



Authorgraph No.86: Jane Hissey

Article Author:

[Stephanie Nettell](#) [1]

[86](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

Jane Hissey interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**.

Jane Hissey interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**

<!--break-->

The single-track train trundled through the Sussex spring, past oast-houses, primroses, catkins, stiff-legged lambs and a nonchalant cock pheasant. It was outside commuter hours, and no one left and no one came on the bare platforms ? which, like Adlestrop, will probably perish in the approaching blizzard of market forces. Jane Hissey and three-year-old Ralph waited for the train and me, and then, in another nostalgia-filled moment, we all waved to the guard as he hung smiling from the train as it jogged gently to the next and last stop on the line.

I've been to launch parties for Jane Hissey where her career has sounded like a fairy story of discovery and fabulous success ? which is scarcely how 10 years of painstaking work feels to her. But now, not a day passes without a deep appreciation of the house the family were able to buy two years ago. Surrounded by vast rough lawns and a dishevelled orchard bright with run-wild daffodils, it looks downhill over six acres of fields and woods, from which deer emerge in the early morning to drink at their ponds and stream.

A copy of a French farmhouse, it was started near the beginning of the century by an author who'd had one book published, but, failing with the next, he had been forced to sell before it was finished ? his spirit should be content now with the success of its present owners. It was bought and developed by an artist couple (small, somewhat pre-Raphaelite-ish, paintings decorate the back walls) who added studios on both floors ? huge, white and pure, with gigantic northern windows, they're like airy, vaulted chapels. Here Jane's houseplants, which green every sill and corner of the house, turn into tropical-forest trees.

Husband Ivan, artist and freelance designer, has one studio (shared usually with Ralph), but Jane herself has no need of a studio nor such light. She works in a tiny neighbouring room, setting up her still-life toy scenes on a table-top stage arched over with a wooden frame. Her lamp is fixed to this (when not ?borrowed? by 13-year-old Owen), and from it hang twists of thread to fix in mid-action the positions of her floppy characters. A polythene sheet keeps out nosy hands and a cat with a fetish for sleeping on Old Bear.

Plastic ice-cream boxes are filled with pencil crayons in various stages of depreciation (Ivan gave her an ingenious device that will grip an otherwise hopeless stub-end, transforming it into a pencil again) and divided into colour groups. Two great filing chests with enormously wide, shallow drawers (thrown out by British Rail) hold artwork, and on the walls are shelves of stuffed toys, her own, the children's, and those donated or discovered, all of them worn by years of loving.

Here is the real home of Old Bear and Little Bear, of Jolly Tall (who suffers a sex change in France and becomes Julie the Giraffe), Duck and Zebra, or Ruff, Bramwell Brown (who's ?Caramel? in French) and Sailor Boy (who was given to Jane's young sister to comfort her when their big brother went away at 11 to naval school). There is even a whole

shelf of ancient golliwogs, looking down with round eyes at scenes everyone knows they can now never join.

This is where *everything* is created and set up exactly as we see in the pictures ? not just the characters or the scene, but such props as the birthday cake sandwiched with jam, the pass-the-parcel, the bone-shaped cake (the decorator working on the house had to go on a diet after **Ruff**), the cardboard-box train, every piece of curtain, or carpet, or bedspread... When her editor, Caroline Roberts of Hutchinson, was anxious about the unexpectedly ?bright? cover for **Ruff** , done abnormally early for a dummy to sell foreign rights at the Bologna Children?s Book Fair, Jane didn?t simply repeat the original drawing against a new background of carpet and skirting-board, but once more set up all the characters and started again.

?Doing a drawing a second time is usually a mistake, and though I tried to make slight improvements in the group, I didn?t really want to do it, so perhaps it was a bit static. But everyone seemed content. Then Caroline phoned. ?Please don?t be cross with me, but I?ve just walked past someone?s office, and seen your old jacket on the wall, and, you know, it looked really nice?? ?I won?t be cross,? I said, but I was thinking *Great!*? So **Ruff** got his bouncy cover after all.

On the back flap is a photograph (astonishingly recognisable) of Jane aged three, ?in one of those pixie knitted hats of the fifties? and with a smartly furry Old Bear. ?My grandmother had given me Old Bear when I was one, but eventually I did wear him out. In those days you had few toys, so you remember them all ? *the* doll, *the* bear.? I had always thought my elder son eccentric for carrying his teddy by its nose gripped in his teeth, but in **Old Bear and His Friends** there is a story about Teddy no-Nose, named after the bear of a friend?s small boy who did just that. There?s little that Jane Hissey doesn?t know about teddies.

Jane?s father was in the Navy, so the family regularly moved ? Londonderry, Portsmouth, Malta (which she thinks was the source of a little chequered-cloth donkey, whose tails of threads she used to plait in those pre-My Little Pony days ? she was thrilled to find one uncannily like it in a car-boot sale, which is surely about to make its public debut). He died at 39, leaving her young mother with three children ? Jane, in the middle, was eight. Jane had been born in Norwich, and they returned to an old cottage ?out in the sticks? which they?d left while they were away and Jane travelled in to Norwich High School.

Her brother, abandoning the Navy, became a social worker, her sister a physiotherapist, but all of them (like their mother, if she?d had the chance) were talented at art. With zoology, botany and art at A-level, Jane seemed destined for medical illustration, but at Brighton College of Art, John Vernon Lord, her personal tutor, recognising her work was not sufficiently tight or technical, wisely put her off.

?A brilliant, lovely man, he kept me going when I lost heart. Until I discovered pencil crayons in my last year, I floundered a bit with every medium. I knew what I wanted to do ? I preferred drawing to painting, but pen and ink was too scratchy ? yet it never worked. Then suddenly what came out was what I?d planned! I enjoyed the physical nature of them, the action (I nearly did wood carving and welding), and I liked the colour, the way I used them ? really heavily, not soft and light.

Her books suggest she avoids the human body? ?I loved life drawing, but once I was using pencil crayons I never did it. Building up colour and texture is a slow laborious process, so it demands still life. By the end it?s right, but it won?t look right halfway through: it?s the opposite of water colour, where you look for a long time and then do a few strokes, a little work and a lot of thinking.? She chooses her characters primarily for their *texture*, and it is texture which her crayons build up so miraculously ? fluffy curls or wiry coats, corded carpets or woodgrain, glass eyes or velvet ears? One drawing can take a week, a book like **Ruff** a year of daily labour.

Jane and Ivan had met at college; after teacher-training in Brighton, she taught in a Worthing sixth-form college for five years. ?That was fun. I put day-and-night enthusiasm into all the projects, which didn?t leave much time for my own work.? Only when she left to have Owen did she begin to build a portfolio, one based on the principle of ?Draw what?s to hand? ? which turned out to be Owen?s bear.

She couldn't handle touting her portfolio as a freelance ? Agents always want *backgrounds*, and I wasn't tough enough to say, ?So what's wrong with my *foregrounds*?? but gained a contract to do Teddy Bear Portraits for customers of The General Trading Company (such an unexpected offer that few customers asked for it). When a friend sent her work to a greetings card company, she moved into print with about a dozen designs for various firms.

Caroline Roberts saw one, and rang to discuss, Jane assumed, commissions for illustrations or jackets. Instead, **Old Bear** was born. That was 10 books and 10 years ago, when Alison was a baby. Perhaps when Ralph, who, with his playgroup friends provides such a valuable testing ground, is older she will break out of the Hissey nursery world?

It has its pressures now, ?though I wouldn't do it if I weren't enjoying it?. The 12 stories demanded for the TV series meant not only an inversion of her usual working process (?it's hard to write without a picture to shape the story?) but intensive writing ?which isn't my forte?, in spite of her stories being popular in 10 countries and in National Curriculum favour. Normally a month of writing would be followed by nine of drawing ?to recover?, but now she had to write continuously because there was a film crew waiting ? and another series! Mind you, as with most Hissey projects, the hard slog seems to pay off. The first series has just won Jane the 1993 BAFTA Award for The Best Children's Programme (Fiction/ Entertainment).

The technique is freeze-frame animation. The books formed the first storyboards; now Jane has to work with the team to provide, say, her visualised viewpoint (?behind the door?), and, for stories she may want to use herself later, the exact props. The essentially simple style and restricted world of a toddler can mean one sentence being revised twenty times, testing, reading aloud, looking for the best point to end on.

Ivan is her guide, support and vital critic, reducing his own workload in order to accommodate her, while still teaching at Eastbourne Art College ?to get him away from me and the children! He's incredibly versatile and talented ? The One in our year at college. He spends so much time with Ralph he's totally tuned in, so he can write the first draft of an idea we've had, rather than lose it while I'm finishing another.?

Together as a team they juggle work, children, garden and house. But while she frets about cobwebs and curtainless bedrooms, it's clear they delight in labour: stretching across the expansive garden is the treat TV success allowed her ? a great bare rockery, whose colours and textures are slowly building up layer by layer. It's a technique with a proven record.

Jane Hissey's books are all published in hardback by Hutchinson and in paperback by Red Fox:

Old Bear , 0 09 165290 1, £6.99; 0 09 955440 2, £3.99 pbk

Little Bear's Trousers , 0 09 172140 7, £6.99; 0 09 959780 2, £3.99 pbk

Little Bear Lost , 0 09 173715 X, £6.99; 0 09 962470 2, £3.99 pbk

The Jane Hissey Collection is a boxed set of three miniature editions of the above three titles, 0 09 174330 3,;£10.99

Jolly Snow , 0 09 176414 9, £7.99; 0 09 962490 7, £3.99 pbk

Jolly Tall , 0 09 173720 6, £7.99; 0 09 962480 X, £3.99 pbk

Old Bear and His Friends , 0 09 987780 5, £6.99 pbk

Old Bear Tales , 0 09 988000 8, £6.99 pbk

Ruff , 0 09 176487 4, £8.99



[Jane Hissey.JPG](#) [3]

Page Number:

20

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '20): <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/86/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no86-jane-hissey>

Links:

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/stephanie-nettell>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/86>

[3] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Jane_Hissey.JPG