

WRITERS ON THE RECORD with Victoria Lautman

Magic Figure

A former cookbook editor, Susanna Clarke casts a spell with her critically acclaimed debut novel.



SUSANNA CLARKE'S FIRST novel, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, is a literary phenomenon, with a first printing of 250,000 copies, rights sold in more than a dozen countries, and rumbles of Hollywood interest. Not bad for a former British cookbook editor who dreamed up this dense alternative history of England, set early in the 19th century. The premise: Magic once existed throughout the land, but disappeared hundreds of years before.

The story: Two magicians seek to resurrect magic and restore it to the realm. The result is wonderfully inventive and utterly compelling. Victoria Lautman caught up with Susanna Clarke on her book tour.

Q: Technically, this may be considered fantasy, but it reads like a historical novel with a big dollop of sorcery tossed in. There are dozens of actual 19th-century hotshots popping up, like the duke of Wellington, Napoleon, and Lord Byron. Was your personal interest in these personalities the reason the story is set during the Regency period?

A: Actually, my ideas weren't that developed at the beginning, and I set it then because of Jane Austen and the gravitational pull from

her novels. I felt so at home in her society, which she describes so well. But then the Napoleonic Wars turned out to be so... useful, although it involved such a lot of research. I was a bit nervous at first about fitting the magic into these historical events, but then found that I could do this ventriloquist act by mimicking all the voices—with Wellington in particular.

Q: You do seem to have a particular affinity for Wellington. He's sort of a scene-stealer.

A: Well, he was such a celebrity and phenomenon—a soldier who changed the course of history! Once I got a sense of his character, I could make up lines for him, and they're some of the best in

the book. His presence made the magic seem almost mundane by comparison.

Q: Still, the magic you describe can be incredibly poetic: Statues come to life; rain is sculpted like clay; mirrors transport people. But it's also unpredictable and screwy. You must have had a specific notion of what magic is, and isn't.

A: I've had the idea that there could be advantages and disadvantages to using magic, or that there are at least a lot of problems inherent in it. On the poetic side, I wanted magic to have a sort of eerie, stunning atmosphere all its own, because there are so many amazing images used in film and video that I think magic in books has to do something more. And I also drew upon poetry in the English language, and the things I particularly love about England—the statuary, rain, dark forests. So this is really a very English form of fantasy, like C. S. Lewis.

Q: At 782 pages, this is an awfully big book.

A: I didn't know it was going to be quite so long! I gave a figure to my publisher and agent, and then it turned out to be 100,000 words longer, and they never blinked—just sailed ahead. But I wrote it for readers like me, who love long books like [those of] Dickens or Charles Palliser. I'm afraid that, despite my years in publishing, I was not really thinking of commercial considerations. ■

LIVE

Hear Susanna Clarke talk with Victoria Lautman, Sunday, December 19th, 11:45 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Lookingglass Theatre, 821 N. Michigan Ave. Free. Call (312) 832-6788 for reservations. WFMT (98.7 FM) will broadcast the event live at noon.

(TOP FIVE)

UNSCROOGED

IF THE THOUGHT of sitting through yet another production of *A Christmas Carol* makes you want to break Tiny Tim's crutch over your knee, take heart, Ebenezer. There are plenty of alternative holiday entertainments. Five worth venturing into the cold for:

1 A Merry Jewish Christmas Christmas Eve and Chanukah overlap in this comedy, which finds a gay Jewish man trying to keep his parents in the dark about his gentile boyfriend when they all get together over takeout Chinese food. November 27th through December 31st at Bailiwick Arts Center, 1229 W. Belmont Ave.; (773) 883-1090.

2 Black Nativity: A Gospel Song Play The Chicago premiere of this show—which tells the Nativity story using gospel music, African American verse, and dance—puts some roof-raising joy into its hallelujahs. December 3rd through January 2nd (except December 24th, 25th, and 31st and January 1st), presented by Congo Square Theatre at the Goodman Theatre, 170 N. Dearborn St.; (312) 443-3800.

3 Santaland Diaries The off-produced stage adaptation of David Sedaris's hilarious short story about working as one of Santa's helpers at Macy's is the perfect antidote to forced Christmas cheer. December 3rd through January 9th, presented by Theater Wit at Raven Theatre Complex, 6931 N. Clark St.; (773) 506-8150.



4 A Child's Christmas in Wales This production for adults and children ten and up offers the simple pleasures of storytelling, including the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas's wry memoir and other selections, accompanied by music. December 4th, 11th, and 18th, presented by Remy Bumppo Theatre Company at Victory Gardens Theatre, 2257 N. Lincoln Ave.; (773) 871-3000.

5 It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play You won't see George Bailey fall into the lake or the pool, or off the bridge, but you'll still hear the splashing in this stage production of the movie as a radio broadcast with foley-table sound effects, live music, and the occasional word from our sponsors. December 8th through 26th (except December 25th) at American Theater Company, 1909 W. Byron St.; (773) 929-1031.

—KEVIN McKEOUGH



Clarke

ILLUSTRATIONS: LEFT CHARLIE POWELL, RIGHT DEAN MACADAM. PHOTOGRAPH: SIGRID ESTRADA