

LOVEJOY AUTHOR TURNS TO PAST

"Meg Davis-Berry meets the Essex author who created one of television's favourite characters and has now written the story of a woman for all men."

Jonathon Gash, author of the Lovejoy novels is a surprise - as much to himself as anyone else. He admits to total astonishment at his success and even to what his characters get up to.

His readers would be amazed to find that Jonathon is really John Grant - no pirate treading a fine line on the edges of the law and the world of antiques, but a highly respected doctor and senior microbiologist in London.

He lives quietly at West Bergholt, near Colchester, with his wife, a budgie and a study full of books which almost constitutes a library. Three daughters - two married to actors - shatter the peace when they came home with a variety of small grandchildren.

The Grants moved to West Bergholt more than 20 years ago, when, as a specialist in tropical medicine he returned from overseas appointments in Hong Kong and the Middle East.

Writing started in 1975 "as a game" and, fifteen years on, Lovejoy has become an international success with 14 books and an omnibus edition in print, a new book and television series on the stocks and strong rumours of a film to come.

But writing remains a game and doctoring still comes first. John Grant runs four clinics in London each week while Jonathon Gash comes home to his make-believe world of good humoured trickery, double dealing and occasional clear-cut crime.

But recently John Grant has surprised himself again. He found that his first attempt to write a Lovejoy story featuring a doctor as a central character had turned into something quite different.

The result is his first historical novel, full of the atmosphere of the isolated Essex coast of almost two centuries ago.

The Shores of Sealandings is the story of a mysterious and beautiful young girl rescued from the sea by a fishing lugger from the village of Sealandings. The villagers take the girl in and from then on her strong but benign character influences them all - especially the men.

The girl is Mehala and Jonathon Grant openly acknowledges his debt to the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould who wrote Mehalah, his own gothic novel of a young east coast girl, during the ten years he spent in Essex in the late 19th century.

Jonathon Grant takes over where Baring-Gould left off, with Mehala drowning, but there the resemblance between the two characters - and the two books - ends.

It's a shame, but Baring-Gould's book is virtually unreadable now", Grant admits.

His own new novel, which is the first part of a trilogy, is most certainly readable, including elements of a Lovejoy-style scam, plenty of historical detail, the atmosphere of East Anglia and a good helping of romance.

But it is the story of the village doctor, totally atone in his fight against disease in general and diphtheria in particular, which is the centre point of the book.

"I felt for him every inch of the way," Grant said, giving his character a life of his own. "I have been there and felt everything he felt - a feeling of being so alone and so helpless."

But why has it taken 15 years for a doctor to write about doctoring and why did he choose antiques as his original subject matter.

"Writing is a game. It's easy to kill off the woman at the end of chapter nine. Doctoring singularly isn't.

"I chose antiques because I used to work in Petticoat Lane every morning to help pay my way through medical school."

He worked from 3am to ten each morning as a runner helping to set up the stalls for the day. That is where he found his pen name of Gash, the street name for rubbish.

He has been an avid collector ever since and his love of the history that each object holds can clearly be seen in *Sealandings*. Today his knowledge of the world of antiques is aided by the dealers around him in North Essex and Suffolk. They are only too eager to help when they realise who the quiet gentleman asking the awkward questions is!

John Grant is obviously a good listener. He has learnt so much of East Anglian customs and Essex history by talking to the older people in West Bergholt and neighbouring villages.

He admits to having fallen in love with this part of the country which has been the background to all his books so far, although his own background was very different.

He was born in a Bolton back street in the 1930s and remembers running to the top of the street to see which mill chimney was smoking that morning to tell his father where he might get work.

School, and the nuns who taught him there were two worlds and almost two languages - one of the streets and one for school - led him to training for the priesthood in a seminary where even football games had to be played in Latin on certain days.

"We had E-days when we spoke English and L-days for Latin. Even if you won the match, but shouted out in the wrong language, you lost."

He decided on medicine rather than religion and ended up as a tropical disease specialist after National Service.

But Grant has never turned his back on his Lancashire roots and has a hefty file of epic poems that he has written in his childhood dialect. They remain unpublished.

"Mainly because my mother and I are the only two people left who understand them," he laughed.

It's possible that a historical novel set in the same period as *Sealandings*, but based in Lancashire, could be the next from the pen of Jonathon Grant. But he is no wiser than we are about that.

"I find I've been looking at maps of my home town from the 1820s and the street pattern hadn't changed at all when I was a boy. Of course, it's totally different now.

"It could be that there's a book brewing."

Writing is still very much a relaxation rather than a task. Unusually for a successful author, he has refused to take a contract with a publisher for a guaranteed sum of money a year for whatever he writes.

He prefers to write without that pressure and he is always surprised at what emerges when his pen hits blank paper. He still writes in longhand and carries out revision in different coloured inks before the book ever reaches manuscript stage.

"It looks like a map of the underground by the time I've finished with it. But I hate wrongness. I have to get things right." He certainly has got things right with both *Lovejoy* and *Mehala*, who could become his female counterpart.

The Shores of Sealandings is published by Collins in hardback at £13.99. A sequel, *Storms at Sealandinas*, is due out next year. A new *Lovejoy* novel, *The Lies of Fair Ladies*, is scheduled for January to tie in with a new television series.