



## Classics in Short No 93

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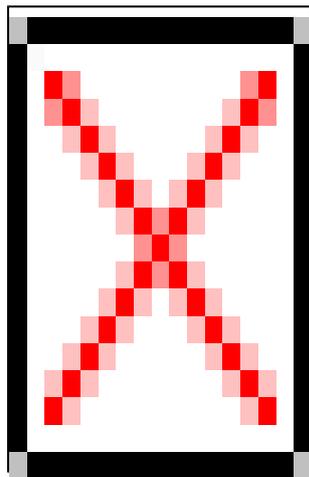
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Article Category:

Classics in Short

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Brian Alderson on Joan Aiken's **The Wolves of Willoughby Chase**.



Havey-cavey goings-on up North among **The Wolves of Willoughby Chase**?

### *Wolf-proof*

the Channel Tunnel was not. No ? not THAT Channel Tunnel, but the one constructed in the 1820s during the contentious times when James III wrested the throne from those intruding Hanoverians. By the time that things had quietened down a bit in the 1830s, the wolves had roused up. Bad winters had brought them through the Tunnel and the plaguey things were all over the place.

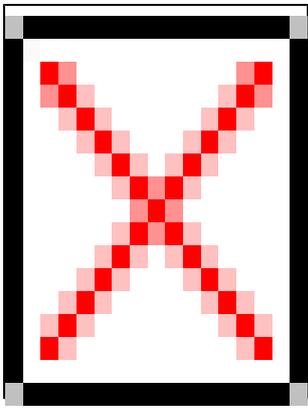
### *The new-fangled railways*

were particularly vulnerable and poor little Sylvia Green had a hard time of it on her fourteen-hour journey northward through winter snows to stay with her cousin Bonnie in the great house of Willoughby Chase. The hungry beasts had worked out the food potential of rail passengers and were not beyond waylaying slow-moving or halted trains. Indeed, Sylvia owed it to a mysterious gentleman, sharing her compartment, that a wolf who jumped through the window was despatched before it could eat her.

### *Mysterious though he was,*

it never struck her or, later, her cousin that he too might be of a wolfish disposition, and as Joan Aiken's story proceeds the animals' place is ceded to predatory humans, whose ruthlessness is backed by a greater cunning than that of the beasts. Leader of the (very small) pack is the domineering Miss Slighcarp, Bonnie's fourth cousin once removed and her newly-appointed governess, given control of the Willoughby household while her parents seek a Cure for Lady Green who has been suffering from an acute debility intermixed with melancholia.

### *Once they are gone,*



(unknowingly booked on to an unseaworthy vessel) Miss Slighcarp exercises her authority as chatelaine in a bid for power that sees the two cousins made away to a kind of Dothegirls Hall in the town of Blastburn where starvation and death seem likely to be their lot. At the turning-point of the story though an ingenious rescue is planned by Simon, the goose-boy from Willoughby Chase, and the story moves from wolvisish winter to a spring- and summer-time of freedom and revenge.

### *Parallels*

with Dickensian narrative could be found by anyone seeking them, but Joan Aiken's verve as a teller of her own stories is already manifest in what was her first full-length book of any consequence, published fifty years ago this year. The pacing ? much ground is covered, both geographically and in terms of events, in its modest 192 pages; the naming of parts ? from Slighcarp and Brisket to the village blacksmith, Mr Wilderness; the embracing of heady coincidences and grand rescues, all make for absorption rather than rousing spoilsport doubts about authenticity. The writing may not quite come out ?with the force of Niagara? which was Aiken's criterion for the making of a good children's book (see her still very relevant 1982 manual on **The Way to Write for Children**) but it exhibits the attendant qualities that she praises: setting the words down with love and catching the intensity of a story told as it demands to be told..

### *It's easy to believe*

that, by the time **Wolves** was finished the author's head was humming with a realisation of the potential that was on offer through the circumstances of her larky tale. The imagined politics of the work had so far made little appearance but in its successor, **Black Hearts in Battersea**, they come to the fore just as the wolves recede. Bonnie and Sylvia recede too, but Simon, their rescuer, is found on the very first page, crossing Southwark Bridge and entering a tale of dark political doings as the Hanoverians seek to unseat King James and bring Georgie back to the throne. And a page or two later, down Rose Alley, Simon encounters a ?shrewish-looking little creature...with sharp eyes of a pale washed-out blue and no eyebrows or eyelashes to speak of? ? none other than the indomitable Dido Twite. It may not have seemed a momentous meeting but Aiken was to pursue their fantastic adventures through nine more books down to the end of her life. (The last, **The Witch of Clatteringshaws**, came out after her death in 2004.)

### *Against recent serious-minded*

(and perhaps pretentious) multi-volume series, there is a light-heartedness in these twelve picaresque stories which leads me to wonder why they are not more often recognised as the hypnotic adventures that they are. (Indeed, Philip Pullman is quoted as referring to their author as ?a marvel? and there would be much mileage in a comparative assessment of her storytelling and his.) It's difficult, under today's publishing regime, to know how many of the series are currently in print or how they may continue to be nurtured as a coherent sequence of printed books. Certainly paperback endeavours have come and gone, but one's welcome for them is tempered by the disgraceful treatment that has been meted out to their illustrator. Pat Marriott worked closely with Aiken for forty years, and her versatile drawings are indispensable adjuncts to the first seven stories (she died, alas, between **Is** and **Cold Shoulder Road**). Progress in print and paper technology however has managed to reduce her expressive, and often comic, line to a species of black mud.

The Illustrations by Pat Marriott are taken from the 2004 edition of *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* by Joan Aiken published by Red Fox (978 0 0994 5663 6) at £5.99.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for The Times.

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