film version, which starred Johnny Depp and Juliette Binoche - something of a fairy tale story in itself. Five novels and a couple of cook books down the line, Harris is soon to publish her first children's novel, *Runemarks*, written, she says, in what spare time she had between other ventures.

It is, true to its Norse roots, an epic journey and a nine-books-in-one fantasy tale of magic, enchantment, evil, danger and Maddy Smith, a girl born with the rust-coloured mark of an outsider on her hand. This novel has all the characteristics of a heavily researched project (Harris has, after all, been studying Old Norse) but looks, it appears, can be deceiving. "I don't do a tremendous amount of research, and I tend to write about things that already interest me and so I don't count the knowledge I gain as research; I've been interested in this subject since I was itty-bitty, a big mythology freak since an early age who's been writing Norse god stories since I was about six years old."

What attracted Harris to the Norse pantheon in particular, she says, is that as there were very few extant recorded stories she could go ahead and write her own. "I made up a huge number of alternative mythology stories throughout my school years, so *Runemarks* is in a way a continuation of the first things I ever wrote."

Harris, who retains her soft, Yorkshire burr, still lives not far from where she grew up with her French mother and an English father in Barnsley - a town rumoured to have been founded by someone of Danish/Viking origin. Was this book, then, something she'd been planning for a long time? "It hasn't quite been that calculated, but to a certain extent that's true; the first book I ever wrote, but never seriously submitted, was called *Witchlight* and was very much this kind of story in the same kind of universe." In

retrospect, she says, the best thing about the book was that it taught her to type.

Some characters from this early work have survived, as characters have a way of doing, and make an appearance in the new book, but Harris gave up on the original idea after having been told one too many times that her story was too dark, the vocabulary too complicated and there was no obvious age range. All the kind of objections now pretty much cast aside since Messrs Pullman and Rowling conclusively proved children were quite capable of reading well outside the box they'd previously been put in.

When her daughter Anouchka was about nine Harris began telling her what would eventually become *Runemarks*. "I was having fun with the story, she was having fun listening to it, and for quite a long time that seemed enough...until her demands to know when it was going to be published prompted me to show it to someone. I had, at that point, written probably all but the last of the nine books and was charging towards the end by then at such speed that I thought 'Let's not fool ourselves here, there's 500 pages - and it might be 500 pages of pants - but I just can't pretend that it doesn't exist any more.'"

Although Harris says she never had any intentions to write a children's book, her primary agent had promised a specialist sub-agent that if one did ever appear she would represent it, which is why Jennifer Luithlen was the person Harris sent the manuscript to. "I asked, very tentatively, for her opinion, what did she think? She loved it, as did the readers she gave it to, but I was still a bit wary because obviously it's not what I'm known for." Wary though she may have been, with fantasy still selling very well and the patent synergy there would be between the adult and children's Doubleday imprints (there's a high profile campaign running right now for *The Lollipop Shoes*, Harris's latest novel) this is a manuscript that was never going to end up on a slush pile somewhere.

Along with a troupe of human characters, gods, seers and goblins, Harris also invented her own runic system for the project and the book comes complete with a checklist, plus three maps and a full cast list. "My system is based on the Norse originals but I've been creative in terms of their

meanings and how to use them, about which not very much is known - there's no Rosetta Stone for runes. Most of what I've written is pretty close to the original source material, what little of it there is, so I've had to do a certain amount of creative interpretation but I haven't actually made anything up from scratch. This isn't, though, in any way a historical novel because I didn't want to do that; it is a fantasy, which I have had some difficulty explaining, about a parallel world of slightly different possibilities, rather than an old world."

Runemarks, says Harris, is a book that she hopes will subvert the fantasy genre and also one that she's really looking forward to getting out and promoting. "I'm going to have a great time! Fifteen years of being stuck in front of classrooms of kids means I have no fear of that at all; one of the nice things about talking to kids about books is that adults ask you these tremendously prepared questions, while kids ask you things like 'If you were a *Simpsons* character, who would you be?' and 'What's your favourite spider?'. After having all the adult novels, this book has been such a refreshing change for me - there were no expectations, no one was tapping their watch waiting for it and, having had such a terrific time writing it, it is very unlikely that I'll never do it again."