

## THE CLATTER OF A TYPEWRITER AT FOUR YEARS OLD

*Interview by Marcus Ferrar for The Oxford Writer, September 2013*

Janie Hampton serves me a boiled quail's egg as I sit down to interview her on a sunny morning. From someone who travelled across Africa by canoe and truck with husband and three small children, it was never going to be a biscuit. In her gently cascading garden of husbanded semi-wilderness, chickens cluck, ducks quack and quails serve up breakfast.

Janie has swept through life with gusto, and I hear some choice bits. Her writing career started with a women's column in a Zimbabwe newspaper. She advised how to breast-feed, but also how to make an appetising treat out of crickets and build a bamboo latrine. She was paid by the centimetre, measured by ruler on the newspaper page. When typewriter ribbons ran out, she typed on carbon stencils, which meant the top copy was blank.



Adventure was not merely to be lived, but in Janie's case written about. Her mother was a writer, and so too her elder sister. Her father died when she was four, and Janie's first memories are waking up to the clatter of a typewriter. Her mother wrote 40 books, and died at 95 in the night after she completed the last.

"That's what my family taught me about writing: just do it. It's possible, but it's hard work. I still find it difficult." Around the family breakfast table, she learned you're only as good as your last book. She sent her first book at age 11 to a publisher, who rejected it but added, "I'm sure you will be writer one day."

In the 15 books she has written, recurring themes are hardship and ordinary people overcoming daunting obstacles. Two bestsellers are *London Olympics: 1908 and 1948*, and *The Austerity Olympics: How the Games Came to London in 1948*. – "There was no money. Athletes slept in classrooms and travelled to their events by London bus," she says.

"I'm no sports journalist. I'm good at research and interviewing people." People such as Dorothy Tyler, who competed for Britain in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, met Hitler and went to a party thrown by Goebbels.

She looked askance at Girl Guides before she started writing about them. But then she heard extraordinary tales of endurance in wartime China, and of rallying morale in concentration camps. “We will not die until the death” was their motto. When she launched *How the Girl Guides Won the War* in the Summertown Book Store, she sang a Girl Guide song her mother sang in the 1930s.

Having worked with conventional publishers, Janie liked using Kindle Singles to publish *Rationing and Revelry - the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953* earlier this year. “30,000 words, properly edited, brought out quickly, available for £1.49.”

Ninety minutes have passed, and I have scarcely pealed one quail’s egg. Janie’s stories flow on, each phrase honed by the scion of a writing family.

© Marcus Ferrar, 2013.