

## IN THE BLOOD JENNY NEWMAN

It's not often that I know a writer I admire whose work I love reading well enough to ask them detailed questions about their writing process. But I am lucky enough to know Jenny Newman both as a colleague and a friend. I asked her if I could interview her for my website and her website too. And I am delighted to present her answers and comments here.

**Patricia Duncker** is a novelist and academic. For more information visit [patriciaduncker.com](http://patriciaduncker.com)

**Patricia:** *In the Blood* is set straight after World War 2. What was the lure of this period?

**Jenny:** The war had shaken up Britain. Faced with social upheaval and the threat of imminent death, characters such as Liz, Rumney, Polly and the major had formed liaisons that disrupted earlier social norms. In peace time, as society resettled, such people were often dogged by problematic pasts. Marriages foundered. Illegitimate children were born. Jackie, for instance, has never known her father. At least two of my adult characters suffer from what we now know as PTSD: they bear irreparable scars both psychological and physical. In other words, their past comes back to bite them.

As for the children: my narrator, Jackie, was an evacuee, one of millions, and she is likewise scarred by war. During her years away from Liverpool, she learns a different language (Welsh) and fails to recognise the mother who comes to reclaim her.

**Patricia:** Liz, her mother, takes a job as a maid in an English country house. Why did you choose this setting?

**Jenny:** Country house novels generally function as a microcosm of social upheavals; and, with their snobbery, and upstairs/downstairs topography, they dramatize class distinctions and conflicts. In L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, set in 1900, thirteen-year old Leo Colston's unwilling involvement in the affair of wealthy Marian Maudsley with tenant farmer Ted Burgess leads to Leo's nervous collapse. Three characters will die in the subsequent world wars: this rich tradition of English fiction, though seemingly bucolic, often illuminates international conflict. The characters in Isabel Colegate's *The Shooting Party* are unknowingly on the brink of World War 1. Their competitive lust to kill game exemplifies what may be the masculine aggression that fuels such events. Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* is both a pre-and post-World War 2 novel: in the Prologue, which reflects on the novel's main action, we see how war has damaged the characters' lives forever.

Like Brideshead, Foxleigh Hall has been occupied by the army. When Jackie and Liz arrive, its deserted passages and rooms full of dusty Red Cross chests and abandoned gas masks are troubled by soldiers' ghosts. Had it not been for the war, the major himself would not have lost Jack, his heir and Oliver's elder brother; he himself would not have sustained his life-changing injuries, physical and psychological; and his batman, Mr Arbiter, would not have been blown up. The major's Vichy-supporting French wife would not have returned to Paris, and thus Liz would have been unable to renew contact with the major. His housekeeper, Mrs Arbiter, would not have been widowed and, most crucially to the plot, Jackie would not have been evacuated.

**Patricia:** Therefore the fact of the war structures the action of the plot?

**Jenny:** Yes, it does. At a more personal level: by choosing this period, I was keen to explore my own 'pre-history': the years just before my birth which helped shape my parents' often volatile and, to a child, inexplicable relationship.

**Patricia:** Your narrator, Jackie, is only twelve years old. What do you lose and what do you gain by choosing a child narrator?

**Jenny:** Angela Carter describes the brink of puberty as a 'hinge state', a magical, in-between age when the developing child is still able to challenge boundaries and not yet too troubled by teenage preoccupations such as sexuality and bodily changes. Many well-loved stories feature young

narrators: for instance, Scout in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and the eponymous hero in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Both characters encounter grimly adult problems: slavery, racial prejudice and violent injustice.

All narrators are, to an extent, unreliable, and inexperienced ones are less reliable than most. More than ever, the reader works as sleuth, interpreting clues in the text, construing adult events whose nuances a young narrator misses for a while as author speaks to reader over the child's head. Though active, bright and beadily observant, my narrator Jackie is an ingenue. What will she make of a mother who clearly ran a dockside brothel, and who has history with both owner and chauffeur on a Westmorland estate?

*In the Blood* sees Jackie coming of age, as do Huck and Scout. She learns to accept her mother's past, her own uncertain status and her place in a complex hierarchical society.

**Patricia:** Why does the fox hunt play such an important part in your novel?

**Jenny:** Prehistoric cave art often depicts the hunt, and its images - sometimes a sequence - give us an insight into this earliest way of seeing the world and structuring a story. Paintings in the caves of southern Europe and indeed southern Africa uncannily resemble the oldest known example (44,000 years old) on the wall of a limestone cave in Indonesia. Their frequent depiction of therianthropes (creatures part-human and part-animal) may be, according to anthropologists, the oldest evidence of our ability to imagine the existence of supernatural beings.



The myth of the hunt continues, both oral and written, in various cultures worldwide. Think of Artemis the huntress (Greek), Diana and Actaeon (Roman), or Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis. In Northern and Celtic Europe, the myth evolved into that of the Wild Hunt, typically led by a supernatural figure such as Gwyn ap Nudd, the Welsh god of the chase, and the prevailing deity of my novel.

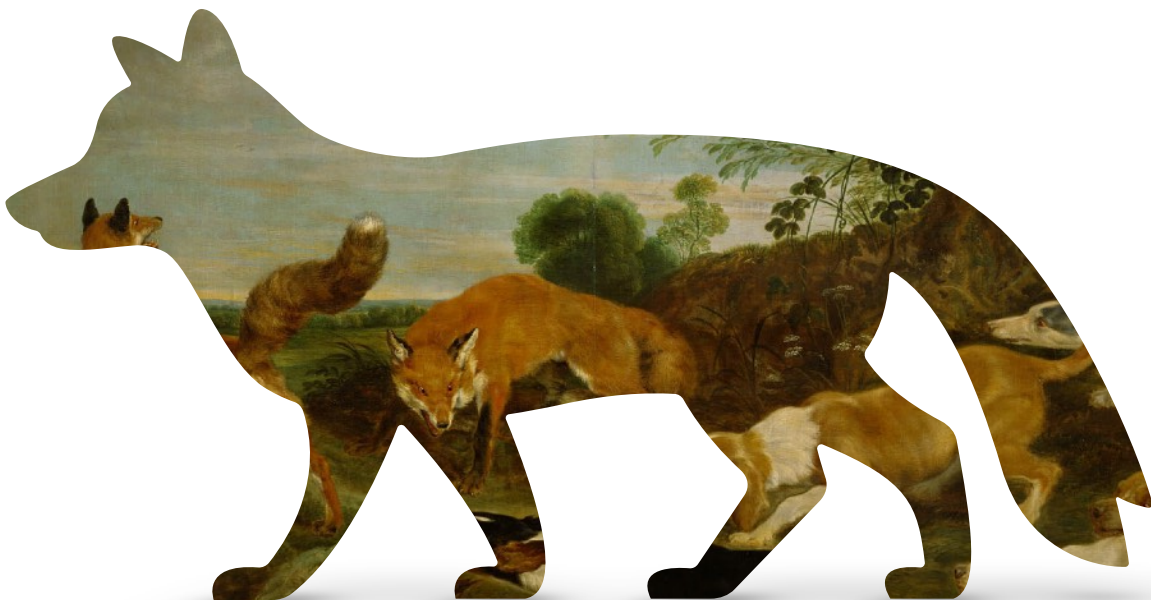
In Wales, Jackie is billeted with the ambiguous Iolo whom, as a clue for the knowledgeable reader, I named after Gwyn ap Nudd's huntsman. He lives in Capel y Bont, Welsh for the chapel on the bridge, a name which suggests, in

my mind at least, a holy place on a bridge between two worlds. He encourages Jackie to sleep in the kennels along with his pack of hounds. The passionate link with animals she shares with many lonely, troubled children has, by the end of the war, grown so intense that she sees herself as more hound than girl: a modern version of the therianthrope.

*In the Blood* can be seen as a religious novel and, like all such, it has its own teleology: Gwyn ap Nudd controls its plot. Jackie, as instructed by his agent, Iolo, knows that the hunter must kill with respect, honour the animal's passing and appease its soul.

For the structure of *In the Blood* I turned to a relatively recent version of the story: the Middle English chivalric poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Like the anonymous poet, I built the plot around three hunts, with each involving a greater challenge for Jackie. Can she carry an ancient way of hunting to a modern, callously secular England?

Myths often depend upon the hero's desire and ask: is that desire morally defensible? And most of them will have a turning-point: a moment when the hero ignores a moral warning. In Jackie's case, Iolo arrives at Foxleigh and tells her not to hunt with Oliver. In thrall to her wish to hunt at any cost, Jackie ignores him. Thus, like Sir Gawain, she fails her final test and learns for herself that the god will avenge an animal wrongly killed.



**Patricia:** What are your major concerns as a writer?

**Jenny:** Like my first two novels set in convents, *In the Blood* explores a closed society, in its case that of the feudal stately home. Both institutions are private,



closed to the public, with highly-evolved social codes. And in both novels, I chart a point of cataclysmic change: in convents as a result of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, and in country houses the point where private ownership had become, for many, unsustainable. As a result, barriers are broken; codes grow less elaborate, an old order disappears.

As a child, I loved books where animals were central, such as Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books*, Jack London's *White Fang*, Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* and even Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*. Later, as an adult and an animalist, I relish texts that challenge anthropocentrism: an eclectic bunch that includes Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, S.T. Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Charles Foster's *The Cry of the Wild* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. Most forms of life on earth exist to eat and to be eaten. The antitheses of ancient and respectful ways of hunting are the battery cage and factory farm.

**Patricia:** Can you give us all a hint of where your next novel might take you?

**Jenny:** I'm writing about a remote village in the nineteenth-century Pyrenees, and once again my central character will be a pre-pubescent girl in thrall to an alternative take on life.



**Jenny Newman** has written two novels, *Going In* (Penguin) and *Life Class* (Arrow), and her short fiction has been widely published and broadcast. She is the editor of *The Faber Book of Seductions* and co-editor of *Women Talk Sex: Autobiographical writing on sex, sexuality and sexual identity* (Scarlet Press); *British and Irish Novelists: an Introduction through Interviews* (Arnold) and *The Writer's Workbook* (Arnold). She has also written extensively on contemporary British writers, and the process of writing fiction, including *A Novel in Nine Steps* (Mslexia Publications). She was formerly Head of Creative Writing at Liverpool John Moores University where she founded the MA, MPhil and PhD programmes in Writing.

**[Read reviews of In the Blood on Amazon](#)**