

## 2004/May NICOLA MORGAN - Publishing News

Nicola Morgan claims that her entire career in publishing has been approached from entirely the wrong direction; her first books were educational, which wasn't what she'd trained to do, and though she first started writing an adult novel in 1981, when she was at Cambridge studying Classics and Philosophy, it was 21 years later that Hodder published her teen novel *Mondays Are Red*. By that time she was already the best selling author of the non-fiction educational series *I Can Learn* from Egmont.

“Originally I hadn't thought of writing a novel for children, I was trying to write for adults,” says Morgan, “and then I read *Skellig* when it came out and it changed my views about what could be done with language for young people. For some reason, unfairly, I thought that a story for teenagers could not use complex language or ideas, but reading *Skellig* completely changed my view.

“The one thing you have to do for this age group is be direct and get straight to the point,” Morgan continues, “you can have deep, interesting ideas, but the story must be there...when I was trying to write for adults I thought people would just love the sound of the words and that the story didn't matter at all. But it does, no one reads anything without a story to carry them through.”

Morgan followed *Mondays Are Red*, a book about synesthesia - a condition whereby sense impressions come confused - with *Fleshmarket*, a historical novel set in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Edinburgh and based in part on a true story. “I never set out to write a historical novel, but I happened to go on a tour of the gory bits of the Royal College of Surgeons; we were taken into a room members of the public aren't normally allowed to go into and told an incredibly moving story of something that had happened there before anaesthesia.”

She was in the process of putting together another book at the time, but nonetheless wrote down what amounted to the first chapter of an idea based on what she'd heard and sent it to her then editor at Hodder, Chris Kloet. “She said I should forget the other book, this was the story she wanted to hear,” says Morgan, “and I told her I didn't know anything else about it, hadn't a clue

about what might happen, and she replied ‘You’ll have to work it out then, won’t you!’”

And what happened to the book she was writing? It’s still there, a story patiently waiting to be told, but having to wait as it’s been abandoned yet again by another idea. Seemingly not a writer who wants to remain in one place for too long, Morgan’s latest novel, *Sleepwalking*, is in many ways her take on a brave new world, with influences from other dystopian visions of the future. The influences are, she says, deliberate, for reasons which will become obvious to readers as they progress through the story.

*Sleepwalking*, then, isn’t so much science fiction - although there is much about the book that allows it to be called that - but more, Morgan says, what Margaret Atwood would call future speculative fiction. “I’m not a sci-fi fan, and I don’t feel that even though the book is set in the future it is science fiction, in the same way I don’t feel *Brave New World* is either...the science is there incidentally, for me the humans are the important thing and while the machines are going to change [in the future], I believe there are things about humans that aren’t going to change at all - and those are the bits I’m interested in.”

One on level, Morgan says, the book is about her view of the importance of story and language, but she thinks the seed for the idea was sown the day we all watched the Twin Towers fall. “For me, when I heard the news, I had this extraordinary feeling of fear and despair and that nothing mattered except your family and the people you loved and keeping them safe.”

A few days before September 11, Morgan had been told she was getting a contract for *Mondays Are Red*; with the whole world seemingly flying apart it appeared obvious to her that it wouldn’t now go ahead, and what was the point of stories anyway - who cared about some aspiring author’s book? “Right then I didn’t care either, it was surviving that mattered,” Morgan goes on, “and then, quite soon afterwards, I began to think I was wrong, that stories and language are what make us human, they’re the things that transcend everything else and they’re what make us different from and higher than animals.”

To get from that point to *Sleepwalking* required something of a leap of thought and two years hard work, but the conclusion Morgan came to was that the power of stories and language are what bind us together as humans. “Every culture throughout history has had stories, and very often anthropologists find that they’re linked in ways that can’t be explained by people travelling from one place to another,” she says. “There seems to be almost a collective consciousness tying us all together, and I wanted to say something about that, about the power of language...and the politics of the power of language and privilege.”

Morgan’s storytelling is infused with her ideas and philosophies, but she does feel the story is the most important element. “I’m not actually a natural storyteller, it’s the bit that comes with the greatest difficulty to me, the actual telling of the story...I’m hopeless at making them up on the spot to tell my children and I really have to work at it...[the novel] is a way of saying what I think and telling a story at the same time.”