

Entry on Jane Rogers (1952-) for *The Literary Encyclopedia*

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Novelist, Editor, Scriptwriter, Lecturer, Teacher.

Active 1983- in England, Britain, Europe

Jane Rogers was born in 1952 in London, the daughter of academic parents whose frequent moves led to her living by turn in London, Birmingham, Oxford, Copenhagen and New York. She read English at Cambridge and after graduating she qualified as a teacher at Leicester University. She began a career as an English teacher in secondary schools and further education, and also in a children's home and a mental hospital. She became a full time writer when her first child was born, which coincided with the publication of *Separate Tracks* (1983). She is married to the playwright Mike Harris, and lives in Manchester, England. She has worked as a Writing Fellow on university and college creative writing courses in the north of England.

Jane Rogers established her reputation as a writer who deals uncompromisingly with raw emotions through the publication of her first two novels, *Separate Tracks* and *Her Living Image* (1984). These novels drew on her background as a secondary school teacher and mental health worker, but in later works she moved away from the contemporary scene, setting *Mr Wroe's Virgins* (1991) in early nineteenth century Lancashire, and *Promised Lands* (1995) partly in eighteenth century Australia. Her most recently published novel, *Island* (2000), returns to a contemporary setting, and to some of the themes of her early work.

*Separate Tracks* clearly draws on Jane Rogers' experience as a secondary school teacher of English and as a worker in a children's home. The novel charts the relationship between an ill-matched young pair: Orph (the name derives from his status as an orphan) and Emma, from a privileged middle-class background. In the early chapters scenes from their childhoods are described alternately by an omniscient narrator. Their paths coincide when Emma spends a gap year at the children's home where Orph lives. Orph becomes Emma's project – written off by the manager of the home, he represents a challenge to her do-gooder middle class sensibilities, assuming heroic proportions in her eyes, although it is Camus' *L'Etranger*, Meursault, to whom she compares him rather than the handsome heroes of the cheap romances of her childhood. Rogers, however, balances Emma's idealised vision of Orph with a relentlessly downbeat description of his life and attitude. Emma's altruistic decision to invite Orph into her

student household sets off a train of events leading to a horrific climax. Jane Rogers anatomises contemporary Britain in this novel, juxtaposing the comfortable concerned middle class represented by Emma and her student friends and the underclass represented by Orph. The result is a disturbing and impressively frank narrative.

*Her Living Image* is more self-consciously experimental than the previous work. The central conceit of the novel is to entwine two narratives, both centred on a young woman who is involved in a car accident in the opening pages. One narrative follows the course of her early adulthood following the accident, documenting the effect her chance meeting in hospital with the radical Clare has upon the somewhat timid schoolgirl; the other narrative describes the life she might have had if the accident had not occurred. The woman, Carolyn, becomes two separate people, and the two narratives develop separately, although the two lives become entwined through the presence of Alan, boyfriend to Carolyn, and lover to her alter ego, Caro.

Jane Rogers uses the simple device of presenting Carolyn's story in italics, whilst the story of Caro remains in conventional type. The arrangement provides Rogers with plenty of opportunity to contrast the lives of the two women, and to comment on the way in which society shapes women's lives and gives them roles. The atmosphere of 1970's Britain, epitomised in the contrasting lives of the two women, is expertly suggested. Rogers uses her characters to show the class differences which were exacerbated in Britain at the time by the polarising of the political parties. Alan and Carolyn's comfortable middle class existence in their mock-Tudor house is contrasted with the radical lifestyle of the all-woman household lived in by Caro where trips to Greenham Common and protests in support of local community initiatives against the interests of business are the order of the day.

*Her Living Image* won the Somerset Maugham Award and established Rogers as an important new voice. Her next novel, *The Ice is Singing* (1987), published at the height of the Thatcher years, contained her bleakest portrait yet of life in contemporary Britain. This short novel comprises the journal of a woman, Marion, who is escaping from the constraints of her life by travelling through the winter landscape of mid-eighties England, and interpolated stories, "written" by Marion, which focus on the relationships between parents and children and are by turns brutal, tender and always unsettling. Nothing is taboo as Marion, perhaps attempting a cathartic release, examines the depths to which relationships can plunge and, in particular, considers the treatment women receive at

the hands of a patriarchal society. The novel is painful to read and powerful in its effect.

*Mr. Wroe's Virgins* (1991) is the first Rogers novel with a non-contemporary background. It concerns a real historical circumstance, the arrival of the self-proclaimed prophet John Wroe in the Lancashire mill towns of the early nineteenth century. The novel centres on the household Wroe gathers around himself, consisting entirely of seven local women, the "Virgins" of the title. Each of the women has a voice in the novel, and the story unfolds from multiple perspectives. Rogers is adroit at differentiating the voices of the women and in each case the character is fully revealed in the style of the monologue. The seven range from the credulous Joanna to the knowing Leah, from the animal-like Martha to the prim Hannah. Rogers adeptly sketches the background of mill-town life in the 1830s, lending the narrative a credibility it might otherwise have lacked. The novel has been the best received of all Rogers's works, aided by the 1993 BBC television adaptation, for which she wrote the script. Here is the voice of the brutalised Martha, coming to terms with her dreams:

There was nothing before. Only blackness at night. Now there is a new thing every night. People, sounds. And from before. Warm arms lift me. I am held. I have a mother. These are alive at night.

If this world is at night, that was not there before... There may be more.

Before I had none, and now I have two, of daytime brilliance and of night time dreams. My eyes and ears and skin are new and can perceive. If there is a world in dark sleep, there may be one behind the surface of stone.

*Promised Lands* has an obvious affinity with *Mr. Wroe's Virgins* in that it has its roots in historical events and uses multiple narrators. It too is concerned with the relationships between powerful men and subjugated women and touches on many typical Rogers themes, especially motherhood and education. Once again the idea of physical and psychological dislocation is a key feature in a narrative which switches between the contemporary relationship of an idealistic history teacher and his wife, and the story of the eighteenth century settlement of Australia by convicts. Narrative voices cleverly interweave as the eighteenth century tale comments on the twentieth century one, and vice versa.

Jane Rogers's latest work, *Island* (2000) returns to her earlier major theme, the mother-daughter relationship. The treatment is again forthright and occasionally brutal. The novel concerns the determination of Nikki, a young woman, to kill her mother, who abandoned her to a ghastly life in a series

of foster families. After tracking her down to her remote Scottish island home, Nikki poses as a student researching the lives of the islanders, and forms a relationship with her mother's son. The anguish of Nikki's life is conveyed in a colloquial first person narrative which ranges obsessively over her life, in a racy and unsentimental style.

Jane Rogers's critical reputation continues to grow. She has demonstrated her ability to deal with contemporary moral and social issues within the framework of unconventional and intricately plotted narratives, using a cast of sharply realised characters. Her vision is a bleak one, informed by an unflinching engagement with the realities of modern life.