

Interrupted Journey

When Pat Moon was assembling her poems for *Earth Lines: Poems for the Green Age* twenty years ago, she needed to seek the advice and guidance of the peace campaigner Bruce Kent. In the way of these things, Kent returned her telephone call at the very moment her three children, Sam, Daisy and Ben, decided to start weighing in to each other with empty plastic cola bottles. The juxtaposition – conversation with notable CND activist against a background of mock warfare – has something of the same diverting incongruity as the vignettes of family life she later included in her fiction.



Family life had long been a source of inspiration, as I learnt when I visited Pat and her husband David at their home in Norwich. She had been writing and illustrating books for the children long before anything was published. “Little stories,” David explained. “Little drawings. About family life.” He showed me one called *Time To Get Up*. Landscape format, stoutly bound, with a clear, simple text, hand-drawn lettering and attractively crisp and detailed (she was unusually good at feet, I noticed) colour illustrations. “There’s a whole pile of them upstairs,” said David.

She also had a gift for poetry, so when, in 1989 or thereabouts, an advertisement appeared in the *TLS* asking for a writer to help on a new project, and to *please send poetry*, she was ready to oblige – particularly as her horoscope told her that now was the time to use her talent. Off went a poem, and within days back came a telephone call acknowledging her skill and asking if she would like to supply some English verses to match the illustrations in a book originally published in Spanish. She “scribbled” a few lines, and being requested to fax them over agreed that she would. When David came home that evening, she asked him, “What’s a fax?”

Then, a publisher called Pimlico wanted some verses on green issues, a subject in which Pat was greatly interested, so she started writing the series of poems that eventually became *Earth Lines*. Although the book is no longer in print, and Pimlico has ceased to exist, she continues to receive appreciative letters from schoolteachers who swear by it and still use the poems in their classrooms.

She went on a writing course at a retreat near Ipswich, which was under the tutelage of Jan Mark, a writer she greatly admired; and, later, won a *Sunday Times* story competition with an entry Pat and David are pretty sure (it’s too long ago to be absolutely certain)

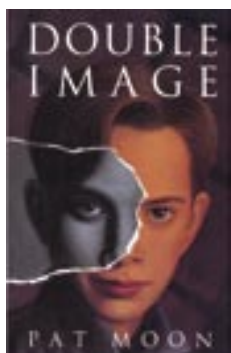
was called *Onions Make You Cry*. The prize was to be a special guest (not a speaker) at the Hay Festival. There, she met Rosemary Sandberg, who was in the process of setting up her own literary agency. She asked Pat to write for her.

With the publication of *Double Image* and *The Spying Game* in 1993, two novels for older readers about identity and how we perceive other people, Pat Moon laid down her marker as one of that select band of novelists able to create highly entertaining narratives from the minutiae of everyday life. *Double Image* was shortlisted for the Smarties Prize and *The Spying Game* for

the Guardian Award. Subsequent books for the same readership, *Nathan’s Switch*, *The Ghost of Sadie Kimber*, *Four Days Till Friday* – respectively, social comment spliced with Wellsian sci-fi, a genuinely scary ghost story, and an account of bullying, and separateness – share the same common ground as the first two in their sensitive awareness of other people, at home and at school, and in their evocation of the sometimes untidy hugger-mugger of family living. (“Mum! Where’s my snorkel?” Gav’s sister demands in *Nathan’s Switch*. “On top of the microwave,” comes the reply.)

The way families behave is a recurring factor in Pat’s books. She’s a dab hand, for instance, at mimicking the blather and joshing between siblings. “Mature? Mature?” Laura screeches at her brother, in *The Ghost of Sadie Kimber*, before continuing in a vein that is almost Wodehousian in its disdain: “Are we talking about the person who stood in the queue in McDonald’s with trails of Sarah’s green Play Doh running out of his nostrils?” And in *The Spying Game*, Lucy’s debunking response to Joe’s new blazer is cool in the extreme. “Has he forgotten to take out the coat hanger?” she asks, pointedly squeezing the shoulders of the over-large garment. Then, in a different vein, but in the same book, she displays a whole range of other sorts of perception in depicting the individual sorrows undergone by Mum, Joe, Lucy and Tom in their grieving over Dad’s accidental death.

The writing is consistently clear-cut, dexterous and exact, with a keen humour and wholly convincing dialogue, the result of an alert ear and a vigilant eye; and the characters are distinctive and independently minded, and tend to determine the course of the plot rather than be manipulated by it. And the same is true across the range of her work, from young read-alones like the *Jungle Bunch* series, to shorter fiction – *Ben’s Bean*, *The Stare*, *Barking Mad*, *Little Dad* – and the novels for older readers.



Biggest bugbear of all: she can no longer write.

“I like writing too much. I grieve for it,” she said, like someone marooned on a desert island. “Half of me says I could do the plotting, “ but only half of her. “I’ve tried dictating but I lose the thread of the story,” which makes her anxious. “It’s lovely getting letters [from readers]”, which she still does. I read one from a 12 year old girl in Swanage, beginning, *I LOVE your “do not read” series and before I found it I almost gave up on reading!!!*

David who nowadays, with Pat’s compliance, acts as a sort of spokesperson, for reasons that will soon become apparent, mentioned the ‘Finch books’ (in which family life is almost exclusively the subject). This series attracted an enthusiastic and loyal readership as soon as the first book, *Do Not Read This Book*, was published in 2000, and shortlisted for the Sheffield Children’s Book Prize. It was followed by two further instalments – *Do Not Read Any Further* and *Do Not Read Or Else!* – of Finch Olive Penny’s funny, poignant and definitely top secret diary. In view of the books’ popularity it’s not surprising that Pat’s publishers asked for a fourth.

“And that,” David said, “is when things started to go wrong.”

Pat began to have trouble reading diaries and calendars, so much so that she bought *three* calendars, to make up for the others being what she called “wrong”. She was making mistakes with everyday things like loading the dishwasher and opening the up-and-over garage door. Traffic lights, too, were proving a problem, as was judging distances when driving. Eventually a routine eye test, during which the optician discerned all was not well, led to a visit to the GP, then to a neurological consultant, and on to Addenbrookes, where Pat was diagnosed as suffering from PCA (Posterior Cortical Atrophy), an “atypical” variant of Alzheimer’s disease. (Terry Pratchett is a fellow sufferer.)

The disease affects the region of the brain responsible for visual processing, the part that “tells the eyes how to react”. It means that Pat has difficulty in dealing with perceptual matters that involve sequences or the awareness of rows, layers and some shapes. Everyday activities – making a bed, loading a dishwasher, setting a table, reading a newspaper, telling the time, cooking, shopping, dealing with steps, using a keyboard – present the utmost difficulties.

She gets easily disorientated. “Sometimes I can’t find my way to the kitchen. Show me where the kitchen is,” she said, while still managing to chuckle at her predicament. “If I put anything down, it merges with the background. I get very anxious because I can’t understand what I’m seeing. This *room* makes me feel ill sometimes. I can’t make sense of it. The colours. I can’t identify certain things. I have to get up and touch it to try to make sense.” She is unable to read, “because it causes nausea”. So television has proved “a blessing”.

Pat and David remain positive and up-front. She, for example, willingly took part in a study of PCA that required a researcher to monitor her at home and is pleased at the thought of the research helping future sufferers. They belong to a support group at University College Hospital, in which the extraordinary total of four out of the 30 members happen to be authors (although “that is thought to be coincidental,” said David). And they determinedly respond to every reader’s letter, clearly explaining why the stream of Pat’s books has encountered an impassable dam.

Outwardly there was little to indicate that all is not right with Pat, apart perhaps from an occasional tendency to repeat herself. She sat at ease, her short, attractively cropped hair making her look as if she’d landed the part of Peter Pan, and told me about her early life. Born in Bromley. Lived in Somerset. Many jobs, including working in a bank, and in a children’s home. “A huge, old-fashioned building. I used to read stories to the children.” The memory made her smile and appear slightly puzzled, simultaneously. “But I liked teaching best of all.” And she was frank and open about her bad patches, the black moments. “Oh yes, I do the stomping around,” she said. “It’s – not – *fair*.” It isn’t.

Although her long-term recall seemed sharp, details about the books she has written and published remain a mystery. So David reads them to her. She described her reactions. “Gosh, did I write this? It’s not bad.” She grinned broadly. “I’m surprised at the plots. It’s so strange though, to have written something I can’t recognise. Hearing them, it’s quite a revelation. Strange position to be in. I’ve written books but I can’t remember them.”

Towards the conclusion of our chat, her natural urge to create reasserted itself. She was saying how she gets into a muddle dressing – both legs into one leg – and suddenly stopped, looked up, and asserted: “That’s a book I want to write – *The Knickers of Time*.” For that instant it was as though the sun had shone brightly.

Chris Stephenson

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