



May We Recommend... Gillian Rubinstein

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Adrian Jackson meets the Australian writer.

Adrian Jackson looks her work.

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Gillian Rubinstein is a very successful and popular writer of children's books in Australia where she's lived for the last seventeen years. Revisiting England last summer to coincide with the publication of two of her books, she spent a day in Bristol... and **BfK** duly despatched me to meet her.

Space Demons, her first novel, was published in Britain in 1989 after winning a number of awards in Australia. It draws in its readers with the excitement and fascination of the computer game and, as so often happens, violence seems to be part of the solution with skill earning the players a gun to destroy the demons. But, by a clever twist, the violence comes to be understood as the problem: the game has snared them with their own hate, feeding and breeding on it, making them into demons, too. To 'win' the game the children have to acknowledge their own violence, give up the guns and rethink their behaviour. As Elaine, one of the main characters, puts it: 'It's what we think we are that makes us what we are. But changing the way you think is so painful.'

One reason for visiting Bristol was a first meeting with Diana Wynne Jones, whom Gillian called her unwitting mentor'. Gillian had actually been reading **A Charmed Life** (Puffin, 0 14 03.1075 4, £2.50) during the writing of **Space Demons** and it was interesting to hear that Diana Wynne Jones had picked up verbal echoes of her book. Her own powerful fantasy novels have several times drawn on the world of fantasy games and show how 'this shared language of the imagination', as Gillian called it, can be used in fantasy novels to take children out of and yet into themselves.

Gillian 'wants to entertain' and yet feels that 'you cannot write today without addressing the problem of violence'. Because 'you sound terribly preachy if you write about the real', she finds it 'very satisfying combining the two elements of very strong fantasy and very strong real worlds' so that, as in **Space Demons**, on one level, the children are 'just playing a game', but:

'Inside the game they had been forced to know each other at such an intense level that it was hard to adjust to the everyday world again. They had seen a little too much of themselves and each other.'

Gillian Rubinstein appreciated the power of the computer game partly through watching her own children. This world of fantasy, where so many children are, is where she starts from - but what she does with it, where she takes the reader, is likely to be new to them. The journey of the novel has been a journey into self-knowledge and the demons are finally ones of their own making. As the quotation from the frontispiece puts it: 'We has found the enemy and they is us.'

It isn't surprising to learn that the novel won a peace prize in Australia, but I was intrigued to discover that fiction had become fact and Elaine's words at the end of the novel had been made real. She had wanted to create an 'all-star, live

production of **Space Demons**' and the real one is now in its third season. Gillian now has plans for another of her novels to take to the stage.

Skymaze is dedicated to 'everyone who asked for a sequel'. (The popularity of both is such that there will probably be a third, as yet unwritten, book in which the mysterious Professor Ito, the creator of the games, may be tracked down.) The main characters from the first novel reappear, but it's largely an undeveloped relationship from the first novel which is examined here. Once again the apparently weak grow stronger, partly through confidence, but also through 'skill co-operation and courage'.

Beyond the Labyrinth also won a major award, chosen as Australian Children's Book of the Year, but it's strikingly different in form. In part at least, it takes the style of a 'Choose Your Own Adventure', but is written a little disconcertingly in the present tense using a great deal of intercutting between what are often brief episodes. The central character, Brent, is an alienated teenager who throws a die to determine his responses to the people and events he watches. At the end, we are invited to acknowledge our own voyeurism and join in the die-throwing to decide on an ending.

It's a challenging read in other ways, too. There's violent language which shocks (the effect of this is lost in the bowdlerised English edition), and Brent's bleak perspective is alleviated only to the extent that, in Victoria's words of advice, he might live 'as if... You just have to get on with life, do what you can.'

Any 'message' is inextricably bound up with entertainment for Gillian Rubinstein however, and the show will go on. In this case in a stage version with the audience having to cope with dice-throwing for an ending. They'll have to come back if they want to see other possibilities, as long as the die allows it!

Gillian Rubinstein clearly enjoys her work and loves being a part of what is a small, but strong community of children's writers in Australia where, she says, the market for books is 'booming'. Her next book is to be 'an anti-science-fiction story about the way societies treat children - which is not good.' It's to be called **Galaxerina**... 'I've almost finished it ... all I've got to do is write it!'

I look forward to it and hope that it won't be long before children here catch up with her books. They're well worth seeking out.

All Gillian Rubinstein's titles are published in Mammoth paperback at £2.25 each:

Space Demons, 0 7497 0410 1

Skymaze, 0 7497 0397 0

Beyond the Labyrinth, 0 7497 0280 X

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