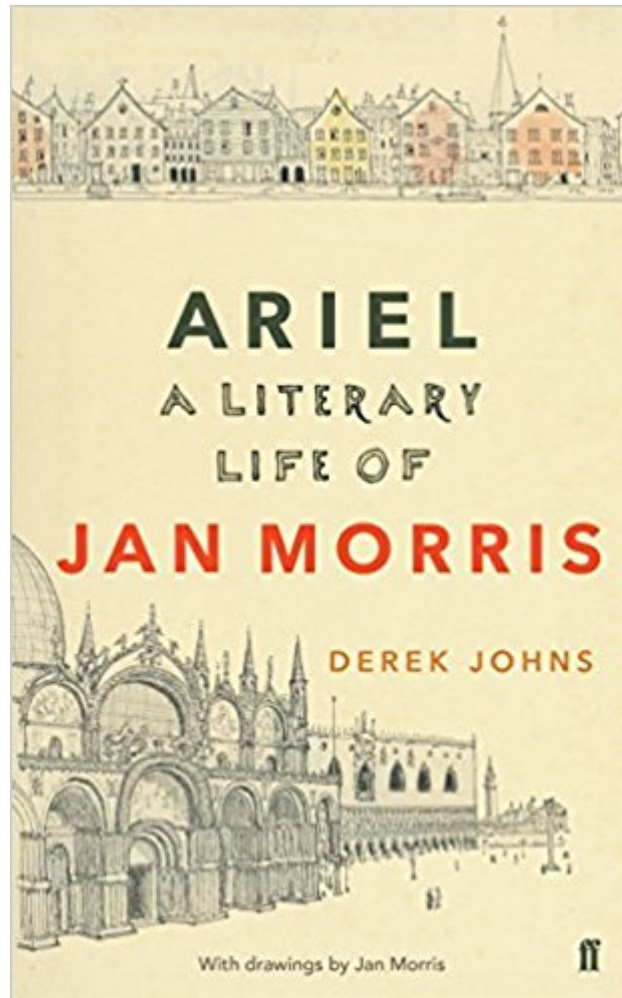


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# Ariel: A Literary Life Of Jan Morris



## Synopsis

Jan Morris is one of the great British writers of the post-war era. Soldier, journalist, writer about places (rather than a travel writer), elegist of the British Empire, novelist, she has fashioned a distinctive prose style that is elegant, fastidious, supple, and sometimes gloriously gaudy. For many readers she is best known for her candid memoir *Conundrum*, which described the gender reassignment operation she underwent in 1972. But as *Ariel* demonstrates, this is just one of the many remarkable facts about her life. As James Morris she was the journalist who brought back the story of the conquest of Everest in 1953 and who discovered incontrovertible evidence of British involvement in the Suez Crisis of 1956. She has been described by Rebecca West as the finest prose stylist of her time, and her essays span the entire urban world. Her many books include a classic on Venice, a 1,600 page history of the British Empire, and a homage to what is perhaps her favorite city, Trieste. Her writings on Wales represent the most thorough literary investigation of that mysterious land. Derek Johns was Jan Morris's literary agent for twenty years. *Ariel* is not a conventional biography, but rather an appreciation of the work and life of someone who besides being a delightful writer is known to many people as a generous, affectionate, witty and irreverent friend. It is published to coincide with her 90th birthday.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Those unfamiliar with Morris's life will enjoy *Ariel*...Johns quotes copiously from the Morrisonian oeuvre. He catches his quarry well with adroit turns of phrase." - Observer  
"As well as analysing her style, this book also reminds us that Morris was, fundamentally, a bloody good journalist." - The

Times"[an] elegant little volume, which is as much an anthology of excerpts from Morris's writings as it is a 'literary life'...Derek Johns, who was Morris's agent for 20 years, has written an affectionate portrait, although not a hagiography...Her writings should be celebrated and enjoyed, and Ariel provides an admirable introduction to them and to Morris's peripatetic life." - The Sunday Times

"Morris, on the basis that she doesn't do journeys, has never regarded herself as a travel writer, but she is undoubtedly one of the great conjurers of place. Anyone who has enjoyed that aspect of her work will enjoy Derek Johns's tribute." - The Daily Telegraph

"Johns, a novelist in his own right, knits his materials elegantly, adroitly and with affection." - New Statesman

"Morris has always rejected the idea of a biography. But Derek Johns was her literary agent for two decades and knows her and her output well, so, with her help (and her own delightful line drawings), he has written a 'literary life' - really an affectionate memoir, which is shortish, sharp and full of insight... Johns describes her as 'generous, witty, irreverent and affectionate', and suggests that, if she has a religion, it is kindness. He has shown skill and sensitivity in chronicling Morris's brave and cheerful journey through life, where travel has often been a vehicle for an expression of inner transformation." - Literary Review

"...what Johns offers is much more than a patchwork of extracts. His own prose is elegant and his insights incisive, and though he is affectionate he is not always uncritical." - MAGGIE FERGUSON

"A discreet, affectionate presentation of the writer's work, somewhere between a biographical essay and a compendium, Johns's words are in effect a framing device, to usher in Morris's own. Ariel is unusual because it is apart from anything else it is most biographers aren't granted permission to quote at such length. Morris's delicate line drawings are a highlight." - Daily Telegraph Books of the Year

"Perhaps the best descriptive writer of our time." - Rebecca West

"I don't think there's a writer alive who has Jan Morris's serenity or strength." - Paul Theroux

Derek Johns has been a bookseller, editor, publisher and literary agent. He is a former trustee of English PEN and a member of the Advisory Committee of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. His novel *The Billy Palmer Chronicles* was published in 2010. He lives in London.

Love this book!

*Ariel* by André Maurois is a fictionalized biography of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Shelley, the son of a wealthy landowner, went to school at Eton, where he was bullied. He was expelled from Oxford for publishing a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*. His father was

enraged when he heard about this pamphlet, and this caused him to break off relations with his son; the two of them were never reconciled. Shelley married 16-year-old Harriet Westbrook, a friend of his sisters, rescuing her from a bad situation at home and school. But Harriet was not his intellectual equal, and their marriage was very unhappy. While still married to Harriet, Shelley fell in love with Mary Godwin, the daughter of his mentor, the philosopher William Godwin, and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who died giving birth to her. Shelley left his wife and lived with Mary, which caused a huge scandal in society. Godwin would have nothing to do with the couple, even though he relied on Shelley to pay his debts. Harriet eventually committed suicide over her husband's affair, even though, according to Maurois, she had suicidal tendencies all her life. Shelley and Mary married, and Godwin forgave them, but pretended they had not been living together for several years. Their troubles were far from over, though. A court refused to give Shelley custody of his two children by Harriet. He had several children by Mary, but all but one died as babies or small children. The couple spent much of their time in Italy, where Mary's stepsister Claire lived with them. Claire had a brief affair with Lord Byron and gave birth to a daughter, but she really loved Shelley, and Mary became jealous. Maurois believes that the relationship between Shelley and Claire was innocent, but others disagree. Shelley died by drowning when his boat, the Ariel, sank. His poetic genius was never recognized during his lifetime, unlike that of his friend Byron, whose poems were the bestsellers of their time. Mary Shelley, of course, became the author of Frankenstein, but Maurois does not talk about Mary as an author, or even say much about Shelley's poetry; the focus is on their relationship. But his book provides a very good introduction to Shelley.

This was one of the first books related to computers, much less Artificial Intelligence, that I ever read. It's excellent. Interesting story, personal drama, technical details, a precocious teen tied in just enough to not make it all about him, espionage, etc. And let's not forget Ariel herself... an AI that makes you WANT AI NOW. I have gone thru 3 copies of the paperback edition of this book, and probably re-read it over 200 times in the 25+ years since I first received it. I can't say enough about it, grab a copy for yourself and your own children, and let them wonder what would make AI possible. Every time I finish this book, I'm smiling.

This obscure work was the first book I ever read about Artificial Intelligence. I was enthralled. As a child just on the cutting edge of the computer generation explosion this book captured my attention and held it throughout. I'm surprised that this book is not more well known. It's well written, factual

(for the time), emotive, and just a great story!

Wild and wonderful this book is, and on the jacket it claims (rightfully) that Maurois "created in this book an authentic and memorable style, which established a new form of dramatic biography." It was written in 1924 and I discovered it in 2005 on a long meditation/contemplation retreat in southern Spain, so the conditions, while not predicable, were perfect. If you're intrigued by Percy Shelley, and Mary Shelley, and Byron – trust me, these are glorious pages.

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