

Jan Needle was first published at the age of about seven, during the war in Korea. He started off confused, as his father was the editor of a Labour Party news sheet called the Courier, which he took to be the name of the country. Even then an opportunist, he offered to write his father a novel about the conflict, to be serialised weekly.

The first chapter appeared on the front page, but his delight turned to anger when it transpired that his father had not corrected his spelling, on the grounds that it was extremely funny. Jan refused to write any subsequent chapter, so thus ended his first work.

As he had killed off the hero at the end of the chapter it was a lucky break for the young novelist, and a mistake he rarely repeated.

Although what was known happily in those days as a slum kid, he went to Portsmouth Grammar School after doing quite well in the Eleven Plus and extremely badly in an entrance exam for borderliners. He was allowed in on interview, apparently because the posh teachers found him quite funny. When asked what he wanted to do when he grew up, he tried and failed several times to say "a barrister," which was the answer his parents had told him was the passport to a place.

Finally he blurted out the truth: "I want to be the captain of an oceangoing tug." He felt vaguely humiliated when everybody laughed, but ended up enrolled, at the bottom of the D stream, where he contentedly failed to struggle for three years but was thrust up into the C stream willy-nilly.

Due to take three A-levels – English, French and German – he was asked to leave after two terms in the six form on the grounds that he was unlikely to pass any of them. In those happy days, dumb teenagers didn't need to become crackheads or male prostitutes to live, so Jan joined the Portsmouth Evening News. (Which some people might think is not so different, come to that.)

Quickly realising that writing fiction and calling it fact was but a short step from trying to tell the truth as he saw it, he started writing short stories, and by the time he was 19 had had a few published. He then moved north to Manchester to join the Daily Herald as a reporter, quickly became a subeditor, and found himself where he wanted to be. Usually drunk, rarely sleeping, and vaguely underwashed.

In his mid-20s he decided he had enough of journalism, and became a drama student at Manchester University. He had to take three part-time A-levels at Rochdale College to get in, and discovered that Portsmouth Grammar School's assessment of his abilities had not been far out. He scored E for English, which meant he had to do an extra year before he could move into the honours school. He got a first, which he is not prepared to boast about, because he still thinks it was because the professor was afraid of him.

By the time he graduated, Jan had had two or three radio plays produced, and supplemented his grant by working as a freelance subeditor, mainly on the Daily

Mirror. He did shifts and wrote articles for other newspapers, including the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph, and even the Sunday Times and the Sun. What with that and his fiction writing, he never really found it necessary to get a job again.

While he wrote radio plays, Jan also wrote theatre plays, including the first production for the Contact Theatre Company, a wild and modern version of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Then at the age of 30ish he had the strange idea of retelling *The Wind in the Willows* from the point of view of the downtrodden denizens of the Wild Wood. Never having written a novel before, he thought it was meant to be easy, so it was. Not so easy to get published though – Methuen threatened to sue him for breach of copyright.

Everybody has their price it seems, and not many years later they accepted a small royalty in exchange for their permission. By this time though, Jan had written several children's books, starting with *Albeson and the Germans*, following it with *My Mate Shofiq*, *The Size Spies*, *Rottenteeth* and a couple of volumes of short stories.

Although it did quite well when it was published in 1981, *Wild Wood* suffered from having been published as a kids' book. Whether or not Kenneth Grahame's original is for children or not, Jan never thought his version was, although many children seemed to love it.

Some years later, when Grahame's copyright expired, a rash of sequels appeared, which given the nature of journalism, were noticed and lauded extravagantly. Note to writers: timing is everything.

By now however, writing was a drug. Always self-indulgent to the point of lunacy, Jan wrote what he liked when he liked, with never a thought to what his publishers and agents might recommend. He had another addiction as well: the sea and boats. Despite these fairly major vices, he has managed to produce about 45 books so far.

In the 1980s, Needle moved seriously into television writing. His favourite piece of work was an eight part series called *Truckers*, which indulged another of his passions, long-distance lorries. You also wrote episodes for several drama series including *The Bill*, and worked for a year or so on *Brookside*.

At the same time he began to write what he called "big dirty thrillers," one of which immediately became a serial on BBC2. HarperCollins vetoed the title *Underbelly*, which the television people immediately nixed, and Jan later rewrote it as the first of his e-books. It is now called *Kicking Off*, and is a fierce and brutal looking at the failings and horrors of the British prison system.

The second was a bitter resetting of the *Romeo and Juliet* "myth" in Northern Ireland, called *Other People's Blood*. Then came an examination of another modern story with mythical overtones, *Death Order*, published by Endeavour Press, which is a political thriller about the Rudolf Hess affair.

Two days after delivering the manuscript of his next book for HarperCollins, *Fear of Night and Darkness*, Jan was involved in a motorway pile-up which ended his writing for a full eight years. As he had just been asked to do a block of eight episodes of *The Bill*, it was a financial disaster on top of everything else.

Interspersed with plays and thrillers and children's literature throughout these years Jan also wrote a series of historical naval adventures featuring William Bentley. The first book was called *A Fine Boy for Killing*, and approached Britain's naval history through a distorted lens. The glib idea of extraordinary heroism and honour is skewered comprehensively. Bentley starred in three more novels, and one day the story will be completed. Road accidents can have a debilitating effect on long sea journeys!

The latest sea books are two novellas, the second of which, *Nelson: The Poisoned River* starts a proposed series on the life of Nelson, the man who almost single-handedly originated the seagoing hero myth. The first book, *The Devil's Luck*, also starts a series, which will eventually lead into the life of William Bentley.

As well as writing, sailing, travelling all over France and Germany, and playing a variety of musical instruments (most quite badly) Jan has also found time to produce five children with the two women who have shared his life. They range in age now from 38 to 22. Four boys and a girl called Sadie M'gee, (for which she has never forgiven him).

His parents are both dead, which is a great loss in terms of eccentricity if nothing else. His mother was the longtime cook for Portsmouth Water Company who said her greatest achievement was not her two children, but living with their father for so many years. Jim died at the age of 78 after abusing his body mercilessly on a diet of cakes and bummed cigarettes, both of which he apparently started using at the age of seven. He also smoked a pipe 24/7, sometimes using wood shavings instead of tobacco when he was skint. Which sadly, was very frequently.