



Interview for *Half-truths and White Lies*

These questions have been submitted to Jane by readers.

Your first novel is *Half-truths and White Lies*. Have you read it again since it was published and are there parts of it that you would change?

I had the advantage of an excellent copy-editor, so the version that went to print is not quite the original. In the first version, I gave away the 'big reveal' too early. I was asked to write a couple of new chapters after I won the competition, and I think they are some of the best in it. Apart from those changes, when doing readings, I find some of the language is a little long-winded. These days, I read my work out loud.

***Half-truths and White Lies* won the Daily Mail First Novel Award. How did you receive the news?**

To be honest, I was completely gob-smacked. I already knew that I had been short-listed and that was more than I had hoped for.

I had only found out about the competition by complete chance. I attended the Winchester Writer's Conference for the first time in June. There were many different lectures I could have chosen, but I chose to go to a lecture given by Jack Sheffield of *Teacher Teacher* fame and a very nice lady from Transworld, whose name I forget, who urged everyone with a finished manuscript to submit it, promising that they would be read in their entirety. For me, that was the incentive to enter. The closing date for entries was only two days later, so it was a case of getting it to the Post Office as soon as it opened and praying it would reach them in time.

The timing of the announcement was absolutely perfect. I had left my job of twenty-three years September and went on holiday but, three weeks later, the honeymoon period was well and truly over. Every time that I turned on the television there was talk of financial doom and gloom. I began to worry that leaving a secure job at the start of a recession had been a terrible mistake.

I got the call from Transworld when I was at home on my own and, because I was alone, I wasn't quite sure how to react. There was no one to ask, 'Did that just happen?' I can completely understand the sentiments expressed by Myrrah Stanford Smith who, at the age of 82, signed a three-book deal with Honna. She says she insisted on putting down the phone, pulling herself together and ringing them back to make sure it was true. She had expected the manuscript to be returned with a rejection letter. Myrrah also summed up what it means to see your work in print beautifully. She said 'To have my book, my words, in my hands as my very own book - it was wonderful.'

The Daily Mail First Novel Award was a one-off. Do you have any idea why it wasn't repeated? Surely recognition for first novels is vital for the industry, and for an author's career?

I was the second recipient of the award. Roland Vernon won it in 2007 with 'A Dark Enchantment', which was a Greek Romance. The Daily Mail had already decided to withdraw by the time that my win was announced. The main reason was purely commercial. 2008 saw the beginning of the recession and book sales dropped. But I do agree: it is a great shame. It is becoming more and more difficult for first time writers to get published. Publishers have reduced their schedules and are less willing to take risks.

On my travels I met an editor who was offered the manuscript of the Kite Runner and loved it, but didn't think that a book about Afghanistan would sell. The cover of my copy says that over eight million copies have been sold. With such strict criteria, it seems obvious that talent is going to slip through the net. Isabel Ashdown, author of Glasshopper, credits her competition win for the Mail on Sunday Novel Openings competition as the factor that secured her an agent.

Your first (unpublished) manuscript took over four years to write. Do you think this was lack of writing experience or because your life was busy with other things?

There is no doubt that working full-time was an issue, but it also meant that I maximised on what time I had. I am at my most productive under pressure. Part of the reason the novel took so long was that I was tackling personal subject-matter and I wanted to do it justice. The second reason is that the writing was a learning process and the first version was rejected. Having sent submissions out to agents, I was receiving what I soon learned was the standard reply: 'We are not taking on any new clients at the moment.' But a couple of agents were kind enough to tell me, 'We think you can write but your work is completely unmarketable.' They recommended that I get a professional review from the Literary Agency Consultancy. Six weeks later I received a sixteen-page review telling me what they liked and what they didn't like, what should stay and what should go and perhaps the most shocking piece of advice of all – they thought I should turn it into a crime novel. It was a piece of advice I didn't want to take. I didn't even particularly like crime novels. But I gave myself a good ticking off. There's no point asking for advice if you don't take it, so I re-wrote the manuscript. It wasn't a crime novel as it turned out – but it was enough to get me the attention of two agents, one of whom I chose to represent me. Sadly, success didn't follow, but my then agent was the first person who said to me, 'Jane, you are a writer,' which sounded so much more glamorous than being in insurance.

Can you remember where you first saw 'Half-truths and White Lies' on the shelves?

It was on the day of release when I did five signings in central London. It is terrible to think that only two years later, two of those book shops have closed! The first was at Books Etc. at Victoria Station, followed closely by Foyles (where I was asked to add my name to a white-board of authors' signatures), Hatchards on Piccadilly, which was just a treat, and Borders on Oxford Street. I also had a number of friends dotted around the country who started to send me photos of themselves with my book on the day of release.

You have three narrators; twenty-three year old Andrea (the main protagonist), her godfather Peter Churcher and her aunty Faye. What made you go with more than one 'voice'?

Having decided to write in the first person, the decision to use three narrators was forced on me. There was no one character who could possibly have known the entire story. I wasn't put off by this idea, except to try to make the three voices as distinct as possible. Jodi Piccolt used this technique to create multi-dimensional characters in *Vanishing Acts*. We hear how the character introduces themselves. Then we hear how two other characters see them. The effect this approach had that I didn't anticipate is that the characters who remain a mystery – because they can't tell their own stories – become the most interesting.

With three first-person voices, do you rely on them to tell the whole story or do you also have third-person narrative in between?

No there is no third party narrator. A word of warning to all aspiring writers – whilst writing in the first person really helps you to get inside the head of the characters, it appears to be frowned upon by agents. I had a face-to-face meeting with one and she looked at the first sentence and said, 'Oh, it's in the first person,' and that was that.

Faye is the character who appealed to me because she's misunderstood and is 'prone to lengthy monologues. Do you have a favourite of the three, or would that be like choosing between children?

I agree. Faye is my favourite. For all her flaws, she's brutally honest and she is the rebel.

Andrea's parents called one of their daughters pretty, the other clever. How do the sisters react to each other given these 'labels'?

Andrea is the pretty one; Faye is the clever one. I am very interested in the psychology of families and the effect that labelling has on children. In the case of Andrea, she wasn't brought up to expect a career. At the same time, she was concerned that her window of opportunity was limited because her looks would fade. In Faye's case, she felt that being pretty was valued by her parents more highly than intelligence. She grew up in the shadow of her perfect sister, who was wheeled out for visitors, while she felt that she was hidden away. I don't have a solution. I am not sure what parents should do if they have two children who are very different. I grew up in a family of five children. We were all treated the same, with the same standards imposed on us, which was equally as unfair in its own way.

Your Amazon page talks of your stage fright. Is this getting easier the more public events you do?

I don't think stage fright ever wanes but you do develop coping mechanisms. In my professional life, I would feel terribly self-conscious every time I had to stand in front of a room of people, but I was frequently videoed and found that what I was conscious of didn't necessarily come across to the audience. I recently saw Peter Gabriel play, and he got so tangled up in his mic lead during the opening number that he had to go off stage and start again. It was actually quite a magical moment. Fluffing your lines is one of the only ways that a public speaker has to gain the sympathy of the audience, so it isn't a bad thing to get tangled up in your words occasionally. The trick is to be able to laugh it off.

Where do you think the boundary lies between women's fiction and romance, for instance Mills & Boon? Do you think you could write a Mills & Boon novel?

That's a difficult question to answer because this year's shortlist for the Orange Prize show just how difficult it is to categorise women's fiction and how diverse the subject matter is: *Room* deals with confinement; *Grace Williams says It Loud* disability; *The Tigers Wife* deals with living in a time of conflict; *Annabelle* deals with being a haemaphrodite. I wouldn't say that any of these issues are women's issues. They're simply human issues.

Did you watch the BBC's first *Book Review Show*? The theme was 'All About Women' and legends such as Ruth Rendell, Faye Weldon and Joanne Harris discussed the difficulties facing women writers. Some of them would argue that there is no such thing as women's fiction except in the mind of the marketing guys. From being a guest at book clubs - all run by women so far - and seeing the reading lists, the message is clear. It is impossible to categorise what women like to read. Men, however, appear to like to read books that have been written by men.

As for Mills and Boon, I would have to say no. If I can't stop a sex scene outside the bedroom door, I tend to either rely on comedy or the sheer awkwardness of the situation. I blame my Catholic upbringing. I would also argue that some of the most romantic books that I have ever read are written by men: Martin Davies's *The Unicorn Road* blew me away. *One Day*, David Nichols!