



JOCELYN SIMMS

The Sentinel Literary Quarterly

Monday Writer

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# Jocelyn Simms, Monday Writer, 07 September 2020

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## About Jocelyn Simms

**Jocelyn Simms** was born in a part of Yorkshire which, after the Local Government Act of 1972, was transferred to Lancashire. Initially she trained as a librarian in Leeds, subsequently working in Burnley and Barnoldswick. Circumstances necessitated a change of career and she took over the management of a shop for several years. This period was followed by a series of retail jobs including a spell working for Harper Collins Educational. In 1993 she retrained, this time as a counsellor. The course stimulated her interest in writing as therapy. She founded a group, The Writer's Block, which in turn ignited the idea for *Colour Matters* - a book in which the influence of colour in everyday life is explored alongside its inspiration for writing. Jocelyn moved to France in 2002 where she has been involved in several literary projects. Firstly, she proposed the Segora writing competitions which she and her husband (fellow poet) Gordon have been organising since 2007.

Whilst living in their first French home, a watermill, the pair ran two gites during the twelve years they spent there. They put on three bi-lingual literary festivals and were delighted to welcome Helen Dunmore to the first one along with poets Roger Elkin and Katherine Gallagher. Michele Roberts, Blake Morrison, Patricia Duncker and Lemn Sissay were principal guests at these events held in deepest rural France. Rich in content, fostering lively debate and giving a forum to local writers, historians, poets, translators and story-tellers, they were pleased to see the event become a model for another initiative, the Charroux literary festival.

A Segora celebration weekend has been held in St Andre-sur-Sevre, the Simms present location, since 2018, evolving into a mini-festival with guests Edwin Apps, Mario Petrucci and Maggie Butt. Writers' workshops and lively discussions have enhanced the local cultural scene. In partnership with the local *comite de fete* the Simms hosted four presentations highlighting local history, the influence of jazz on poetry, church frescoes and a celebration in song of the *langue d'oc*, the poetry of the troubadours.

The Segora International Writing Competition takes up a considerable amount of time. It began with poetry but now includes short story, vignettes and plays. Jocelyn and Gordon also write modules for poetry/flash fiction and offer online support to writers. By invitation they put on workshops and readings; last year saw them in Teignmouth, Enfield, Confolens and Brantome. This year Jocelyn was honoured to judge Charroux short story and EarlyWorks Flash fiction competitions. [www.poetryproseandplays.com](http://www.poetryproseandplays.com)

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## The Monday Writer Interview

**Let's begin this conversation with your home. In a piece titled 'Living the Dream in Deux-Sevres' (FrenchEntrée.com), you and your husband, Gordon, told a beautiful story about how you bought your home in France. You said in the end "We found our ideal home where every day offers inspiration" How has this illimitable source of inspiration powered your writing? Do you believe that where a person lives can boost or hamper creativity?**

The watermill was a beautiful, ancient place. I was always conscious of the presence of those who had lived and toiled there. We met a French lady whose father and antecedents had been millers there and this thread created such a strong bond that we became firm friends. She was to become instrumental in helping us to launch the bi-lingual festivals. Litfest type events do not exist in this area of France, so support from a French person was vital.

The play of water from the river both outside and inside (through refraction) brought a quality of mystery to our everyday surroundings. We were always aware of the environmental expectations of 'looking after' the river and its gifts. We discovered that an artist, Aristide Caillaud, had spent formative years at the mill, also fascinated by stone, wood and water. Later we were to see some of his work in the Georges Pompidou centre in Paris.

So, yes, I think that the place inspired my first collection, *Topaz Island*, and I published several poetry pamphlets by our group members also reflecting the place. The mill has eight small islands, one of which I named Topaz Island.

We have always chosen to live close to a river. Our present house overlooks the flood plain of the Sèvre Nantaise which attracts flocks of visiting egrets. Golden orioles, herons and hoopoes are plentiful. Conversely I can imagine being hampered by lack of a conducive place – but then look at Oscar Wilde and Reading Gaol. But in truth I am happiest in the countryside.

**You are well known as a poet, but you have been known to judge fiction competitions and workshop plays from ideas to performance as you did at The CharrouxLitfest. Do you write fiction and plays?**

I have been writing flash or vignette fiction for the last four years. A one-act play I wrote was commended in the Cardiff Drama Association in 2003. Gordon is the playwright in the family but I have participated in workshops alongside him. I do entertain ideas of *Tickling* being presented as a piece of theatre. Recently I have been piecing together a series of memoirs for an autobiographical book.

## **How do you decide what genre would best showcase a particular subject?**

Sometimes I experiment with trying something out in different genres. It seldom works for me. My writing seems to come with a mind of its own. However, I am interested in mixing form and in an essay about a family member who became the victim of a grooming gang I experimented with putting part of the account into an imaginary (dramatic) tribunal.

## **The things you write about. Do you choose to write them or are they like callings that won't let you off the hook until you have written them?**

I am an avid reader and often struck with an idea that I'd like to write about. One such concerns Georges Simenon, who spent time in the village adjacent to ours during WW2. He was hiding from the Gestapo and the *Maquis* simultaneously. There has to be a story in there! Otherwise I am haunted by ideas and feelings that lodge somewhere in the mind/body making me restless until they ripen.

## **Why did you choose the format of *Tickling the Dragon*; poems, historical notes and pictures? Did you think the poems alone would not achieve your desired results?**

I used the research as the blueprint for the poetry. Thus they were in tandem in my mind. After speaking to people born in the 1970s and earlier I realised that there didn't seem much knowledge of the atrocities or of the public debate on the moral issue of dropping the atomic bomb on civilians. I decided that short historical notes might encourage readers to find out more for themselves. Having had the opportunity to read several of the poems that ultimately became *Tickling the Dragon* at Bear Island in Ireland (Poetry Meets Politics), I realised that they stood alone without added information. When I launched the book in 2019 short extracts from the notes excited an interesting debate amongst the audience. The photographs came about by sheer coincidence. A fellow-writer happened to see the title of one of the poems, *Grapple Y*, and recognised it as the bomb detonated on Christmas Island. Her father was one of the Sappers there in 1958 and she still had his snapshots. It seemed a wonderful opportunity to include real 'footage'.

## **Walk us through the experience of your creative processes leading to *Topaz Island* and how it differed from putting together *Tickling the Dragon*.**

The poems in *Topaz Island* are personal, charting for me, my development. How did I get here? The sequence covers recollections of growing up, death of parents, miscarriage, loss of my oldest friend and my first experiments in writing poetry. It is a sequence that retrieves my memories, thoughts and feelings from adolescence to adulthood.

*Tickling the Dragon* is my witness statement to what has possibly been the most significant occurrence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initially I was inspired by reading a poetry anthology *60/60 - Poems on the 60th anniversary of Hiroshima*, edited by Gerry Loose (2005: Survivors' Press) given to me by Chrys Salt whilst we were staying at The Bakehouse in SW Scotland. When I got home I started re-reading John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and the seeds of *Tickling the Dragon* were sown.

**Thinking about the historical notes in *Tickling the Dragon*. Were you faithful to the facts or did you exercise a creative freedom? How much research did you carry out and were there obstacles along the way?**

A great deal of information is available on the net: I amassed a large file of documents. I was faithful to the facts but added my own creative slant. For example, in *Les Fleurs d'Azur* I recount the mother's testimony. I track what occurred but I imported the shawl. The story of the brothers in *Half-Deer, Half-Butterfly* is accurate but I invented the card game. I found I could relate to the emotions of the various protagonists in *Tickling* by tapping into my own feelings. For example, my daughter was very ill at the time I wrote *Les Fleurs* and my brother-in-law informed the personality of the Sapper described in *Grapple Y*.

Sometimes during my research, I cried out in astonishment at what was actually said! In *Enola Gay*, I quote some of the words of Paul Tibbets (the pilot of the B-29, named after his mother and carrying *Little Boy*) in answer to questions from Studs Terkel who interviewed Tibbets shortly before his death in 2007.

To make an impact I used the statement issued by a spokesperson from the Ministry of Defence to demonstrate the coldness of 'officialise' obscuring the truth in defending the judgement not to award compensation to veterans.

A poem of pure invention is *Rosendale* which is loosely based on my parents. The headline comes from *War Papers* (John Frost Historic Newspaper Service, introduction by Ludovic Kennedy, 1989). The final poem, *Transubstantiation* is a personal meditation on destruction through contemplating frescoes in the *Chapelle des Rosiers*.

I read a momentous biography of Robert Oppenheimer, *A Life in the Center*, by Ray Monk. I tore up many poems I started about Oppenheimer and settled in the end for an incident that occurred when he was fourteen which made him more accessible (and vulnerable) to my unscientific mind. It's the first poem in the book but the last and most difficult one I wrote.

I think the major obstacle was - how much to include?

**Have you ever read a poem by another poet that kept you awake through the night or longer?**

Certainly. Hard to choose but I'll go for Glyn Maxwell's *Deep Sorriiness Atonement Song* from which I quote daily.

**Is there a book you never leave home without?**

T.S. Eliot, *Collected poems, 1909-1962* (Faber &Faber)

**How did the writing business begin for you and when?**

I started to write creatively at school encouraged by my English teacher, Sister Mary David. During the counselling course I wrote my first adult poem, leaving it tentatively on the kitchen table for Gordon. His response "I thought I was the poet in the house" was immensely encouraging!

**In an email conversation with me after Mandy Pannett's review of *Tickling the Dragon* appeared on Sentinel Literary Quarterly, you wrote 'There is still more to say'. Looks like you are not done with the dragon. What are you working on now and when can we expect it?**

The environmental catastrophe wrought by the atomic bomb can never go away, so I guess there will always be more to say. Many articles have been circulating occasioned by the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombings. One in particular reveals more secrecy and exploitation surrounding the manufacture of nuclear weapons and I hope to create a poem inspired by this.

As a contrast I am finalising a collection of poems which feature flowers in a rather elusive way. This I shall be sending out shortly to competitions or editors. I have begun the memoir referred to earlier and am booked to give a talk on Simenon in November (restrictions permitting) to a local history group. *SLQ*.

'The Monday Writer Interview with Jocelyn Simms'  
By NNOROM AZUONYE

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## Georges Braque, Montmartre, 1909

Ah, Monsieur Braque, twinkles the apple-seller, rummaging beneath his stall, producing a brown paper bag which Georges quietly receives. Further along *rue de la Clignan court* he sets up his easel, digs out papers, paints, brushes, knives, smooths his fingers over the firm globe, lifts it to his nostrils. But he will not follow the pathway of the senses.

He dissects with the flair of a forensic surgeon, he bleeds the palette, reconstructs the fruit, discovers mountains, valleys, forests, the seeds of stars - unravelling a map of earth and folly.

Lunches alone in a street cafe, drinks a glass of red wine: back to work.

Early evening, the street livens. They are looking for the Spaniard. Georges waits modestly, plays a melody on his flute.

A man lingers over the canvases.

Price?

Will you take half?

Georges shakes his head, continues the carefree tune.

A velvet twilight coats the street. The man returns, once more proffers 10 francs. Georges takes the painting, pulls it apart, hands him one apple.

There is a raw edge to the torn tableau. Cold ebbs from paving stones as he walks back to the shared studio. Well, he can always go back to painting and decorating.

More than the paper is fragmented: the austere buildings crumble: their facades tremble with silent holograms of strained faces and bayonets.

Underneath his feet, in countries far away, guns are growling.

Georges feels his head split open.

Once Paris, it is said, was worth a Mass, and one day, Pablo will tell him, the city art dealers will kill for possession of this singular apple.

(First published in *The Real Jazz Baby*, Reflex Press, 2019)

## Market Day

John Scott rubs square palms across apron stripes.  
I finger a solid apple.

Together we regard the sky: sulphurous clouds,  
nacreous sun, the moon a cinnamon curl. The Resurrection,  
Apocalypse, Turner's Fighting Téméraire?

I bite tart flesh, silver juices spill, the taste of almond  
at the core. Removal of any item of school uniform will result  
in nuclear fission.

What have we to lose, John Scott? Here at the end  
of the world . . .

And you with all these pheasants to sell.

## The Cartographer's Craft

Telegraph poles orchestrate the route.  
Cables tighten in the molten air: soon  
it will thunder. Indoors a chorus of ants  
searches out ley lines, patrols the thin  
carpet-square, roams glossy floor tiles.  
They want their plot, to call it Antland.

They circle the chairs you and I once  
hailed to Wimbledon, now stacked against  
the plaster wall of our rented summer.

We left them behind a privet hedge  
in Wandsworth, to be free  
to cup our plastic tea and queue.  
They were cheap enough to lose.

But you'd marked the spot, tattooed  
the railings, counted pavement cracks.  
On our return you conjured  
them triumphantly from the leaves.

The coffle of ants thickens.  
Garden lilies parch; strained trumpets.  
I will not pick them for our table.  
Instead let me smell your hair.  
Tell me again about the chairs.

## To the Plaintive Postman

Yesterday we feared too many  
would arrive, demand a chair,  
a glass, a plate. Today, anxiety  
that no one comes.

Carnivorous crowd, baying  
for answers. We offer flimsy  
words, frangible as dry leaves.

We've repaired houses,  
defended bridges, recited numbers  
of departments,

*prefer their river names*

can chant a litany of kings  
of one epoch at least.  
Lots of Louis, Charles,  
perhaps a Philippe? We're stuck  
with Henry, Richard, John.

Yes, we know the constitution,  
*but then not everyone obeys.*

In Beziers the mayor keeps a list  
of names of Muslim children.  
God has many names, some of them secret.  
Thiepval's wall lists seventy-two thousand,  
one hundred and ninety-five missing  
even before the great offensive.

No name on my mail box, you complain.

(First published in *erbacce*, issue 54, July 2018 and displayed as a poster in the Dugdale Theatre, Enfield, May 2019)