



The Serial Garden

The Complete Armitage Family Stories

Joan Aiken

The Book

The Serial Garden is the first complete collection of Joan Aiken's twenty-four beloved Armitage family stories—including this story and three others published for the first time. The book also includes Joan Aiken's "Prelude" to the series from *Armitage, Armitage, Fly Away Home*, as well as introductions from Joan Aiken's daughter, Lizza Aiken, and best-selling author Garth Nix.

The Armitages

After Mrs. Armitage makes a wish, the Armitage family has "interesting and unusual" experiences every Monday (and the occasional Tuesday). The Board of Incantation tries to take over their house to use as a school for young wizards; the Furies come to stay; and a cut-out from a cereal box leads into a beautiful and tragic palace garden. Charming and magical, the uncommon lives of the Armitage family will thrill and delight readers young and old.

Praise for Joan Aiken's stories

"Joan Aiken is a marvel."—Phillip Pullman

"A writer of wild humor and unrestrained imagination."
—*Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*

"This year can boast one genuine small masterpiece. . . . *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* . . . almost a copybook lesson in those virtues that a classic children's book must possess."—*Time Magazine*

The Facts

The Serial Garden: The Complete Armitage Family Stories

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Big Mouth House · Distributed to the trade by Consortium

Praise for Joan Aiken's stories

"A consummate story-teller."

—*The Times*

"With its fine-tuned combination of folklore and fun, is a good source of imaginative tales to read alone or aloud."

—*Booklist*

"Whether scary, satiric, or poetic, Aiken's tales have strong settings, memorable characters, insight, and humor."

—*School Library Journal*

"You can never quite be sure where an Aiken story will end up; you can only be sure that the journey will be worthwhile. . . . The Armitage stories are, once again, charming and quirky. Some of them veer into slightly serious territory, but mostly they're Aiken having fun. Harriet and Mark also have fun in these stories, and readers will too."—*Strange Horizons*

"The best kind of writer, strange and spooky and surprising, never sentimental or whimsical."—Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*)

The Serial Garden: The Complete Armitage Family Stories

- Introduction by bestselling author Garth Nix.
- Introduction by Joan Aiken's daughter Lizza Aiken.
- Prelude by Joan Aiken from *Armitage, Armitage, Fly Away Home*.
- This first complete collection of Armitage stories includes stories taken from seven different collections and includes four stories published here for the first time.
- Aiken has over twenty books in print in the USA. In 2007 Harcourt reprinted five Aiken titles and in 2008 there will be reprints from Sourcebooks and David R. Godine.
- Cover by Beth Adams.

Don't Go Fishing on Witches' Day

Joan Aiken



*with an introduction
to the October 2008 collection*
The Serial Garden:
The Complete Armitage Family Stories
*by Joan Aiken's daughter,
Lizza Aiken*

Big Mouth House
Easthampton, MA

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this story are either fictitious or used fictitiously.

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Joan Aiken's Armitage Stories

Joan Aiken (1924-2004) began writing the Armitage Family stories when she was still in her teens, and sold the first story, “Yes, But Today is Tuesday,” to the BBC Children’s Hour programme in 1944. This and another five stories about the Armitage children, Mark and Harriet, and their encounters with everyday magic, were included in her first published collection, *All You’ve Ever Wanted*, in 1953. Over the years Joan continued to add to their adventures and the stories appeared in six further collections of fantastic tales during the next four decades. For the American collection *Armitage, Armitage, Fly Away Home* in 1968, Joan added a prelude introducing the Armitage parents on their honeymoon, and ensuring, by means of a wishing ring, that despite living “happily ever after” the family would never, never be bored. Before she died in 2004 she had completed four new Armitage stories, and had just sent them to her typist, together with all those from previous collections, with a letter saying that she hoped to try and have all of them gathered together and published in one volume. Here it is at last!

Joan was the daughter of writer Conrad Aiken, who was divorced from her mother Jessie McDonald when Joan was five. When Jessie married his friend, the writer Martin Armstrong, in 1929, the family moved from Joan's birthplace in the town of Rye to a tiny cottage in a village on the other side of Sussex. Armstrong was nearly fifty, and had no children until Joan's half brother David was born in 1931, and she says: "I was rather nervous of him and he, probably rightly, found most of my remarks silly." Nevertheless he was "immensely entertaining, both witty and erudite" and life at the cottage was graceful in spite of the family's poverty, as Armstrong depended for their living on what he wrote. In those days there was no running water, it was drawn from a well, and no electricity, but oil lamps and fires to prepare daily. Joan always said that these formative years were lonely but happy; her friends were books.

Her brother John and sister Jane, twelve and seven years older, were sent away to school, but Jessie, who took a B.A. at McGill in her native Canada, and a Master's at Radcliffe in 1912, before marrying Conrad, was well able to teach Joan at home, and was herself a great reader. Armstrong was also an enormous influence on Joan's reading—his house was full of books—and on her writing, both by example and in his comments on her early work. All through the 1920s and 1930s Armstrong was producing novels, biographies and poems, but perhaps his greatest gift was for short stories, and it is for his fantastic, often ghostly and wildly imaginative stories that he will probably be best remembered. In the late 1930s the BBC invited him to write for their Children's Hour programmes, and he produced a series of stories called "Said the Cat to the Dog" about a middle class English family and their rather extraordinary talking pets, which became an enormous success.

Joan was about sixteen, and as she says: "in a snobbish

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sort of teenage rebellious mood, and it seemed to me that they were terribly silly.” In fact they probably were intentionally so, but this only reflects the difference between Joan’s attitude to writing for children, and what her step-father considered would be suitable (and indeed moral) fare for the young. “Silly” had been the most withering criticism he had levelled at her own early work, and this had clearly rankled.

“Just for fun I thought I would write a kind of skit on them, so I wrote a story, called ‘Yes, But Today is Tuesday,’ calling my family Armitage instead of Armstrong, in which a lot of totally unexpected and horrendous things happened, sent it to the BBC, and to my amazement they took it!”

Martin Armstrong, born in 1882, public school and Cambridge educated, had served as an officer in the First World War; he was therefore not only an Edwardian, but a member of the gentry. In an English village of the 1930s there was an absolute social divide between the gentry and the villagers, and they would ‘meet’ only on public occasions, but nevertheless they lived and worked closely together. It seems incredible now that an “ordinary” family like the Jacksons, in Armstrong’s stories should of course have a “Cookie the Cook, Elsie the Maid and Mr Potts the Gardener” to look after them, but that they were also seen as part of the family—rather like the children of the period they would be expected to know their place and keep to it. Joan, daughter of Canadian double graduate Jessie, must have felt as alienated as her mother in this hidebound society, and embarrassed to see it depicted in her step-father’s fiction. She describes being discouraged from playing with “the village children” who, teasing and hostile, would shout “Ginger!” at her red hair if they saw her in the road. Once when she had been reading about the Greek hero Perseus, she shouted back “I’ll set Medusa on you!” She regretted it for years afterwards as she was pursued by cries of “Ooooo’s Med-yoo-sa?” whenever they saw her. She does

describe with great affection her relationship with Lily, the fourteen-year-old maid who helped in the house, and with whom she shared stories about Mowgli and Tarzan and sometimes even movies; *The Count of Monte Cristo* and other films were occasionally shown in the tin shack cinema in the small town of Petworth, five miles away, to which they had to walk. The village had one small shop, and a blacksmith. A carrier fetched supplies from Petworth with a horse and covered cart. It seems less surprising then, that Joan's idea of an ordinary family living "happily ever after" in a delightful village should include some fairly oddly assorted characters, let alone dreadful old fairy ladies and Gorgons, as a matter of course.

From an early age, Joan had told stories to her half brother David while climbing and walking around the Sussex Downs behind the village. In the beginning these would be a string of fairly unrelated events, as trying to spin the story out till they reached home again she would add in a witch, a dragon, another disaster, or just the answer to the inevitable question "And then what happened?" She describes with delight the moment when she realised that she could in fact plot it all out so that it tied up satisfactorily with the end relating to the beginning, and with seeds laid along the way to bear fruit later. Despite the fact that the Armitage stories began at this time, and span a period of over fifty years, they have kept a consistent voice, and retain the sense of atmosphere and period of her childhood home. While time and technology moved on and were incorporated with Aiken's usual mix of matter-of-fact and magic, the family characters remain essentially themselves, grappling with the more absurd twentieth century developments alongside the inconvenience of untimely curses and irritable local witches. Thanks to an extraordinarily wide range of reading in her early years, and her belief in the benefits of a powerful imagination, Joan was

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prepared for almost anything. Brought up on a diet of Dickens, Dumas, Austen and the Brontës, Kipling, Stevenson, Nesbitt, Trollope, Scott, Victor Hugo, and many, many more, she was equipped, like the hero of a myth, with the tools, or, in her case, the imaginative power to meet any contingency, and she was going to need it.

The Armitage stories in fact begin during the Second World War when, having been sent to board at a small school in Oxford, Joan was unable to return home. When the school was forced to close down she took what turned out to be an appallingly dull job ruling lines on cards for the BBC in an evacuated office in the middle of nowhere, as London was being bombed. Aiken's "The Fastness of Light" in the collection *A Creepy Company* describes this period fairly vividly, and "Albert's Cap" in Michael Morpurgo's anthology *War*, describes London in the Blitz, but these are rare examples of her using material directly from her life. Although there are oblique references to wartime difficulties, for example the requisitioning of the Armitage house in "The Frozen Cuckoo," or her brother David's enthusiasm for planes during National Service with the R.A.F. in "Dragon Monday," it was her fantasy that sustained her during these bleak years. In fact the next fifteen years were to be almost impossibly difficult as she dealt with war, work, marriage, motherhood and then becoming widowed, homeless, and insolvent all in quick succession. What did she do? She wrote, and by 1955 she had published her second fantasy collection, *More Than You Bargained For*, including four more Armitage stories. Although these might have to be written on trains, while feeding chickens or, as she said, while peeling potatoes with the other hand, she described how they always came almost out of the blue, in a terrific and wonderful urge to get themselves written.

By 1960, she was at last settled in a house of her own,

back in Petworth, and was able to plan and write full length novels; she produced eight in quick succession. The Armitage stories, when they appeared again over ten years later, revisited happier memories from the village, adventures with her cousin Michael on holidays from Northumberland, the exploits of her older scientist brother and much admired older sister on their visits home, actual events like the lady Gardener who tried to buy the Quince tree, and finally, in “Milo’s New Word,” the arrival of David the baby brother and the delight of having a smaller creature to care for. Written long after the death of her mother Jessie, this has some of the most tender descriptions of “Mrs Armitage,” perhaps to make up for a previous and uncharacteristically drastic piece of writing. In *The Way to Write For Children* Joan writes about the degree of tragedy permissible in a work for children:

Children have tough moral fibre. They can surmount sadness and misfortune in fiction, especially if it is on a grand scale. And a fictional treatment may help inoculate them against the real thing. But let it not be total tragedy. Your ending must show some hope for the future.

One Armitage story stands out as unforgettable for many readers, and clearly Joan, too, felt she had to return to “The Serial Garden” and offer some hope of a happier ending, not just to poor Mr Johanssen and his lost Princess, but perhaps also to those, who after reading the description of the appalling but unwitting destruction wreaked by Mrs Armitage, are still reeling with shock that this kind of thing can indeed happen. Mr Johanssen reappears here in two more stories, and although clearly what was done cannot be undone, hope is offered for a solution. It was Joan’s suggestion that this collection be called *The Serial Garden*, perhaps

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wishing to alert those readers who were still waiting for the promised “happy ever after” that she had not forgotten them.

Lizza Aiken, 2008

Don't Go Fishing On Witches' Day

Mark whistled as he cycled along the narrow country road through the cool early-morning air. The tune he whistled was well known in his village—"Don't go a-fishing on witches' day, on witches' day, on witches' day, Don't you go fishing on witches' day unless you take me along too..."

But when is Witches' Day? Mark wondered. Hallowe'en? St Wenceslas? St Swithin's? Midsummer? And who was the "me" in the song?

Harriet would be sure to know, he thought. His sister Harriet was into all that kind of stuff, she did courses in curses, in philtre-making, potion-brewing, astrology, incantation and hoodoo, her ambition was to graduate into witchcraft like some old great-aunt on Dad's side of the family. Harriet would have come along with him this morning had it not been for a radio programme on BBC 13 about blessings and curses and ever-filled purses that she specially wanted to catch; the witchcraft programmes on BBC 13 were always at five o'clock in the morning. Mark was not normally up this

early but he wanted to get to Herringbloom Ponds and cast an eye—and a fishing-line—over them before his father went and bid for them at an auction which was due to start at nine o'clock.

“Three beautifully situated carp ponds with adjacent ruined mansion,” said the Estate Agents’ brochure, under a picture of a blue stretch of water reflecting the branches of green arching willow trees.

“Bless my soul!” Mr Armitage had exclaimed at breakfast the day before. “Bless my soul, my dear, see here in the local paper, Herringbloom Ponds come up for sale at last. Great-aunt Marianna’s curse must have run out at last. Or lifted, or whatever curses do when they die down.”

His family, munching toast, looked at him with interest.

“Great-aunt Marianna? Who was she?”

“My father’s aunt. Lived with her cousin Victoria in Herringbloom Lane, beyond Froxfield. And there was some quarrel with Marianna’s brother Wilfred—he was younger, but he claimed he should have inherited the ponds.”

“Why?” asked Harriet.

“Because he was a male. And because he said they were witches, not eligible to own aquatic properties. There was a great family feud about it. But Wilfred mysteriously vanished. And, after that, the old ladies’ house burned down.”

“What happened to Marianna and Victoria?”

“Died in the fire. But Marianna was heard to say with her expiring breath that, because of Wilfred’s un-brotherly behaviour, no man should ever cast a fly over the ponds without incurring doom and dole—or some such tarradiddle—she laid a curse on the water and foretold that anybody who fished in it should something-or-other—”

“Would what?”

“I really forget. Fish in peril of his life, perhaps.”

“And did the curse work?” asked Harriet eagerly.

“Well I don’t believe the ponds have changed hands more than a couple of times in the last fifty years,” Mr Armitage said. “Old Miss Shelmerdene bought them from the estate but she did nothing with them—I’m sure she never went fishing—she never lived in the house, it became more and more of a ruin—and then Sir Robert Pope-Nottingham bought the land—come to think, he hasn’t been around for the last fifteen years—”

“So perhaps the curse is still working?” Harriet looked hopeful. “Where exactly are Herringbloom Ponds, Father?”

“About fifteen miles from here, other side of Froxfield Green. I’ve a good mind to make an offer for them myself. The sale’s tomorrow.”

“Oh, do. Do!” Harriet’s eyes sparkled at the possibilities which opened before her.

Mark had not taken much part in this conversation, but he had listened hard. Mark was not particularly interested in curses, but just now he had a great passion for fishing, and he was keenly attracted by the thought of Herringbloom Ponds. If no one had fished them for fifty years, what treasures might those waters not hold? There was a local prize for the most uncommon catch brought in before St Swithin’s Day, and Mark thought that Herringbloom Ponds might produce just what he needed to win it. But, on the point of urging his father to buy the ponds, he remembered that Mr Armitage was also a keen angler, so kept quiet.

And now here he was, out on Midsummer Morning when all the woods and fields were bathed in clear daylight at 4 A.M. and the sun was just readying itself to rise.

In a minute, thought Mark, as he pedalled along the road to Froxfield Green, all the trees will have long shadows stretching westwards. The road was bordered by some young copper-beech trees, planted by Sir Robert Pope-Nottingham, owner of Froxfield Manor, before he failed to come home one

evening and was never seen again.

Next minute the sun did rise, over Badger's Hill, and the shadows of the young beeches, and Mark on his bike, all cast themselves forward along the road. And, on either side of his own shadow, Mark noticed two others, tall gaunt skinny shadows, keeping pace with him on his bike.

He stopped pedalling, put a foot on the ground, and looked sharply behind him.

Nobody was there. And the shadows had disappeared. But as soon as he got back into the saddle and rode off, the shadows reappeared, keeping pace with him.

Harriet, meanwhile, was in her bedroom listening to BBC Radio 13. A paragraph of instructions in the Radio Times had said, "Listeners will benefit by supplying themselves beforehand with three different recordings of J. S. Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, BWV 903. These should be played at intervals of five minutes, overlapping, while the programme is going on."

Fortunately Harriet's bedroom was an attic at the top of the house, for the noise made by three different recordings of Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, all started at different times, was very complicated indeed. But Harriet had grown accustomed to it.

"Time is progress," said the radio voice. "A leaf grows, then withers. A flower opens, then fades. But the music that you are hearing now is not affected by time. It can be played at different speeds, on different instruments. It remains itself. Similarly, other activities can be undertaken without regard to time. Step outside the frame of time and you acquire power—power to move mountains, to plunge deep into the matter of existence, to cross immense divides of space, to go forward, backward, sideways."

Harriet listened with great concentration. She was taping

the talk so that she could play it again. Maybe I should make three different recordings of the talk and play them again at different speeds, she thought.

"You have been listening to a talk by Regina Queenscape, Countess of Nearly Nowhere," said the announcer. "It is one in our series of programmes for student necromancers and beginners in auspication; the next in the series will be at the same time on August 1..."

Harriet switched off the radio and went to look out of the window. The fine day had clouded over and large drops of rain were beginning to fall. I wonder if Mark has got to Herring-bloom Ponds, thought his sister. I wonder what is happening to him? It's lucky I made him cut his fingernails before he went off and put them in that little silver box...

Mark did not appear at breakfast. Nor at lunch. This was not particularly unusual. But when his place was empty at supper time his mother became a little perturbed.

"If he was going off for the day you'd think he would have taken something to eat with him. But nothing seems to be missing from the larder... And it's meat loaf for supper, his favourite."

Harriet felt obliged to speak up. "He asked me not to mention where he was going for twelve hours—"

"Why, for goodness' sake?"

"In case you were going to bid for the carp ponds, Father."

"Well, I was," said Mr Armitage triumphantly. "And I did. And what's more I bought them. Thought they ought to be back in the family."

"Oh wow," said Harriet.

"Darling! You bought those ponds? Whatever for?"

"Fishing, what else?" Mr Armitage helped himself to another slice of meat loaf. "Always wanted my own fishing water."

“But the curse?”

“Mark went off to Herringbloom? What time did he leave?”

“Four o’clock this morning. Or thereabouts,” Harriet said. “He wanted to get there just after sunrise.”

“Why just at that time, may I ask?”

“Because I told him supernatural power is just at its lowest at dawn. And also he had an idea that you were going to bid for the ponds, Father.”

“Tough bidding it was, too, against old Lady Ullswater,” Mr Armitage grumbled. “I could have got those ponds for five hundred less if she hadn’t hung on for so long, obstinate old besom. But why should Mark want to be there before I bought the place?”

“The owner of the ponds and his heirs are in the direct line of the curse. He felt it might be better to get there before you made that connection.”

“Troublesome young devil,” growled Mark’s father. “Now what are we supposed to do? What do you reckon has happened to him?”

“We had better go along there,” Harriet said ponderingly. “If the curse has caught up with Mark there may be some way of unravelling or reversing it.”

“Yes, we’d better go.” Mr Armitage pushed back his chair. “Anyway I’d like to take a look at the place before it grows dark. I’ll get out the car.”

“Well I’m not going,” Mrs Armitage said firmly. “I always make the Christmas puddings on Midsummer Night and I have got out all the ingredients and the pudding-basins—it would be shocking bad luck to alter that habit. If there is a curse you will have to unloose it without my help. Harriet had better take all her occult bits and bobs. Oh dear! I hope we haven’t lost Mark for good. He is so careless! He was going to fix the oven door for me—he kept promising—thoughtless

boy! And he's never done it..."

Her face crumpled and Harriet gave her mother a hug.

"Don't worry, Ma; we'll bring him back somehow, even if it's in the shape of a goldfish. And perhaps after all he's just having a wonderful time fishing."

"Selfish young tyke," remarked his father.

Harriet ran off to collect three tape-recorders, a powerful magnet, a flute, Mark's fingernails, a tin of toast crumbs left over from the meat loaf, and a hand mirror, besides a few other odds and ends that might come in useful.

"What are the toast crumbs for?" said her father.

"To feed the fish! Have you brought your rod?"

"Of course."

Harriet and her father were rather silent as they drove through Froxfield Green and on to Herringbloom. The trip took about twenty minutes. A beautiful golden glow lay over the midsummer countryside. The rain had stopped. Father and daughter were deep in thought. Mr Armitage was wondering what sort of bait to use, Harriet was wondering whether she had brought the right equipment to counteract a powerful curse.

Herringbloom Ponds lay linked by waterfalls in a shallow valley set about with elder and willow trees which dangled green and golden trailers over the still water. Each pond was oval in shape and about the size of a tennis court. By the middle pond grew a huge old willow whose gnarled and wrinkled trunk, wider than a church door, had Mark's bicycle propped against it.

"So he got here at least, silly young ruffian," said Mr Armitage, and he threw his head back and shouted "MARK!" at the top of his voice. His only answer was echoes, running up and down the side of the valley.

A few bubbles rose from the still surface of the pond. A couple of blackbirds chattered angrily in the trees.

"I don't think shouting is going to bring him," said Harriet.

"Then I shall fish while you get on with whatever you think you ought to do." Her father unpacked his rod and baited his hook. Then, with an expert twitch, he slung his line over the quiet water of the middle pond.

Harriet watched rather apprehensively. Suppose she were to lose both her father and her brother on the same day? How could she explain that to her mother?

She wondered how Mrs Armitage was getting on with the Christmas puddings. She hoped Mrs Armitage hadn't forgotten the lucky silver charms.

The tree behind Harriet whispered to her, "Don't let him do that! Don't let him cast!"

"Why?"

"It's a mockery of their power!"

Power, thought Harriet. Step out of the frame of time and you acquire power.

"But who are they?" she asked the tree.

Instead of an answer, there was an explosion: a huge shape burst from the water, scattering spray all around. It was bigger than a hippopotamus, grey and white, shining, with a cruel, contemptuous mouth and two mean little eyes. Over the mouth hung a dank pair of black moustaches.

It snapped and swallowed Mr Armitage's rod and line as if they had been cheese straws, then sank below the water again, leaving arrowy ripples trailing from end to end of the pond.

"God bless my soul!" said Mr Armitage. "A shark! A shark of the hammerhead species if I am not mistaken."

He stood looking perplexedly at the broken rod handle, which he still held. Then he said, "Do you suppose, Harriet, that the shark has swallowed Mark?"

"Well—I do hope not," said Harriet. But her tone was

rather shaky.

"I said they would be angry," remarked the tree.

"What should I do now?"

"Answer three questions."

"Yes?"

"What is sadder than a lost child? What remains when voices are gone? What dies every day and lives for ever?"

"The child's parents. Words remain when voices are gone. The sun dies daily and lasts for ever."

"Look into your glass," said the tree.

Harriet looked into the hand mirror and received a shock. Looking back at her was her own face as it would be if she lived to the age of a hundred. She shivered.

"Now you can remember," said the tree.

"I remember their burying and my digging up a box with gold things in it."

"So do that."

Mr Armitage always carried a spade in the boot of the car. Harriet fetched it, and began digging among the tree's bony and twisted roots.

Her father was sitting on the ground with his head in his hands.

"I don't understand!" he said tremulously. "Talking trees—giant sharks—what is going on?"

"We are trying to find Mark."

"But where is he?"

"Lost in the past, I believe," said Harriet, digging away among the roots.

"The past? But why?"

"It's one of the commoner curses, specially among family feuds and disputes. If you think about it, worse than putting someone in prison. Women often used it to get rid of tiresome male relations. Ah!" said Harriet, and dug up a small heavy metal box, rusted and crusted with earth. "Can you

open this, Father?"

Mr Armitage could, by dribbling rust solvent (which, luckily, he also kept in the car boot). Inside were fragrant cedar shavings, a gold-backed set of false teeth, and a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Give me the tooth, Sister!" said Harriet.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It was what the weird sisters said. They shared an eye and a tooth between them."

"I'm lost in all this," said Mr Armitage gloomily. "What about that shark?"

"The shark might be Marianna or Victoria. Or both of them using the same pair of teeth. But I'm not sure about that moustache," Harriet said doubtfully.

A breeze shook the willow trees. Harriet had the impression that all the dangling fronds swung closer to listen.

She said cautiously, "Or, of course, the shark might be Mark."

"My own son? Turned into a shark?"

"You don't often find sharks in carp ponds," Harriet pointed out.

"Outrageous impertinence!" Mr Armitage snorted. "In my ponds! I bought them!"

"You bought the curse too."

"So how do we get rid of this infernal curse?" demanded her father.

"A curse is like a crease in material. You have to go back to the time before it was crumpled and iron it out flat."

"Mark used to be a nice friendly little fellow," quavered Mr Armitage, almost in tears. "Liked me to take him for walks. Held my hand. Not the way he is now, always skiving off on his own to go fishing."

Harriet, carefully hanging an Aeolian harp on a weeping willow tree, felt sad for parents who must always lose their

children, stage by stage, into the harsh world.

The harp let out a soft sigh, as if agreeing.

A water-rat slipped from the bank and swam to the far side of the pond, leaving a wake of V-shaped ripples.

"Rats. Mark used to be afraid of rats," recalled his father.

The surface of the pond cleared. As Harriet adjusted her equipment they could see a reflection of Mark, aged about nine, kneeling and looking into the water.

"Mark! Take care! You'll fall in!" shouted his father.

Mark paid no heed to the warning.

"He can't hear you," Harriet said. "He's in another time band."

"Mark's image in the water faded. The reflections of two ladies, dressed in white, with hats and plummy feather fans, appeared, upside down, sitting at a table under a parasol. They seemed to be arguing. A man approached them and said something that annoyed them even more. They waved their fans furiously at the man, who slipped and staggered by the brink of the water.

The surface of the pond bulged as if the shark were about to explode from it again. Harriet had just fitted a tape into her battery player. Complicated music ran about the valley.

Now Harriet carefully scattered a handful of toast crumbs across the water. A whole school of small fish rose and snapped eagerly at the crumbs.

"Why, bless me!" said Mr Armitage. "What became of the shark? The crazy pond seems to be alive with tiddlers. What became of the two ladies? Where's Mark?"

The reflection of Mark suddenly reappeared, aged about four, wearing brown canvas overalls and a red shirt. He carried a seaside spade and bucket.

"Dear little feller he was at that age," said his father fondly. "But why can't you get him at the right age?"

“It takes a lot of practice. Where is the ruined mansion?” Harriet asked.

“Up by the top pond. I can remember being taken to tea with the great-aunts and being given home-made lemonade and ginger-snaps,” recollected Mr Armitage.

Harriet strolled upstream along the bank, leaving the tapes playing.

The ponds were connected by three cascades fringed with ferns and little daisy-like plants growing in cracks between the rocks. Above the topmost waterfall stood an aged house which was half-burned and ruinous. A green and juicy creeper climbed and dangled over the ruins. A wavering mist rose from the frothy pool at the foot of the fall, which was about the height of a two-storey house.

Harriet could see that it would not be possible to get into the mansion without fighting through a mass of vegetation which blocked the doors and window holes.

She stood by the lip of the waterfall, watching the smooth shining water as it poured over, and thinking about Mark.

She remembered how, when they were six or seven, she had fallen into a stream and he had pulled her out; she remembered how he had given her his favourite shell because none of hers were as good as his; she remembered how he had cried when their cat Walrus was found dead of old age in the garden.

“Mark!” she whispered. “Where are you? Come back. . . .”

She dropped his fingernails into the waterfall.

The mist at the foot of the fall wavered. Then it began to form into a spiral. The sprays of green leaves dangling from the willows started to twirl. Clouds in the sky above darkened and writhed into corkscrew shapes. A whistling wind spun the long grass into funnels. Discs of rain scoured the surface of the pond. Then the whole pond rose into the air, as a cork is twisted out of a bottle. Harriet grabbed the trunk of a

massive willow and wrapped her arms round it, or she would have been sucked up into the sky along with the pond water. She could feel the tree writhing as she hung on to it. What in the world can be happening to Father? she wondered. And Mark? She saw the two white-clad ladies, with their parasol, and the dark man, swirl briefly by; they vanished into a spiral of mist.

Then the landscape settled down; the pond sank back into its bed; only the dangling fronds of the willows and the long grasses remained tightly twisted and plaited.

Like the ribbons on a Maypole, Harriet thought vaguely as she let go of the willow trunk and gave it a grateful pat.

She saw her father and Mark coming slowly towards her. Mr Armitage held Mark's arm. Mark looked rather dazed.

"A tornado in England in June, what next?" grumbled Mr Armitage. "I shall certainly write to *The Times*. I hate to think what may have happened to my car. . . ."

"Are you all right?" Harriet asked her brother.

"I think I must have gone to sleep." He gave a great yawn. "But my bike is a total write-off. And I can't find my fishing rod. I'd have fallen into the pond if Dad hadn't grabbed me—"

The sun suddenly set.

"We had better go and see what's happened to the car," said Mr Armitage, looking with disapproval at the slate-grey surface of the ponds, the dark, dangling twisted willow tendrils. "I'm almost sorry I bought this place," he muttered.

"Oh, you'll see, it will be quite different from now on," Harriet reassured him. "Look, the old ladies are back at their table." She pointed at the reflection in the first pond, where the upside down ladies were offering a cup of tea to the dark man.

"He's getting his tea in a moustache cup!"

"What about all the things you brought?"

"Nothing left but bits and pieces."

Harriet's mirror, tapes, Aeolian harp, magnet, and flute lay shredded on the twisted grass. But she noticed one of the old ladies was wearing the false teeth and the other one had the gold-framed spectacles.

"We have got Mark back, that's the main thing." Harriet gripped Mark's left hand, Mr Armitage still held on to the other.

"I never was away," Mark argued.

But Harriet looked at the watch on his wrist, which showed date as well as time.

"According to your watch, you've been away for a year—"

"That's just nutty!"

"And where's the car?" demanded Mr Armitage.

Luckily the car was only a quarter of a mile down the road from where he had left it. And it seemed unharmed, but the boot, mysteriously, was full of shingle. A large dead shark lay on the grass verge. Mark would very much have liked to take it home, but fortunately it was far too big to put into the boot. It had a moustache.

"Good thing he's done for, anyhow," remarked Mr Armitage. "No hope of a peaceful day's angling so long as that feller was in the water."

The house, when they reached it, after a rather silent drive, was full of the smell of Christmas pudding.

"Ah, you got Mark back, that's good," said Mrs Armitage comfortably. "If you had come back without him, I was going to suggest dropping one of my puddings into the pool."

"Is that a remedy against curses?" asked Harriet, all professional interest.

"Oh yes, my dear, one of the best. Much more likely to work than all that BBC 13 mumbo-jumbo. You try it next time, you'll see. But the best thing to remember," said Mrs Armitage, "is, don't go fishing on witches' day..."

About the Author

Best known for *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* series, Joan Aiken (1924–2004) wrote over a hundred books, won the Guardian and Edgar Allan Poe awards, and was awarded an OBE for her contributions to children’s literature. After her first husband’s death, she supported her family by copyediting at *Argosy* and an advertising agency before turning to fiction. She went on to write for *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Vanity Fair*, *Women’s Own*, and many others.

The Armitage Family Stories

“Yes, But Today is Tuesday,” “The Frozen Cuckoo,” “Sweet Singeing in The Choir,” “The Ghostly Governess,” “Harriet’s Birthday Present,” “Dragon Monday”

All You’ve Ever Wanted (1953)

“Armitage, Armitage Fly Away Home,” “Rocket Full of Pie,” “Doll’s House to Let Mod Con,” “Tea at Ravensburgh”

More Than You Bargained For (1957)

“The Land of Trees and Heroes,” “Harriet’s Hairloom,” “The Stolen Quince Tree,” “The Apple of Trouble,” “The Serial Garden”

Armitage, Armitage Fly Away Home (1968)

“Broomsticks and Sardines”

A Small Pinch of Weather (1969)

“Mrs. Nutti’s Fireplace”

A Harp of Fishbones (1972)

“The Looking-Glass Tree”

The Faithless Lollybird (1977)

“Miss Hooting’s Legacy”

Up the Chimney Down (1984)

“Milo’s New Word”

Moon Cake and Other Stories (1998)

“Kitty Snickersnee,” “Goblin Music,” “The Chinese Dragon,” “Don’t Go Fishing on Witches’ Day”

The Serial Garden: The Complete Armitage Family Stories (2008)

Joan Aiken's *The Serial Garden* is the inaugural title from **Big Mouth House** a new imprint devoted to fiction for younger readers.

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