

The Monkey's Wedding
*and other
stories*

Joan Aiken



*with Introductions from
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The Making of a Storyteller



This collection of stories, some of which have never been published before, is taken mostly from Joan Aiken's earliest writing years in the 1950s and 1960s when she was working for the English short-story magazine, *Argosy*. They demonstrate her wide ranging stylistic ability, with subjects as diverse as a spinster castaway on an island of talking mice, a doctor's cure for a glamorous man-hating motorcycle stunt rider, a village that appears only for three days a year, or a vicar happily reincarnated as a devilish cat. All these ideas seem to pour out of an endless imagination, making bold use of eccentric and unexpected settings and characters, and at the same time demonstrating an evident delight in parodying a variety of literary styles from gothic to comedy, fantasy to folktales. But Joan always repudiated the suggestion that she was "a born storyteller." She would always argue furiously that writing was a craft, like oil painting or cabinetmaking, that she had learned, practiced, and developed over the years. She described this period of her life as a single-minded engagement with the writer's craft; and her grasp of the short-story form as the foundation of her literary career.

What is far from apparent from these wildly inventive and free-wheeling tales is that this was in fact a bitterly difficult period of her life, when not long after the end of the Second World War she was left widowed and homeless with two young children. Having made the brave decision to try and support herself and her family by

writing, she applied for a job at a popular short-story magazine. In many ways, as she often said subsequently, this period spent working at *Argosy* could not have been bettered, both as a wonderful distraction and consolation during a bad time, and as an unbeatable apprenticeship in the craft of writing.

Joan's work on the magazine, as a very junior jack-of-all-trades, gave her a thorough editorial training while teaching her more than she had ever learned at school about the basics of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Her chief task was to read dozens of stories from the hundreds of submissions that arrived in daily bales, and then to reply to the unsuccessful budding authors. She gave critical feedback and advice, while also learning a good deal in the process about what made a good story. Joan also met and interviewed for *Argosy* many of the successful authors of the time, talking to writers such as H. E. Bates, Paul Gallico, Ray Bradbury, and Geoffrey Household about their working methods. Finally, she was also able to supplement her fairly meager income by contributing all kinds of articles to the magazine: editorial pieces, poems, anthology features, and eventually, also the short stories she was starting to write herself. It was this fertile mix of potboilers and random pieces, rapidly invented space fillers, articles written to go with leftover illustrations, and cheerfully ironic commentaries on unusual news stories or eccentric scientific inventions, which really began to inform Joan's fiction and ignite her practically unstoppable powers of invention.

Under a variety of pen names, including the nicely tongue-in-cheek John Silver—a name stolen from the pirate in *Treasure Island*—Joan created some of her taller tales. Among these was a piece imagining, for example, the plot for a stage musical constructed entirely from the personal columns of a daily paper:

“Nick Lochinvar, a young Scot, is broke and broken-hearted. Owing to a revolution he has had to leave the independent Indian kingdom of Pawncore, where he was

agent-general, and Kate, the girl he adored, who has stayed to look after the little prince, and taking only his pet mamba, Amanda. (Yes yes, we know you don't get mambas in India, but he had been in Africa first.) In a mood of black despair he turns to studying the psychology of donkeys. Finally, reduced to selling either his Scottish evening full-dress regalia or the faithful Amanda, he spots an advertisement for a snake-charming competition the prize for which, five thousand pounds, would allow him to restore his fortunes with Kate . . .”

—and much more, material enough for a sackful of stories. Suggested lyrics to the songs are included of course, for example “the tune that he croons in the rainy monsoon—‘I’ve a bungalow deep in the jungle-o . . .’” which also pour out in the astonishing flow of her invention.

Joan imagined the publication of a simple ‘First Reader’ for the educational improvement of long-term prison inmates, with lines like:

“Has Dan got a hot rod?”

“No, but Ned can do a ton in his van. . . .”

“Run Jim run! I saw a cop pop out of the pub!”

Or she would create and describe entirely fictitious manuals, with names such as *Popular Errors Explained*, from which she would list an astonishing selection of ‘quotations’ from topics in the index—‘Crocodile, Death foreboded by sight of,’ or ‘Nine of Diamonds, the curse of Scotland,’ or simply ‘Absurd Notions, Universal . . .’ All, of course, were invented to tickle the imagination of the reader, but at the same time such pieces were developing possibilities for mad plots in her own fiction.

This need for quick-fire creativity clearly fed Joan's fertile mind and produced endlessly zany plots, as can be seen from the subjects of the tall tales included in this collection—a sailor who brings home a mermaid in a bottle, the murderous nightmares of the advertising jingle writer. Every story is surprising in its premise but promises an even more extraordinary outcome, once you are acclimatized to the Aiken imagination.

Reading dozens of stories daily provided a perfect opportunity to study both what made appealing story content, and also what made a story memorable. Joan summed up the story-writing formula she worked out for the necessary combination of elements as “exotic background, touch of sex, twist ending, and a touch of humor if possible”—a formula that would enable her to sell as many stories as she could in order to keep the family afloat.

As well as learning to write fast and efficiently, Joan was also working to perfect her style. In her interview with H. E. Bates, she notes a remark of his that became one of her key precepts for short-story writing. She writes:

“Besides inspiration and a lot of sheer hard labor, a story requires, for its germination, at least *two* separate ideas which, fusing together, begin to work and ferment and presently produce a plot.”

Apart from scanning the small ads for inspiration, Joan always recommended keeping a notebook to record odd sights and overheard conversations, dreams and news items that would presently gel into a plot. She found that this moment of congruence often came, in her case, while she was dealing with household chores, although she noted wryly that “other writers like Coleridge took laudanum, Kipling sharpened pencils, or Turgenev sat with his feet in a bucket of hot water” while waiting for the inspiration to strike.

Beyond thoughts on plots, Joan records very definite principles on style, for example comparing the construction of a short story to that of a small fire:

“You are trying to kindle the reader’s interest, feeding it with little nourishing bits of fuel, not dumping on too much at once. Lots of people when they begin writing make the mistake of putting in too much description—describing is lovely—but the reader can only take so much at one time, and he will begin to skip.”

Another basic piece of advice she gives is to “show things—don’t just tell the reader about them. If your hero is stingy and selfish—or if the house where he lives is haunted—show it, show what happens” and this she carries out with relish. With true economy she will show her heroine ordering a length of rope long enough to hang herself, “staring straight in front of her like Boadicea” while the hero attempts to distract her from her apparently suicidal intention by telling a wild story of his own about the naming of his dog Raoul:

“After the Vicomte de Bragelonne,” panted Richard. “He was the son of Athos, you remember. He was jilted by Louise de la Vallière.”

“And has Raoul been jilted?” gasped Julia, much interested.

Show things she certainly does, while leaping from scene to scene with astonishing fluidity, garnishing the forward pace of the action with extravagant detail and often extraordinary dialogue, and evidently with no thought of restricting her self to the basic *two* necessary elements.

Describing one piece of early work she wrote: