

Rhys Bowen: at home and at ease

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Rhys Bowen has been entertaining readers since 1987, when she published the first novel in her Sugar and Spice series aimed at young adults. Since then she has put her name to seven different series and sixteen standalones aimed at young readers. But it is her work in crime fiction that has garnered her legions of adult fans.

Born in Bath England in 1941, Rhys graduated from London University in 1963, and has worked for both the BBC and Australian TV. Married and the parent of four children, she divides her time between her home in the San Francisco Bay Area and Arizona.

As one of the most prolific mystery writers of our day Rhys Bowen's crime fiction has enjoyed popular success around the world, and she has been nominated for or won five Agatha Awards, a Macavity, a Barry, and an Edgar Award – all for Best Novel. Her mystery fiction includes ten novels featuring Constable Evan Evans (1997-2006), sixteen in the Molly Murphy series (2001-2014), and 8 novels in the Royal Spyness series (2007-2014)

Recently I caught up with Rhys at her home in Marin County, just north of San Francisco, where, despite having recently undergone surgery on both eyes, she generously made time to

discuss her writing career.



I began by asking Rhys what led her to take up crime writing. "I've been a writer all my life," she replied, "starting with radio plays for the BBC in London, then children's and YA books, historical novels, TV tie-ins and so forth before I switched to mystery writing in 1997."

A question that had been nagging at me for some time centers on Rhy's use of a *nom de plume*. Her married name is Janet Quin-Harken, and she's published many books for young readers under that name. I asked her why she changed it, and how she settled on the name Rhys Bowen. "I was advised to use a new name when I started writing mysteries or I would be pre-judged as a children's writer," she replied. "I chose Rhys Bowen

because it was my grandfather's name."

Novels are supposed to be like children: one isn't supposed to have any favourites. But I asked Rhys whether she had a favourite series, and if so, which one and why. Her response was immediate. "As you say, I love my children equally. But I really enjoy writing the Royal Spyness books because they are fun and I get to sit at a computer and chuckle when I make my characters do and say really silly things. It's very therapeutic to laugh."

Following up on a related issue I asked Rhys who she numbered among her own favourite authors. "In mystery my favorites happen to be my close friends: Louise Penny, Deborah Crombie, Jacqueline Winspear." She added, "I used to be a big fan of Tony Hillerman [who died in 2008]. Outside mystery I love Kate Morton and Connie Willis."

Two of Rhys Bowen's three crime fiction series are historically set, and there are, of course, special challenges involved in writing about other times, so I asked how she went about faithfully recreating the settings, mannerisms, and language of a particular period. She acknowledged that she was meticulous about her research. "For my Molly Murphy books I often begin by reading up about the theme or environment of the book (for next year's book it's Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*). I go to New York quite frequently and visit places I want to take Molly. I study old photographs. I read old news-

papers, Ladies Home Journal etc. Also books written in the period. For the Royal Spyness books I am often in England, staying at houses very like the ones Lady Georgie would visit, and wandering around London. It's important to experience for myself because the smells, sounds are important."

Rhys shared with the late Robert B. Parker an ability to turn out multiple books in different series every year. I asked her whether it is difficult to work on different projects in a short space of time, and she admitted that it has its challenges. "I focus on one book exclusively, researching then writing. I try to get a first draft done in 3 months; then I have time to polish. But I never think of a Molly book when I'm writing a Royal Spyness book."

One of the many strengths of her novels is that the characters evolve; for example Molly Murphy transitions from being an impoverished Irish immigrant in New York, to someone who moves easily in elite social circles. I asked whether there was a danger of readers losing belief in such characters, and how her readers have reacted. "I think it's been a steep learning curve for Molly," she said. "Her friends Sid and Gus have helped her move among artists and writers, [and] her present husband Daniel has grown up in fairly privileged milieu, but I wouldn't say she is comfortable among fashionable people. She is someone who thinks on her feet. And my readers have enjoyed following her journey to a more stable life and marital happiness."

Every author has their own approach to writing, and I asked Rhys what was her own daily routine, and whether it left much time for her own leisure pursuits. "When I am writing I get to work early," she replied, "doing my online chores around seven and then starting to write around eight. I continue until I have said all I want to say for that day, at least five pages. In the afternoons I do secretarial stuff and make time for my health club and a swim."

A question that perplexes many readers (and not a few writers) is what element most accounts one's widespread appeal and success. I asked Rhys whether it was her intriguing characters, or the ability to create believable and interesting settings, or plot -- the puzzle aspect of her stories that drew her readers. Again, her response was immediate. "It's definitely my characters. People care about Georgie and Molly. They also have fallen in love with my secondary characters -- Georgie's Granddad, Queenie the maid, Darcy. They want to know how they are doing and see a new book as revisiting old friends. The mystery plot is definitely not as important for most people."

In the rapidly-changing world of book publishing, aspiring writers are always

looking for advice. I asked Rhys what she found especially important. "Be prepared to work to hone your skills," she insisted. "This means reading widely in the genre and writing every day. Don't expect instant success. Write where your passion is, not what you think will sell."

The latest in her Royal Spyness series, *Queen of Hearts*, has just been released, and takes her protagonist, Lady Georgina Rannoch, to new lands. I asked her if she would share with readers a bit of what it's about—and in particular how much of one of the characters was influenced by a certain influential publishing magnate of the day. "Fans had begged me to send Lady Georgie to America for some time," she replied. "She accompanies her oft-married mother to Reno to obtain a quickie divorce. They meet a movie mogul on the liner and Georgie's mum is persuaded to accept a role in his upcoming movie. But things in Hollywood do not go smoothly and at a weekend at an estate strangely like Hearst's Castle somebody winds up dead. It was fun to introduce some real Hollywood characters, and to spoof others."

Our time was ending, and I left Rhys to it. She had already been more than generous with her time.

Rhys Bowen's latest book is *Queen of Hearts*. It was released by Berkley Prime Crime in August of 2014.

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