

feature

Unfinished business ... sorted!

Life doesn't always run smoothly when you're a writer. STEVEN RUSSELL hears about some rollercoaster times in the world of Julia Jones

AT ONE WITH THE WATER: Writer and biographer Julia Jones on one of her boats at Woodbridge
Photo: ARCHANT



IT'S been a busy year or so for Julia Jones – one in which she's put to bed a lot of unfinished business. She's cleared a niggling debt she long felt she owed to one of her favourite authors and has also plucked her own first novel out of the fire. (It's a tale in the spirit of Arthur Ransome and there was a kerfuffle about whether or not it was being presented as a sequel to Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* canon – which, she said, it patently was not.)

That “debt” first. Years and years ago, Julia had a bookshop and became increasingly taken by the stories of mystery writer Margery Allingham, creator of detective Albert Campion.

Interest heightened when she discovered that Margery had also lived in Essex – at Tolleshunt D'Arcy, near Tiptree. There, she'd written *The Oaken Heart: The story of an English village at war* – an autobiographical account of the early years of the conflict. Julia gave this a new lease of life by republishing it under her own imprint in 1987.

It inspired a friendship with Margery's sister Joyce, still living in Tolleshunt D'Arcy. Joyce let Julia comb through family papers and a biography of Margery was published by Heinemann in 1991. (A new

edition came out in 2009.)

Joyce also bequeathed all the papers relating to her father, Herbert, himself a writer of fiction. (He'd kept the masses entertained with melodramatic cliff-hangers in the “penny papers” of the early 1900s.) Julia used them for a PhD thesis, finished about five years ago. Her knowledge of the Allinghams led to appearances at the Essex Book Festival.

Then last autumn, with the 2011 event on the horizon, someone suggested it should include something about *The Oaken Heart*, which would be celebrating its 70th anniversary. “Silly to have something about a book no-one can easily get their hands on,” thought Julia. “Tell you what; I've always had a bit of an issue about *The Oaken Heart*; why don't we produce a limited edition?”

From there, it was but a small step to thinking: “Bother 50 or 100 copies! I've done all this work; let's go for it! Let's make a trade edition and sell some copies!”

So a new edition would be published by Golden Duck, the cottage-industry imprint run from Essex by Julia and partner Francis Wheen, the journalist, writer, broadcaster and deputy editor of satirical magazine *Private Eye*.

Only it was a bit of a tall order.

The festival was set for March and Julia wanted to give the new version some va-va-voom. There wasn't a lot of time to play with, though.

Of her initial reprint in 1987, she says: “To be fair, I've always been a little embarrassed, in retrospect, about the quality of that publication. I had very little money and very little time, and so to save typesetting costs I sat there, retyping the whole of *The Oaken Heart*.”

This was in the era of small floppy disks – the cutting-edge technology of its day.

“I was single at that point and didn't have anybody to proof-read it for me. So this was an awful example of how you can mess up!” she laughs.

The chosen typeface made the chunks of text somewhat indigestible, and there were irritating typographical errors. All in all, “Very well meant, but basically a bit of a bish.”

It did, however, enjoy a “delightful” reading on BBC Woman's Hour by Joan Hickson, known for her TV portrayal of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple.

For more than two decades, then, Julia lived with a sense of unfinished business over Margery's sole non-fiction title.

“Here's a cracking book; I hadn't really done it justice. I also felt it

wasn't totally me and my typing. I also felt it was a book that had been written in the white heat of a very extraordinary experience” – the war's effects on a rural community of little more than 600 souls – “and therefore had not benefited from the sense of perspective that an editor would give it.

“Margery was so close to her subject – which made it a book to be cherished. She was writing it as she was living it. (Combining it with her duties as billeting officer, for air raid precautions and first aid.) But after 70 years I felt it needed a little bit of explanation.” Hence a desire to include more notes to guide readers.

It had been conceived as a long letter to the author's American publishing friends – partly to explain what was happening in Britain at that time and partly to help the campaign to persuade the U.S. to end its isolation – and Margery wrote the first draft in about three months.

There was the chance, this time round, to reveal more about the good folk of Tolleshunt D'Arcy – the cobblers, chauffeurs, builders, plumbers et al – who featured in Margery's account (which disguises the village as “sweet Auburn”).

Older adults from 1941 were no longer with us, of course, but “Men and women who were children and

teenagers at that time can still tell us of their experiences . . .”

Julia told local people what she was doing. It took time for the message to percolate, and the season of peace and goodwill occupied people's energies, “and then after Christmas there was this fantastic opening-up and people started digging around in their attics and coming out with pictures of their parents or grandparents, and little anecdotes and precise details.”

A lot of people were still in the village where their relatives lived 70 years ago. Julia, grateful for their help, says it gave the new edition “a tremendous community dimension”. The volume includes previously-unpublished diaries and letters.

In March, the Essex Book Festival event was held at St Nicholas School, Tolleshunt D'Arcy, before an audience of 80-plus. Julia spoke, there was a slideshow on the background to *The Oaken Heart*, and pupils acted out a scene about evacuees arriving in the village.

D.C. Thomson's *People's Friend* magazine made *The Oaken Heart* its Book Club choice for April and the Women's Institute magazine will be listing it as one of its titles of the year.

“In public terms, it told me this is a book that is going to speak to people beyond the pages of *The*



ONE OF OUR QUEENS OF CRIME: Far left, **Novelist Margery Allingham**, who lived at Tolleshunt D'Arcy in Essex and also had spells in Suffolk. Centre top, **Margery** photographed in the 1950s, and Left, at her desk. Above, with husband **Pip** at the front door of **D'Arcy House**, in Tolleshunt D'Arcy, near Maldon, where they moved in 1935

Photos: courtesy THE MARGERY ALLINGHAM SOCIETY

Guardian, if you like."

All in all, she's sure Margery would have approved of the result.

And so to unfinished business number two . . .

By the time Julia completed the footnotes to her PhD thesis in 2006 – a bit of a grind – she realised she really wanted to be a writer of thrilling stories like the Arthur Ransome adventures she had read as a child.

Wary of fiddling with punctuation, and needing to vent creative steam, she wrote a Robert Louis Stevenson-ish/Ransome-ish adventure story in about two months flat.

The exercise was in many ways the natural consequence of a potent childhood. Woodbridge-born Julia's parents had bought Ransome's old yacht *Peter Duck* in 1957, when their daughter was about three. The boat had been built at Pin Mill, near Ipswich, just after the war.

Julia spent much of her childhood on board, on local rivers such as the Deben, and read Ransome's stories as she lay in the quarter-berth that had been designed as the great man's typewriter store.

(Much later, *Peter Duck* having passed through several hands, Julia and Francis bought it in 1999. So it's still a familiar sight on east coast rivers.)

Anyhow: five years ago, things looked set fair, then, for her first venture into fiction. She had an agent and a major publisher was giving it a second read, which seemed a good omen. "And then someone said 'Well, obviously we need to speak to people at Jonathan

Cape about this" – Cape, now part of Random House, published the *Swallows and Amazons* series – "and suddenly there was this most terrible row and it was all (mutterings of) 'infringement of copyright and passing-off'."

Everything took a huge backward step. Heavy of heart, Julia began rewriting and put more distance between her story and anything that could remotely be considered Ransomesque.

"I was very dashed at the time, because I hadn't been trying to write a sequel to *Swallows and Amazons*," she says. "It was intended as, if you like, a homage – or you could just say it's a sort of 'thinking' about Ransome in the 21st Century."

Her tale was not "a botched attempt at a sequel", she insists. "It's not at all. It naturally springs from Ransome, but it also springs from various other directions; and Ransome himself used other authors as his kick-off point. He very obviously uses *Treasure Island* in *Swallows and Amazons*, and also in *Peter Duck*."

"But it sort of didn't matter. Once I'd dried my eyes and decided to have another go, I think it was good to sever the umbilical cord.

Although the book certainly has *Swallows and Amazons* as a central feature – it's something Donny reads – it's a different level." In any case, Julia had been truly bitten by the fiction-writing bug – enjoying the heightened state in which one's characters seem to take on lives of their own and shape the narrative – and the tale chimed with her feelings about childhood.

So she regrouped. There was strong interest from another publisher, before a change of internal policy meant they dropped their interest totally in children's books.

Not that Julia sees *The Salt-Stained Book* as solely for children.

The action is set on the Shotley peninsula in Suffolk – mainly on the River Orwell. Young teenager Donny and his disabled mother arrive in the area, hoping to meet his mysterious great aunt – coming, it seems, from Shanghai.

There's an accident and Donny is taken into care, though the officials might not be all they seem. Lurking in the background is an incident in 1945 when two brothers died in the icy Barents sea, leaving behind a book.

Donny discovers his life has been built on a lie. Only a new friendship and newfound nautical abilities help him deal with the dangers.

"It's a 'who am I?' book," says Julia. "He needs to know exactly who he is and what is he like. Something like sailing makes you self-reliant and teaches you about yourself."

Among the ingredients was her experience of working as a community organiser for the Workers' Educational Association, which lays on adult learning courses. Julia saw a lot about the lives of vulnerable families and their dealings with the authorities.

"It's not a kicking of officialdom, but I had observed, for instance, how often the children of parents with learning difficulties were very early taken into care. So I was thinking

about Ransome but also about families who were rather unlike the confident and professional families in Ransome's stories."

That kind of underlying theme is one of the things that makes her story most definitely not a pastiche. The language and writing style are others.

In fact, Julia says she's not an uncritical fan of Ransome:

"To modern ears, the suppression of emotion is completely ludicrous and I think even in 1930s terms he was very extreme. I think he did have some real issues about expressing emotions which probably went back to his own childhood."

Boys obviously didn't cry in the *Swallows* series – and girls had to rush down to the cabin in humiliation if their feelings boiled over!

"Teenagers are extremely emotional beings and they should be allowed to argue with each other or burst into tears or have a bit of a swear-off. That's what they do."

With the pressure some families are under, "You're not going to be jolly hockey sticks all the time. You might become angry or secretive, or something. Without making too much of it – because this is meant to be an adventure story – I wanted a little more of that than I think a Ransome character would have."

The Salt-Stained Book, published by the author's Golden Duck company, is due as the first in a *Strong Winds* trilogy. Having learned to sail

on a barely-disguised Alton Water reservoir, near Ipswich, Donny is likely to get as far as Lowestoft or Manningtree in the second instalment, and cross the North Sea to Ostend in the concluding tale.

Given a fair wind, Julia hopes to bring out volume two, *A Ravelled Flag*, before Christmas.

Although her debut offering is decidedly not Arthur Ransome II, she was intrigued to hear that the BBC is adapting Ransome's adventures for TV. The circle has turned, and having honest fun outside without PlayStations or iPods is flavour of the month again.

"So, actually, it's groovy to have something to do with *Swallows and Amazons*, whereas before it was a yawn!"

■ *The Oaken Heart*, ISBN 978-1-899262-03-8, is £13.99. *The Salt-Stained Book*, ISBN 978-1899262045, is £7.99, both pictured below. Golden Duck Publishing: www.golden-duck.co.uk

