



## An Interview with Jaine Fenn

by Gary Reynolds



*Let's start with the age-old 'how did you get into writing' question.*

Somewhere in the depths of the University of Hertfordshire's Linguistics department is a C30 cassette tape of me, aged four-and-a-bit, telling the story of an as-yet un-broadcast Star Trek episode.

If I remember rightly a flying fire extinguisher saved the crew from Terrible Peril (I think that was during my 'red toy' phase). The Uni kept the tape to demonstrate language acquisition and the development of abstract cognitive skills. A couple of years later I acquired written language, so I don't use tapes any more. Other than that, I'm still doing pretty much the same thing.

*Can you describe your process for writing 'Principles of Angels' from initial idea through to revision and submission? Are you a planner, or do you just*

*dive in and start writing?*

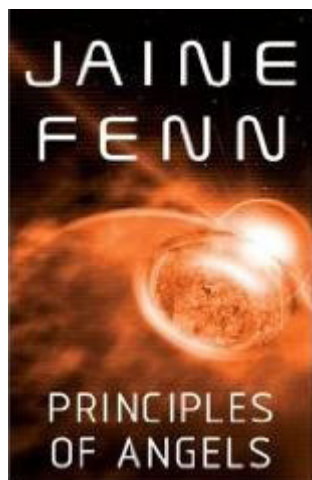
'Principles of Angels' was my first book. It was also my second, third, fourth and ... I've lost count of how many times I re-wrote it. The original idea came from one of my first ever short stories – what if an assassin is forced to kill someone she loves? The idea kept collecting other ideas, and developed an interesting setting, though as I had no clue what I was doing, attempts to bring all this stuff together and turn it into a novel initially resulted in files of disjointed scribbling which I'd abandon then periodically return to. As I learnt to write (mainly through short stories and critiquing groups), I applied what I learnt until I got the novel right. Well, good enough anyway.

As for the 'planning' vs 'going for it' question: If I over-plan, I lose interest. But I have to have the feel of a story (whatever the length) before I start. That sounds pretentious, and it's hard to explain what I mean, but it's a process that involves lots of hand-written notes and a vague outline on the computer. I have to know where I think I'll end up. Quite often, because I don't plan in detail, I find I'm wrong.

*How long did it take for 'Principles of Angels' to be picked up by Gollancz?*

I got the book into a saleable state in late 2004 (thanks to feedback from various critiquers, including the Milford Writers' Workshop), and initially had some interest from one of the large publishing houses in the US. This didn't pan out, but it gave me the confidence to start the process writers know so well, that of submission and rejection.

Gollancz was the tenth market I tried, and they picked it up very quickly – from submission to book deal was less than three weeks.



***What did you learn from writing 'Principles of Angels' and how has it impacted upon your approach to 'Consorts of Heaven'?***

I learnt a helluva lot about how to write a novel, including (some of) what not to do. Specific lessons included: to let characters tell the story and not impose my idea of the story on them; to get the first draft down without compulsive revising; and, when it comes time to revise, to cut brutally and trust that the reader will be smart enough to work it out for themselves.

Oh, and that I should leave writing in dialect to experts like Iain M. Banks.

***What's your favourite sci-fi film and why?***

Predictable answer this: Bladerunner. I'm old enough (just) to remember the impact it had when it came out. I liked noir detective stories, I'd just (thanks to Star Wars) discovered space opera and then along comes this story with mystery and angst and drama and a setting and atmosphere like nothing I'd ever seen before. It looks dated now, but that's because it influenced so much that came after it.

***Can you tell us something unusual about yourself not related to writing or science fiction?***

I'm ballet trained to a semi-professional level. Though I realised about age 14 that I didn't have either the physique or the talent to be a professional dancer, I kept doing ballet throughout my twenties and into my thirties. With the pressure off, I could enjoy dancing for its own sake. Having said that, ballet is a rigid discipline not entirely unlike some martial arts (I'm also a green belt in Ki Aikido). Believe me, a dancer apparently floating across the stage en pointe may look inhumanly graceful, but she's in a lot of pain. Toes aren't designed to be balanced on.

***You write both short stories and novels. Which form do you prefer and why?***

Tough question. Can I have both please? A short story gives instant gratification, and is a great way to explore a single idea (or ideally, two or three). A novel allows more depth, more time to explore, but also asks for way more commitment. While I'm being paid to write novels, they'll take priority, but some stories need to be told in short format: for example, at the beginning of this week I realised a character was about to appear in my current novel who was too interesting to just be defined by my usual '20 questions' technique. I needed to understand how she came to be what she is when we meet her in the novel. So I took two days off from the novel and wrote her back-story as a short. That story may never see the light of print, but I needed to write it to understand her.

***What are you currently working on and how's it going?***

I'm just over half way through the first draft of 'Guardians of Paradise', the third of the three books contracted for so far in the Hidden Empire series. It's going well: I normally find first drafts hard work, and much prefer revising, when I've got something to work with, but because I'm mainly dealing with characters I know well, things are rattling along nicely.

***What can we expect to see from you after your current contract with Gollancz?***

I've got an almost-finished, but as yet unsold, near-future novel set in the same universe as the Hidden Empire books which I'd like to get back to. It's the story that kicks off my whole timeline, so I want to spend a while there. However, there's a lot more to be told at the other end of the timeline too; 'Guardians of Paradise' will resolve some of the threads I've been playing with, but it'll also leave plenty of potential for future adventures – not to mention introducing a new threat (if you think the Sidhe are bad news now ... it gets worse).