

Completing a recent questionnaire about motivation and children's writers convinced Joan Aiken that she writes children's fiction for pleasure and because it is a discipline. She has written about twenty books, both children's fiction and adult thrillers. In 1969 she won the Guardian children's fiction award and was a runner up for the Carnegie Medal. At present she is working on several projects including a full length story and a television series for very young children. She has two children and lives in Sussex.

Joan Aiken

A thread of mystery

What I am going to do, partly, is talk about the things that have influenced me in my writing – particularly of course the books that have influenced me – and partly I am going to talk about mystery.

When I was on a visit to America this summer I was invited to go and tell stories to the children at the local school, and afterwards they talked to me about the kind of books they liked. (It was just a small village school and they were quite young children – eight to nine-year-olds.) One of the things they said was that they particularly enjoyed unusual language in books. And when I asked them if they preferred books to be funny or exciting, they all with one accord said that what they liked best was a mystery. I'm aware that there's a linguistic ambiguity here, as in America the word mystery is used where we'd say thriller or whodunnit, but just the same this stuck in my mind because I think children do have a feeling for mystery. This was certainly true of me, when I was very young.

I can date some of my first reading quite accurately because of two major events that happened in my life early on. At the age of about three and a half I had diphtheria, and then when I was nearly five my family moved from the house I was born, in Rye, to the house where my mother and my stepfather still live. So from the circumstances in which I first read some books, or they were read to me, I can tell how old I was at the time.

My mother was a devoted reader-aloud. She began as soon as one was able to understand any words at all, and if one was ill she was prepared to go on reading almost all day – so my diphtheria was a highwater mark of literary experience. Of course all the books I had with me during that particular illness had to be burned, but several were so precious that they also had to be replaced instantly. *Peacock Pie* and the *Just So Stories* were among the replacements – I still catch myself feeling about my copies of these that they are slightly inferior, not the genuine originals. By the time I'd learned to read for myself – not till five, quite late – I'd had an immense amount read to

me, and from this amount a few books stand out like Everests. I've been trying to analyze what is the common factor in these books from my prereading period, and from a few later ones, that made them so particularly fascinating.

Before I go on to that, perhaps I ought to fill in on a bit of family background which may help to explain what I am going to say. My parents weren't English, they were American and Canadian respectively; they had come to England about three years before my birth because they thought that the education in England would be better than that in Massachusetts, where they had been living up till then. I think my brother and sister – who were twelve and seven years older – were still, at the time I was born, very uprooted and homesick for the village on Cape Cod where they had lived before the family emigrated. I used to hear them talking about this place, South Yarmouth – which I misheard for years as Southy Armouth, never having seen the words written down – and its name still has for me a wonderful magical incantatory quality. It sounded like a sort of Eden that had been lost for ever through nobody's fault. I think that my mother, who knew hardly anybody in England, was homesick also. Then when I was four my parents were divorced and my elder brother and sister went off to boarding school so that was another disruption. I was rather solitary, as after my mother remarried we moved to a small village where there weren't many children and I had no regular friends for years. Anybody who, as a foreigner, has gone to live in an English village will know what a very long time it takes to feel that one belongs there, and of course this was much more so thirty years ago. We loved the place, which was very beautiful, but we didn't know the people. So even when my brother and sister were home for the holidays we were all thrown very much on our own resources which were, of course, walking and reading. The house was stuffed with books – my books, the sixteen years accretions of my brother and sister, grown up books, all mixed together, shelves in every room except the kitchen. So after the move I rapidly learned to read and after that at once started writing. Writing was the family trade – my father wrote novels, poetry, short stories; my stepfather wrote novels, poetry, short stories – so I never had the least intention of being anything but a writer. My only worry was that I was a girl, since I considered female writers inferior. I meant to use just my initials when I became professional, but it's as well I got deflected from this aim, since my brother and sister write books too, and as all our names begin with J it would have led to confusion. Anyway from five on I wrote a mass of poetry and stories, mostly unfinished – I still have all the notebooks I filled. And as well as a written mythology I had an unwritten one. Like most solitary children I invented my own imaginary country, an island peopled with all my favourite characters from books, over whom I was queen, leading them into battle on a white horse modelled on Joan of Arc and Britomart, who were my heroines for years.