

2003/Sept PETER ACKROYD - Publishing News

Peter Ackroyd is a busy man: reviewer, author, broadcaster...and he also has 1,600 endpapers to sign. They're for the initial two volumes of *Voyages Through Time*, a new DK non-fiction series and his first work for children, which publishes this coming September. Before that, August sees the publication of his latest novel from Chatto, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, and in the autumn BBC 2 will broadcast a three-part programme which he's presenting, based on his magnum opus *London: The Biography*.

While this might seem like a fearsome schedule, it's all par for the course for Ackroyd, who normally writes two books at the same time as having another project in preparation. "First thing in the morning I work on the novel, the rest of the morning I work on the other book and then the afternoon and evening I spend researching something else. That's the way it goes," he explains, signing the endpapers as he talks.

With so much Ackroyd activity, it's hard to know where to start, but let's take things in order of publication. "*The Clerkenwell Tales* came out of the blue," says Ackroyd. "Quite coincidentally, Chatto commissioned a number of biographies and the first one was about Chaucer, which was set at the same time as *The Clerkenwell Tales* - an added incentive to learn about the 14th century." When it comes to absorbing information, Ackroyd is something of a sponge. Soaking up facts is a habit he acquired as an undergraduate. "I make knowledge into a pattern because it then becomes easier to learn."

It was while writing *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, he continues, that he first realised he could use history in an imaginative way, and *The Tales* is nothing if not imaginative history. The story takes place in the final year of the 14th century, a time when London was seething with rumour, a time when religion and magic lived cheek by jowl and conditions were ideal for panic to take grip and spread like a disease, infecting a populace already disillusioned with both King and Church. It doesn't help that in the House of Saint Mary at Clerkenwell is a nun, Sister Clarice, who speaks in tongues and whose prophecies are both wild and alarming.

While the background story of Henry Bolingbroke's uprising against Richard II is true, all the other characters, organisations and events are completely made up. "I even made up most of the footnotes," admits Ackroyd, "although one or two are true, like the remains of the nunnery and the tunnels under Clerkenwell." The footnotes themselves are the historical remains of parts of the original draft of the book that his editor said didn't work, "so I decided to put them at the end as I don't like to waste anything".

With an encyclopaedic project like *Voyages Through Time*, there will, you suspect, be room for just about everything. "I love doing research, it piques my sense of curiosity, which is why I leapt at the challenge of doing *Voyages Through Time*. I've written three volumes and I'm working on the fourth now...I'll be doing two a year for the next few years." Daunting though this might sound, Ackroyd does have assistance in the shape of a researcher, but what about all those facts, that mountain of information? Where does all that go when he's finished a book? "Once I've used it, I forget all I've learned. I just dump it. Everything goes and even now I've completely forgotten the stages of the Earth's development and the names of all the dinosaurs."

Anyone used to dry, dusty non-fiction texts will, if they pick up either of the first two titles - *In the Beginning* or *Escape from Earth* - find themselves with a very different kind of book in their hands. Ackroyd is a storyteller, DK has given him the chance to tell the biggest one there is and he doesn't disappoint. Reading it you can hear his voice, turning collections of bare facts into tales ripe for telling. As he was researching and writing, did he have moments of wonder himself? "Continually...things never cease to surprise me, from space to the Egyptians, everything is a continual source of wonder. And if you can tell stories to children, you've won half the battle of storytelling."

And so to television. Ackroyd's first foray was *Dickens*, a series accompanied by his second biography of the great author, *Dickens - Public Life and Private Passions*.

“It was a great success,” says Ackroyd, as endpapers continue to fly under his ever-moving pen, “and I think that’s why they commissioned the London programmes. Writing for TV is much the same process as with books, except that it has the extra inconvenience of having to say it all again in front of a camera. I felt awkward to begin with, then I relaxed and enjoyed it more; it’s a very unnatural thing to do, being ‘normal’ watched by a camera crew. I wouldn’t want to make it my profession.”

Some authors become inextricably linked with a place - Chandler to the mean streets of Los Angeles, Runyon with Broadway - and Ackroyd a Londoner born and bred, has assumed the role of London’s chronicler. “Most of my books are set there...you could call it the landscape of my mind, of my imagination. It never loses its appeal or it’s possibilities, although I may eventually run out of people to write about.”

The new novel, which he’s half way through and which as yet has no title, is about Charles and Mary Lamb and their association with a literary forger called William Ireland. Not content with fabricating a deed ‘signed’ by William Shakespeare, Ireland wrote an entire play - *Vortigern and Rowena* - which opened and closed on the same night, 2 April 1796, at Sheridan’s Drury Lane theatre. “Ireland was a very famous figure of his time, but he and *Vortigern* are now forgotten; when I came across him I decided to write a play about him, but it never came to anything and so I decided to write the novel.”

His next “big book”, which he and an assistant have just spent the last 18 months researching, is to be a life of Shakespeare. It will probably take him a year to write. And so Ackroyd’s day turns. Work, he says, is more or less continual, “with the odd weekend or a fortnight’s holiday - that’s the longest time I take off,” he says. The pile of paper to be autographed is now almost half its original size. He hasn’t, amazingly, spoiled any to them.