

2003/March SHERRYL JORDAN - Publishing News

Bear with me, it's complicated. Award-winning author Sherryl Jordan has had eleven books published in total; on Monday this week Simon & Schuster published her second book here in the UK - but actually the ninth novel she wrote - the epic fantasy *Secret Sacraments*. And epic it is, in more ways than one. Jordan started writing the story a decade ago, and it was first published in her native New Zealand in 1996; subsequently she substantially rewrote the book and HarperCollins published it in the US four years later. Now, finally, we have it here. Phew.

Jordan lives and works in Tauranga, on the North island, 16,000 miles away and 13 hours ahead. *Secret Sacrament* is, she told me down a crystal clear line, the most different book she's written. "It's a world I've created, loosely modelled on Ancient Rome, and not set in Medieval times; it originally took me three years to write, but the novel really began in my childhood, when I was enthralled by books about the Roman Empire."

She was, she continues, astounded that such a great nation could crumble from within, weakened by its own corruption, and then be wiped out by so-called barbarian tribes. "From my childhood, too, came a fascination with medicine and anatomy...I've woven into the book my interest in all forms of healing," she says, "and the story also deals with the themes of loss and death."

Jordan trained for two years as a nurse and loved the surgical aspect of the job, "...but I'm also a great believer in the power of faith and the book is about what I've come to believe and what works for me," she says. Were these subjects best dealt with within the fantasy genre, I wondered? "Yes, in the real world they'd be a little way out," she replies, "although we do use the powers [my hero] Gabriel has, to a degree...they happen all the time, but I've concentrated them."

The imagined world of the vast, acquisitive Navoran Empire and the Shinali tribe, who cling to the treaties which are supposed to protect their rights to what's left of their fertile homelands, also has echoes of what has happened to many native nations, all over the world, and the story is, like a

complex tapestry, spun on a broad canvas. It's the kind of story you'd imagine would demand a sequel but, so far, Jordan hasn't written one.

"I am thinking of resurrecting Gabriel's story - not actually writing it at the moment, but thinking whether I can get back into that world," says Jordan. "Actually, what I'm doing right now is re-reading *Sacred Sacrament* because it's so different. My US editor, Toni Markiet, said she'd publish the New Zealand edition, exactly as it was, if that was what I wanted; but she did say she had some ideas for changes. Her ideas were all great, things I thought I should have thought of, so I spent eight months re-writing and I now hope it will be republished in Australia and New Zealand. It's a completely different book to the original 1996 edition, in fact it's now my favourite book, and I especially love the UK cover!"

The person she's writing for is, initially, herself Jordan tells me. "I write for the pure joy of it," she says, adding that she actually intended *Secret Sacrament* to be for adults, and in the US HarperCollins have also put out an edition under their sci-fi and fantasy imprint, Eos. "I don't mind being marketed to teenagers, but I do mind being referred to as a 'children's writer' as young adults are not children - probably I haven't grown up myself, but I find them very interesting."

Right towards the end of our conversation Jordan reveals that, although she'd wanted to write since she was four years old, she started her professional life using pencils to draw with rather than write. "I entered a competition in 1980, which I won, and I ended up an illustrator," she says. "I was miserable as I really did want to be a writer, and it's hard to give up something you're successful at, but I'm pleased I did."

She does, though, still keep her hand in. She drew the frontispiece map in *Secret Sacrament* and has also done the chapter heads and ends for her latest novel, *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*. "It's set in Medieval times and the chapter heads and ends are designed to make it look like a Medieval book," Jordan tells me. "I treat the dragon as a real creature, and it's definitely a book for younger readers."

International publishing can sometimes seem to be run by the rules of the kind of time-slip plots so beloved of sci-fi writers, with books - such as

Secret Sacraments - coming out in one territory ten years before another, which, for authors, must be like some weird kind of déjà vu. You've been there, you've done the interviews...and then, there you are, having to do them all over again. Still, at least Sherryl Jordan was having her personal Groundhog Day looking out over the Bay of Plenty.