

Into child eyes: an interview with Patricia Quinlan

Sheila O'Hearn



Young people today are flooded with images from mass media and modern technology. They are called everything from the T.V. generation to pinball junkies to Nintendo freaks. Not without good reason do teachers, librarians, and parents scream "ILLITERACY" from every direction, and plot a course of action to steer children away from the video ghettos and towards the lush frontiers of the written word. Fortunately, children's books are pouring into publishers' offices from all over the country. We can, thanks to this explosion in the children's literary market, boast of a generation of children who are in fact reading, or being read to. One particular form of literature which helps children to become readers and stay readers is picture books.

Patricia Quinlan is one of the young generation of Canadian writers who produce quality picture books for young children. She has published five picture books to date: *My dad takes care of me* (Annick Press, 1987), *Planting seeds* (Annick, 1988), *Anna's red sled* (Annick, 1989), *Kevin's magic ring* (Black Moss, 1989) and, *Emma's sea journey* (Annick, 1991). *Willy the champion ant* (Black Moss) is scheduled for spring, 1992 and *Tiger flowers* (Dial) is scheduled for 1993.

O'Hearn: Describe yourself as a writer.

Quinlan: I guess I could say that I'm a very intuitive person. I look for what has energy for me when I write.

O'Hearn: Would you call that inspiration?

Quinlan: Inspiration comes from all different places. It's a kind of energy around certain ideas. Some of my stories have been inspired by dreams. With *Emma's sea journey*, the story started with a dream about being blown across the sea on a ship. It was a little sailboat and I was hanging onto the top. The feeling and image stayed with me. It was interesting to be blown around that way. I thought that would be great in a story, but it took awhile to find other

ideas to fit with that idea. What child, for example, is going to be blown across the sea, and how, and where would they go? Over a period of time some other ideas came up for me – and my memories of Nova Scotia, where I visited when I was 16, came forward and eventually coalesced two years later into a story.

As a writer, too, in terms of my process, it's very much a reaching into myself emotionally. I like to explore emotions in my stories. I always reach back into the child that I was. I like to look out from those child eyes again. I think that's part of what attracts me to writing for children – to get back into that world and look out from those eyes.

O'Hearn: What were your early aspirations, and how did they lead you eventually into writing for children?

Quinlan: I was always thinking about the big question: what is the meaning of life? As a teenager especially, those thoughts were very much present. I can see that child in what I write. One thing I've been playing with more lately is writing fantasy. *Emma's sea journey* is a kind of fantasy story and so is *Kevin's magic ring*. As a child I loved to read fantasy. At one point, my one ambition was to read my way through that section of the library. I don't think I ever succeeded, but I thought it was a good idea. I loved the C.S. Lewis books, the Narnia tales. That might have been part of my attraction for writing fantasies. Part of what I like about writing for children, and getting back into those child eyes, is that children have a special vision of things. They see things with the eyes of the heart. They're not blocked off by the kinds of concerns that we get as adults. The child's vision has something to say to adults as well.

O'Hearn: I've heard often that a person really works hard to get that first book published, but then he or she has to work hard, if not harder, to keep up the incentive.

Quinlan: You have to stick with it. In some ways, it wasn't really that long before *Planting seeds* was accepted. I wrote four or five stories and then Annick Press took *Planting seeds* which was double encouragement. Then it was a long time, over a year, before they took the next one. In some ways, with a novel, you've got a project you can stay with day after day. With picture books, you have to keep coming up with new ideas and new inspirations. Sometimes I find there's a process involved, where I'll finish something and then there's a resting time before the next idea with a lot of energy comes, and I just have to trust that it will.

O'Hearn: As a children's writer, what do you hope to give to your audience?

Quinlan: A number of my books celebrate the essential importance of loving relationships. In *My dad takes care of me*, Luke comes to realize that his relationship with his dad and the interaction that they have are a lot more important than whether he has a job or not. Similarly, *Anna's red sled* celebrates that loving playfulness between a mother and her child. *Tiger flowers* is similar too in that the most important thing about Michael is who he was in his relationship, not whether he had AIDS or not. The fantasy stories (*Emma's sea*

journey and *Kevin's magic ring*) celebrate life's possibilities and breaking through limitations. Celebration is a big word for what I like to do in my stories, and within that I like to deal with difficult things. Some of the books in which I've written about serious issues deal with the darker side of things, but I like to point to where hope lies that comes with love.

O'Hearn: Who is your audience? When you write do you also have adults such as parents or teachers in mind?

Quinlan: I'm not only writing for children. Especially with picture books, adults read to children. You really have a double audience. I like to make sure there's something in my books for them as well as for children. I think books have to reflect the world and the perspective of the child, and I think parents can learn a lot from that perspective too. In some ways the child's perspective can remind adults about the simpler things that are important in life.

O'Hearn: That's been my reaction when I read *Tiger flowers* or *My dad takes care of me* or *Planting seeds*. The topics in these books are difficult. You don't provide answers but you do give ways that a person can cope with some of the issues, whether as a child or an adult. That's a special quality for adult writers to have, let alone the children's writer.

Quinlan: Looking at things from a child's eyes again returns us to what's really important.

O'Hearn: What difficulties have you had in writing for children?

Quinlan: I think I had less discouragement than most. Like every writer, the struggle is more with yourself and your ideas and the challenge in getting them into a story. That's an ongoing struggle. I do think having written poetry prepared me for children's books. There's a similarity in that you have to do a lot in a small amount of space. They're both image-oriented. You have to get to the point rather quickly.

O'Hearn: Does writing fiction give you something that poetry cannot?

Quinlan: I learn a lot. When I write for children, I'm not trying to teach them in a didactic way. The writing takes me back to the central important things in life, and it's fun. There's a playfulness involved with it and the artistry of putting the story together. Having the writing come alive in the other dimension (illustrating) as well – I enjoy that. A chance to reach children, to touch children, is very enjoyable.

O'Hearn: Do you go through a particular writing process?

Quinlan: Relaxing and shifting to the right brain is important. I've written a lot of stories in restaurants, in the bathtub, walking, to get me into that frame of mind. With *Willy the champion ant*, I was sitting in the restaurant, and it was one of the few times I didn't have a lot of paper, and I was literally scribbling ideas all over napkins. Exploring my emotions is important. At the time I wrote *Anna's red sled* it was Christmas. I was feeling very nostalgic, thinking back to special times, so I knew that was an emotion I wanted to explore. I was taken back to special memories of being pulled across the park on my

sled. I had to think back and climb down into that child within myself and find some memories with some special energy in them. The rest comes from my imagination.

Another process is what I like to call reaching out to others in the world. I think in the "issue books" – in *My dad takes care of me*, the idea came from the fact that somebody I was working with had a similar situation. In *Planting seeds*, a friend asked me to try to write something because her nephew was having nightmares about nuclear war. With *Anna's red sled*, there's also a kind of simpler reaching out to others. I had lunch with a friend who had two young daughters and she was talking a lot about their relationship and telling me little stories. I think that writing *Anna's red sled* later that day had to do with the energy I had taken in from her – that mother-daughter energy. So there is a kind of opening out to the energy around us, as well as a going within and touching base with important emotions inside me.

Something else I like to do when I write is to work with images and metaphors. My writing is becoming more image-oriented. *Tiger flowers* deals with a serious issue, but there are key images that help carry the story.

As I thought about writing *Planting seeds* I was coming home and I thought about the hands holding the earth, but the night I wrote the first draft was quite strange. My husband and I were supposed to go out for dinner, but he was tired after work and he fell asleep. Then I felt this sudden urge – it felt very inspired – I wrote madly for a couple of hours and got a first draft. The ideas were really flowing, and just as I finished he woke up. Sometimes writing stories works that way, and I feel a sense of inspiration that comes in a rapid wave. Afterwards, there's a lot of tinkering and revising and juggling, using what I know of technique. Other stories have come piece by piece over a long period of time.

O'Hearn: How does illustration influence what, or at the very least, how you write?

Quinlan: Because I write picture books, I'm always aware of potential for illustration. When I write the stories I divide them up as double-page spreads. There's a certain suspense in turning the page, and I like to think of having to evoke illustration when I'm writing.

O'Hearn: Picture books appear to have a very strict 32-page format. Even the language in many books appears to be tailor-made to the dictates of the format: not too descriptive; sketchy characterization. Do you agree with these statements?

Quinlan: I have never let the format dictate my language. I'm mostly thinking in terms of where I'm evoking illustration. In picture books, there is a certain limitation. You don't have a lot of text-space to develop characterization. It's not like a novel, where you're able to develop your characters in multifaceted way, but there's room for a little bit of character development in a picture book. There are different kinds of novels; there are also different kinds of

picture books. Some novels are very plot-oriented; some are more exploration of character and emotions. In a number of my stories, the characterization has been very important. *Emma's sea journey* is a little different. The character is there, and the little girl is working through her thoughts about day-to-day things, but the plot moves that story. In *My dad takes care of me*, or *Tiger flowers*, *Planting seeds* or *Anna's red sled*, the characters move the story.

There's room for the same kind of variety in picture books as there is in a novel, and I think it should be there. I don't think you see many picture books where the characterization is strong. There should be more of those kinds of books.

O'Hearn: Does the fact that you're writing a picture book constrain or challenge you artistically?

Quinlan: It is a challenge. You need to think about the relation with illustration. You need to think about the length in terms of the story being read aloud, and that it has to fit within either the 24 or the 32-page format. You have to think of the balance of text and illustration. There's a real thrill in having a story brought to life in the other medium.

O'Hearn: Do you consider yourself a part of the oral tradition of storytelling? When you perform, do you tell your stories, or do you read them?

Quinlan: Robert Munsch talks about developing his stories orally, telling them – I don't work that way. I develop it through writing, and end up telling the story much as I have written it. I like to hone the story with the written word, but I like to tell the story rather than read it. I can see the audience's eyes, and it's always wonderful to have that rapport in an oral telling.

O'Hearn: Books, people, ideas, environment: among these, what influences you as a writer?

Quinlan: I've lived in Toronto all my life. The city definitely influences me. You get an urban feeling in most of what I write. *Emma's sea journey* is a little different because I'm drawing from my memory of visiting Nova Scotia. But in *My dad takes care of me* and *Anna's red sled* you have parents living in apartments.

I've had a lot of education that's influenced me. Because I was a teenager who thought very seriously about things and was always interested in questions of meaning, I majored in Philosophy at the University of Toronto, and I think that's a reasonable preparation for becoming a writer. As you write books, you're sifting meaning: you are presenting a vision of the world in your books. I did graduate studies in Theology and did all but the thesis for an M.A. I was going through some turmoil in my own life, and also I was rethinking my thoughts about working in the Church. But having studied theology is important – that's another study of meaning. I did some scripture studies then and sometimes some of the images come back to me when I'm writing and get worked into a story in subtle ways – like *Planting seeds* – where the image is from a passage from the parable of the Mustard Seed.

O'Hearn: Maybe in your vision too. The way you look at things – faith. It may not be in a traditional way, but those affirmations, that celebration of life, is there.

Quinlan: It's a part of what motivated my studies, and has helped shape the vision that I draw on when I write. There's an element in my stories that can be healing for children. A book has to be a lot more than therapy and has to work on a number of levels, but I think it can also be therapeutic. Stories can heal.

O'Hearn: What is the most distinguishing characteristic in your writing?

Quinlan: I have a real desire to explore my emotions and children's emotional sensitivities. One thing that marks my writing is celebration and celebrating the light. I'm willing to explore the darkness, but I like to point to where hope lies, and focus on the importance of loving relationships and meanings.

I like my books to be fun too, as in *Kevin's magic ring*. I do like to reach for depth in my books. I like the fun and the humour, but I like to have my audience reach into deeper meanings.

O'Hearn: What feelings do you have about being a Canadian children's writer? Does your work typify being Canadian in some way?

Quinlan: I haven't given that a lot of thought. But I certainly enjoy being a Canadian writer. My preference is to publish in Canada although I will be getting *Tiger Flowers* done by Dial Press in the States. I enjoy going into the schools and meeting children. Last March, I was invited to Norway House in Northern Manitoba to read my stories to the children on the Indian Reservation. I was so touched that my books had reached up to Northern Manitoba. Apparently, *Planting seeds* was their favourite book at the time. The Grades 1 and 2 had done large collages of responses to my book. I was very moved to feel that connection between me and the children.

How are my books Canadian? Let's just say I enjoy feeling that connection between me and the children across the country. I really haven't figured out any grand theory about being a Canadian children's writer, so I'm not going to try and invent one in a few minutes. But I'm proud to be a Canadian and it's my home.

O'Hearn: Next year is going to be busy for you. Tell me about the new books.

Quinlan: *Emma's sea journey* is a fantasy that celebrates those things in your day-to-day life that you can count on. She's frustrated by routine but on coming back from her journey, she has a new appreciation of it. The book celebrates life's surprising possibilities and friendships with children from very different cultures. It's a book I've tried to write in a very lyrical way.

In *Tiger flowers*, dealing with the topic of AIDS is difficult in a children's story, but I think it's an important subject. Children are very aware of tensions in their family and in society. It is certainly a subject that will affect their future. The book challenges us to look at our values and to see beyond labels. It encourages children and adults to look beyond a person with AIDS and to

see the human being there – a very loving human being. That story works very much through images and metaphors, something I've been trying to do more. It allows people to approach the story in an individual way.

Willy the champion ant is a story that deals with sibling relationships and with loss. It celebrates those loving relationships in a family and a kind of community feeling or responsiveness. It was a fun story about some serious things.

O'Hearn: What's on the calendar for you in the future?

Quinlan: I'll continue to do readings and workshops in the schools. I'm writing a picture book for Somerville Press who are producing series of picture books and learning materials to help children ages 4-8, develop basic skills of independence. Different authors will be writing for the series. My book, for instance, focuses on children learning how to brush their teeth. The project is a bit of departure for me, but a great experience. The series should be coming out in the fall of 1992.

Sheila O'Hearn is a free-lance writer and book reviewer, currently residing in Fergus, Ontario.