

## 2005/March JEAN URE - Publishing News

It does come to something when you can honestly say, hand on heart, that you can't remember how many books you've written - and by that meaning ones which aren't still sitting in a cupboard somewhere, but have actually been published. But then Jean Ure did have her first book, *Dance for Two*, accepted when she was 16 and still at school. "That was by Harrap, and it was my father who sent it in; he actually got my aunt to type it out, but I didn't know there were two copies and he was sending it off. It went to 13 publishers, and number thirteen accepted it."

Was this, then the career path she'd always had mapped out for herself and she was just lucky to get going so early on? No. Ure had really wanted to be a ballet dancer, and still has about her something of the poise, control and bird-like manner of a dancer. "My mum said we couldn't afford for me to have ballet lessons, so that was always something of a pipe dream...but I always knew I was going to write, it was something I did all the time." Except she didn't do what you might expect and go on to university to study Eng. Lit. or Lang., she instead went to drama school.

"After the book was published I just about stayed on long enough to take A levels, and I thought that's it, I'm a writer and went rushing out into the world like a lunatic. My head mistress told me I was a stupid girl, but no one else said anything and I suddenly realised you don't become a writer just like that. I'd written one book about a girl who wanted to become a ballet dancer, and I hadn't got anything else to write about."

After a string of menial jobs she decided she needed some more education and that drama school would be entertaining, which it was; it was also where she met her husband. Her drama career failed to take off because she had another book published, an adult novel she says is best forgotten about, but which got her a lot of work from her publisher translating books from French into English. It was a lot better, financially, than writing her own books, she says, as they paid per thousand words and it was in essence up to her how long she made the manuscript.

“They were pulp fiction, really, by someone called Sven Hassell,” continues Ure, throwing this comment into the conversation like a hand grenade. The author of *Skinny Melon and Me* and *The Sweet Life of Sally Tomato* was the person behind all those tacky, genre-defining WWII blood’n’guts novels? Who would have known? But Ure kept on writing, trying romantic novels, “attempting to be Georgette Heyer, because she’d just died” and finally, in about 1980, coming back into the children’s fold with *See You Thursday*, which was published by Kestrel.

Her editor was Martin West, now with Happy Cat Books and, even though her then agent wanted her to do glitzy adult blockbusters, Ure realised she’d found her niche and didn’t want to go back to the adult world. She says she prefers things with a narrower focus, but her ear for the voice and eye for the detail of teen girls’ lives makes that comment a tad modest. When did she fully appreciate how connected she was to teenagers, that that was where her head was? “I think I can actually do the same thing for adults as well, but it’s more fun writing for kids...what did take me a long time to accept was that basically I’m a comic writer.

“I did something called *The Plague Trilogy*, very serious, quite searing, and it caused me no end of grief because I was writing against my abilities. When I started writing for HarperCollins, with *Skinny Melon*, I finally gave into it and now all my stuff is funny, even if it has a serious face; that’s what I’m best at and what I’m happiest with...it doesn’t get any critical acclaim, as funny books hardly ever do, but they’re enormous fun to write.”

Inspiration is not a problem for Ure, one thing, she says, often leading on to another. One of her recent books, *Secret Meeting*, about two girls meeting someone they’d contacted on the Internet, gave birth to her latest, *Is Anybody There?* “I was thinking that it doesn’t matter how many times you’re told not to do something, you can still go and do it so easily, and I suddenly remembered how, when I was 13, I very nearly got into a car with a guy I didn’t know; it still makes blood run cold to think of it. Ideas spin off other ideas.”

What Ure captures so well are the innate differences between boys and girls, the Mars/Venus axis; what she makes such an integral part of her

storytelling is the minutiae, the detail, the sheer garrulousness of her female characters. Her books, she says, smiling, would be an awful lot shorter if they were written from a male point of view. “It is difficult writing the kind of books I do with a boy as the central character, but I am doing that for my next one, for only the second time, and only because boys are always asking me, quite angrily, why I always write about girls.”

Ure now writes two books a year - fortunate, she says, that they're short - and is on that creative production line where, as a book is publishing, another's being edited, a new one in the process of being written and on a note pad somewhere are the jottings that will become the next project. Is she still as energised and excited by what she does? “I am, it's still fun, and when people ask me why I write for children, as they do, that's what I tell them...if you can't have fun with the work you do God help you!”