

Jane Oliver (the pseudonym of Helen Rees, née Evans)

Helen Evans and her younger sister Mary had grown up in Newcastleton in Roxburghshire, daughters of a country doctor. Helen went to school in St Andrews in Fife, and then to a finishing school in Lausanne in 1922-23. She then went to Bedford Training College while Mary went to Oxford.

After Bedford, Helen taught as a physical education instructor at a school in Loughborough in the late 1920s. Later, she moved to London, and she, Mary and a Canadian cousin also called Helen shared rooms together as paying guests in a house in Cadogan Square. On the dustjacket of her first solo novel, *Tomorrow's Woods* (1932) Helen described herself as 'turning her hand to half a dozen trades, she has since been gymnast, masseuse, and school teacher, a writer of penny dreadfuls, a literary secretary, and worked from nine to six in a big London bookshop.' She had been the 'literary secretary' for Clemence Dane, one of the most well-known British playwrights in the 1920s and 1930s. The 'big London bookshop' was the *Times* Book Club.

After she had had a short story accepted for publication, Helen gave up teaching to concentrate on becoming a writer, and her partnership with Anne Pedler followed. By 1936 they had published six novels together, as Jane Oliver and Ann Stafford, and six further novels separately.

Helen and Anne were photographed by Howard Coster in 1936, in a portrait now held by the National Portrait Gallery. Helen is seated on a cushion in front of the fireplace, while Anne leans over the arm of her chair to look at their manuscript on the floor. It's a portrait of collaborative working, and Helen's intent gaze is the focus, rather than the apparently blank notebook in front of them. Helen was photographed several times by Coster that year, suggesting that she was the more famous face of the writing partnership.

She learned to fly, obtaining her Royal Aero Club Aviator's certificate in April 1937. She then met and then lived with the writer John Llewellyn Rees (he also used the spelling Rhys), marrying him in 1939. He, like her, was a pilot, but he was killed in August 1940 in a training accident. After his death Helen became convinced that she remained in telepathic communication with him, and transcripts survive of their 'automatic writing' conversations. Spiritualism and contacts with the dead became a feature of some of her post-war fiction, particularly *Morning for Mr Prothero* (1950).

As well as her steady work as an author, Helen was a noted local activist and campaigner against the export of New Forest ponies and for the Red Cross. She remained close to her mother and sister into the 1950s, and to her secretary Bet Lukens, to whom she left her house in her will. In 1962 she had had the house rebuilt in brick containing a time capsule, an event filmed by Southern TV. She continued to publish her books, and her nephew David Murdoch notes that from

the 1950s she wrote children's novels in parallel with adult fiction, using her meticulous research to write stories set in the same historical period, but for different readerships.

Helen founded the John Llewellyn Rhys prize from her own royalties in memory of her husband, as a prize for young Commonwealth authors. She and Ann administered it for some years, then handed it to the National Book League in the 1960s. Helen remained on its selection panel, only giving up her work for the prize only a few weeks before her death. Half of her obituary in *The Times* was devoted to the prize and her husband's last book, *England is My Village*, which had been posthumously awarded the Hawthornden Prize in 1941. On Helen's literary career, *The Times* reported that 'she was best known for her historical fiction, which was widely popular. Her work was thoroughly researched and nicely balanced, so that the scholarship never bore heavily on the narrative. She had a great gift for catching the vigour and variety of a period, and this was particularly marked in the novels with a background in Scottish history.' She had published 31 novels under her own pen-name, and had co-written a further 39 with Anne.

Ann Stafford

Little is known about Anne Pedlar's early life. Her obituary notes that she had an MA and a PhD, though it is not known when she was awarded these degrees, or from which university. She had been married but had left her husband around the time that she and Helen met. Her son John Pedler had been born in the early 1930s, and was sent to Canada during the war, returning in 1943. He later worked for the Foreign Office and died in 2018. Anne drove ambulances during the Second World War, but she made her career as a novelist, publishing 25 books under the name of Ann Stafford, and a further 39 co-written with Helen. She was active in the British Red Cross from 1939, rising to the rank of Divisional Deputy President. After the war both Anne and Helen lived in Hampshire, variously living next door to each other and sharing a house in Gorley, Fordingbridge. In Anne's last illness Helen cared for her until her death.