"Writing is the deepest pleasure I know": an interview with Kit Pearson

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Résumé: *Dans cette entrevue accordée à Jane Flick, l'écrivain Kit Pearson fait le point sur ses oeuvres et explique sa conception de la littérature de jeunesse.*

This interview took place on December 11, 1993, in Vancouver. Kit Pearson is the author of *The daring game*, *A handful of time*, *The sky is falling*, *Looking at the moon*, *The lights go on again*, and (with Ann Blades) *The singing basket*. Among her honours are the CLA Book of the Year Award (twice, 1988, 1990), the Bilson Historical Fiction for Young People Award, and Mr. Christie's Book Award.

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Kit Pearson

PEARSON: Writing is the deepest pleasure I know. I have so little time to write these days; and on the days when I can—I feel as if I'm still allowed to pretend, as I did when I was as a child. I had a very hard time getting out of that imaginative world as an adolescent. Writing lets me go right back to that state of imaginative freedom legitimately, to make up a story. I love that freedom. There's nothing like it.

On the other hand, writing is frustrating and difficult. I get scared. I get stuck and then I worry that I'm not going to be able to write more. With every new book I think, "I can't do this, it won't be any good, I can't finish another whole book." And it never gets any better, even though I've done it before. Still, there is always another chance, the chance of writing the perfect book that's in your head.

FLICK: How did you get started in writing?

PEARSON: I had wanted to write since I was twelve—or even before. As a child I always felt like an outsider, an observer, and then I read *Emily of new moon* by Lucy Maud Montgomery; after that I knew I wanted to be a writer. That book has had an amazing influence—in fact, all three Emily books—on writers in Canada.

FLICK: Yes, Carol Shields has commented on Alice Munro's loving *Emily*.

PEARSON: And L.R. Wright and Jane Urquhart, as well. But I didn't write for years, however. I didn't have much creative writing in school, and out of school I was always playing outside, taking piano lessons, or reading. But I did imagine things constantly, and I daydreamed all through my school career.

I went on to do an English degree and then the only options seemed to be teaching or librarianship. I did try a year of education but I hated it, so I took librarianship. It was then I realized I wanted to write children's books. I had already developed a passion for children's literature from working as a library assistant in Edmonton Public Library. And I was lucky enough to have Sheila Egoff as a professor at UBC's School of Librarianship, as it was called then, and she was very inspiring.

I loved being a children's librarian. I worked first in St. Catharines and then in the North York system. Then I took a year off to get a degree in children's literature at the Simmons College Center for the Study of Children's Literature in Boston. Besides courses in children's literature, I took two writing courses, one with Nancy Bond and one with Jane Langton. Incidentally, it was during the drive down to Simmons that I got the idea for *The daring game.*

FLICK: But you didn't write *The daring game* then?

PEARSON: No, just writing assignments and a short story. And then my grandmother died, and two things happened. First, she left me some money, not much, but enough to travel a bit. I had spent a lot of time travelling in between jobs before I became a librarian, and I thought I'd use the money for travel. But one day, I thought, "This is absurd. Why not write?" I decided I could afford—for one year—to work part time and write a book.

Second, my father sent me my grandmother's diary, written when she was nineteen. We didn't know she'd kept one. So I learned *she* was a writer, and a wonderful one. Because I really loved her, I felt I should carry on her legacy. Some day I intend to do something with her diary, too.

I remember very clearly that day in February, sitting in a carrell in Simmons library finally deciding to write, and to go back to Vancouver.

FLICK: What drew you back to Vancouver?

PEARSON: It rains a lot! It seemed a good place to sit inside and write. Luckily, I got a part-time job in Burnaby Public Library. I worked three days a week and wrote the other two days. Juggling two such creative careers was difficult: being a children's librarian can be just as intense as writing. So I later became a part-time adult reference librarian, which was much less stressful.

FLICK: Has working as a children's librarian affected your writing?

PEARSON: I don't think it has directly affected my writing, though it certainly increased my knowledge of children's books and gave me contact with children, which confirmed my very strong belief that children now aren't very different from the children I grew up with.

FLICK: Would you say, then, that the most significant effect was a sense of the child audience?

PEARSON: Yes, but the child audience in relating to my child self. I don't think you need to be around children to write children's books, but you do have to remember what it was like to be young.

FLICK: Did particular directions in children's literature capture your interest?

PEARSON: Because I was working in children's literature, I was in on the groundswell of Canadian children's literature. I graduated in '76 not long after Dennis Lee's *Alligator pie* made such an impact, and I was in Ontario when the Children's Book Centre started. I was reviewing books, going to conferences, and meeting authors for the first time, so I wanted to be part of the excitement—to be a writer as well as a librarian.

FLICK: In *A Handful of time* you acknowledge Philippa Pearce and you mention various children's titles. In *The sky is falling* you have Norah reading *Five children and it*, for example. Is that the children's librarian in you coming out? Slipping in good hints about reading?

PEARSON: I certainly put in some of the books I loved as a child, an easy thing to do since most of my books are set in the past. I'm now very conscious of doing this, since people have pointed it out. I'm profoundly influenced by children's books, and I worry about that. Perhaps I just echo them because I lived them as a child, but I don't echo them on purpose. Characters such as Lucy in the Narnia books and Emily in *Emily of New Moon* and Titty in *Swallows and Amazons* have just crept into my characters.

FLICK: I was struck by an echo of Montgomery's *Anne* in Norah's situation in *The sky is falling* as Norah learns that the Ogilvies want only a boy, but are willing to take her as well as Gavin.

PEARSON: In fact, there are even more echoes of *Emily*. In Norah's rebelliousness, for example. And the aunts are like the aunts in *Emily of New Moon.*

FLICK: Yes, the Murray aunts: good aunt, bad aunt.

PEARSON: They really worried me. But Aunt Florence is also very like my grandmother. So I reassure myself she is also taken from life.

FLICK: Perhaps your reading is also reflected in your books in another way. You seem to be working through particular sub-genres in children's books—the historical novel, the Canadian school story, and the time-travel novel. Is this a legitimate observation?

PEARSON: Very legitimate. I think I write the way I cook. I rarely cook the same recipe twice because I'm so curious about how a new one will work. I'm fascinated by different forms and structures in fiction. I've just begun something new, a modern book, which is a kind of fantasy/ghost story. However, I think of all the genres I've tried and my favorite has been historical fiction, and I do want to go back to that with something based on my grandmother's diary.

FLICK: When you start writing, do you think, "I'll pursue this theme," or "I'll start with a character," or "I'll begin with the setting"?

PEARSON: I often begin with setting, as in *A handful of time.* Lake Wabamun in Alberta was my favorite childhood place, as we had a cottage there. I knew

I wanted to set a novel at "the lake," as we called it. *The daring game* began with my boarding school in Vancouver.

The Toronto books began more with situation than setting, that of the war guests coming to Canada. I'd heard about this from Alice Kane who used to tell stories to them. Because the children Alice met came to Toronto and because my mother grew up there during the war, I set the books in that city. When I came to write *Looking at the moon*, I decided I had better go back to Muskoka for detail.

When I was a child the only books I read that were set in Canada were L.M. Montgomery's, and Prince Edward Island seemed like a foreign country. Then I read Farley Mowat's *The dog who wouldn't be*. I'd never read anything set in the Prairies; it seemed so real and familiar. I want to make Canadian places that real to my readers. Part of our Canadian identity seems to be that we don't look at places carefully enough and make them our own.

FLICK: Certainly we do in "adult" fiction, in Davies' Deptford and Laurence's Manawaka, for example.

PEARSON: Yes, we do see this in adult fiction, but we're only beginning to in children's. Place is a real obsession of mine.

But, back to your question about where I start a book. I don't ever begin with a theme. I gradually see what the theme is after several drafts and then I try to emphasize it. To my great astonishment, after several books I find that I have very definite themes which I didn't initially intend, such as children being uprooted, the past, and children as separate from adults.

FLICK: Uprooting takes various forms in your books, with Eliza in *The daring game* as she goes to boarding school, with Patricia in *A handful of time* as she spends the summer away from home, and with Gavin and Norah in the war guest books.

PEARSON: That's what I call them in fact, "the war guest trilogy."

FLICK: You call them a trilogy, then, not a cycle or a family chronicle? When I was reading *The lights go on again* and watching Gavin and Norah grow older, I was reminded of Laura Ingalls Wilder's work, taking Laura from childhood into adulthood. Do you intend to pursue them as they grow older?

PEARSON: As Montgomery did in the *Anne* books? She hated those after a while. I've finished with the war guests. I'm already getting questions, especially from children, "Is there going to be another book?" But I just wanted to cover the war. I think I would get stale if I were to do more.

FLICK: You have said that your real interest in children as an age group goes into the teen years and that you're not terribly interested in the late teens. Does that have some bearing on your decision?

PEARSON: Yes. I'm not even interested in the early teens. Even thirteen was hard.

FLICK: In *The lights go on again* perhaps Norah has passed out of your area of interest? Perhaps you move her out in order to focus on Gavin—even though you

don't normally focus on boy heroes in your books?

PEARSON: Well, that's part of the reason. Another was that I couldn't stand to talk about the parents' death from Norah's point of view. And I thought that Gavin's point of view was more interesting because he's so alienated and confused. I also liked the idea of contrasting him at ten with Norah at ten, of contrasting Norah's not wanting to come to Canada with his not wanting to go back to England. And I had really grown to like him. I thought it was about time he had a book, too.

But you're also right. I'm not interested in writing about fifteen-year-olds. I hated being fifteen. I don't see why I have to relive it! I much prefer those earlier ages, nine to twelve. I like to call them the peak of childhood. They're powerful, confident ages before the turmoil of adolescence. Children are much more individual at that age than when they're trying to be like everybody else.

FLICK: You have said elsewhere that you consciously write about fear of adolescence.

PEARSON: Especially for girls. I made a pact with my friends when I was twelve that we would never grow up, which of course we had to break. That was part of the reason I was miserable when we moved back to Edmonton. I hated all that phoney "girly" stuff, which I don't think is as prevalent nowadays. I'm sure you remember it, the high heels and the nylons and the role-playing. Now I see kids, boys and girls, just being friends. That would have been unheard of in our day. If you even talked to a boy he was labelled as your boyfriend.

FLICK: The double standard for boys and girls comes up again and again in your books, as a minor theme. In *A handful of time* you show Ruth's mother's awful treatment of her in forcing her to be a little lady, rather like Jo's situation in *Little women.*

PEARSON: Kids make heartening comments to me about the way Ruth is treated in the past. They say, "Oh, they were so unfair. Just because she was a girl she wasn't allowed to do the same things." A lot of boys say that, too. It's wonderful they find this surprising. Some things *have* changed.

FLICK: In one of your "second-look-at-a-classic" articles in *Horn book*, you look fondly at Arthur Ransome and offer a spirited defense against the charge that his books are middle class—too middle-class, and his child heroes too privileged. Some reviewers have made similar comments about your books, particularly the war books.

PEARSON: You mean the fact that the characters live in a big expensive house, have a cottage in Muskoka, and so forth?

FLICK: Yes.

PEARSON: I don't think it's fair to fault a book for being about a certain class. It's an irrelevant criticism. I'm writing about specific children who are experiencing certain emotions. *That's* what's important, not their social situation. But I am conscious that I did use social distinctions in the war guest books because I wanted to have a contrast to Norah and Gavin's life in Britain. By the way, they

aren't working-class, as many people think, because working-class kids weren't sent to Canada. At the time they were probably considered lower middle-class.

I was also trying to show that Gavin is too comfortable, too protected. One reason I had Gavin go back is I don't think this particular upper middle-class kind of life was good for him. He was spoiled, cushioned from reality. Aunt Florence is not good for him. Interestingly, some adults have said to me they thought he should have stayed in Canada, which just astounds me. To me it's obvious that he belongs in England with his real family and, because he is materially spoiled, the move is going to be an adjustment. But that is not what is important. What *is* important is being with a family who love him for the right reasons, not as a substitute for a dead son. And I was trying to show when the baby comes up to him at the end that this is where he's going to find love, this is his true life. This is where he should be.

I was also trying to show Gavin's courage, one of the themes of that book. He thinks he's not brave, but he's always doing brave things, such as making himself listen to Norah when she's full of grief. The only thing he isn't brave about is going back, but when he does decide that, he finally realizes he's not a coward. As you can tell, I'm very fond of Gavin!

FLICK: I liked your choice of a name for Gavin, suggesting as it does its connection with Gawain. And Gavin is reading the King Arthur stories, stories of brave knights.

PEARSON: That's wonderful. I never thought of that.

FLICK: You'll have to chalk this up to serendipity. Another theme in the war books, and in your other books, is the relations between generations.

PEARSON: I love writing books like the books I read as a child, when children are almost like a separate tribe, acting on their own, making moral decisions on their own, and not wanting to have much to do with adults.

I like to feel on my children's side. I think that children are victims of adult society in a lot of ways, even more so now. All the kids in my books are forced to do certain things because of adults. They have parents who aren't there, like Eliza's or Norah's, or parents who oppress them, like Patricia's and Ruth's. Or, of course, they are the victims of an adult war.

I'm also obsessed by children's culture, which Iona and Peter Opie have shown in their collections of children's games and playground sayings. Children still have their own secret culture—they just say different things. There's a playground rhyme popular in New York at the moment: "A tisket a tasket, a condom or a casket." That's shocking and sad, but it shows children coping with adult society and turning it into something that's theirs. It's a kind of secret defiance against adults, which I remember myself and which I see in my friends' children. The scene in my books, where children are the most rebellious and separate from adults is the Halloween scene in *The sky is falling*, when they build a fire and throw things on it which symbolize what they're against. Whenever I read that to children they're absolutely riveted. They *know* that feeling of

rebelliousness.

FLICK: While you present children's frustration with adults and their forming small societies against them—as Gavin and Norah do initially in the war guest books, and the dorm mates in *The daring game*, you also develop the character of the solitary child too, as in *A handful of time*.

PEARSON: Patricia is certainly the most solitary—she echoes the way I was when I was twelve and a half and we moved back to Edmonton from Vancouver and I was absolutely miserable and lonely.

FLICK: Are you interested in working with particular personality features in child characters?

PEARSON: Characters are very hard to explain. Mine are often a mixture. Eliza is attuned to nature—I was very much like that as a child, which is why I liked Montgomery's Emily and Anne. But I was timid and shy, like Patricia. I'm not quite sure where Norah came from; perhaps she's like my very confident niece, but again, she's a bit like Emily in *Emily of New Moon*.

Sometimes I can explain where they come from. Right now I'm writing about a nine-year-old girl; she was inspired by a child I observed sitting on the ferry, talking to her mother. I listened to the conversation—I do that a lot. And now I've just formed this character based on her, and she is beginning to seem very real to me.

Some characters, like Helen in *The daring game*, come from several people in real life. I drew her from three people. And Miss Tavistock in that book is supposed to be like Charlotte Brontë and Charlotte Yonge, a combination. So I can pinpoint her origins. But others? Gavin, the most imaginative of my characters, is a lot like me. Like him, I made up things, I too pretended I was a knight. But he also resembles one of my brothers and my two nephews, who always played games.

FLICK: And do some of your characters take off on their own?

PEARSON: Yes. And when they do, I'm relieved.

FLICK: That's when you know you've got the book?

PEARSON: The kernel of it, yes. I have had an interesting problem with Gavin: I started three books in the fall that all fizzled out. All were about a boy. They were all Gavin! Perhaps I can only do a boy once. As soon as I changed to a girl, the character was fine. Perhaps girls are more complicated than boys.

FLICK: Perhaps Gavin's strong relations with others in the family and with Norah made pursuing lines in his personality easy? Such as his shyness and his compassion?

PEARSON: Yes, he's a compassionate little boy. I suppose if my characters are at all negative, Norah is the most so because she is not compassionate to Gavin in the first book. Adults have criticized me for that, but children haven't. Children understand exactly how, when you're feeling miserable, you can be mean to your little brother. I certainly remember being mean to mine!

FLICK: Your child heroes make interesting decisions, what might roundly be

called ethical decisions. Each of your books has something to do with telling the truth or dealing with some kind of lie, as at the end of *The daring game.*

PEARSON: That relates to children being on their own and what I was saying about their being uprooted. When they are thrown into a new environment and don't have parents to tell them what to do, they're forced to grow and they're forced to make moral decisions.

I had no idea when I started writing that I would find myself in such ethical dilemmas. I hate being didactic, but I'm forced to take stands. In every book some ethical question comes up. This is especially so in *Looking at the moon.* I found myself having to answer the question of whether it was right to fight in World War II. How can I answer that question? No one ever has. But I tried to present both sides of it, and that made me examine my own position. Since I was revising that book during the Gulf War, writing it was a tumultuous experience.

FLICK: *Looking at the moon* raises the issue of pacifism as it explores Norah's sense of the war. She feels strongly that war is wrong but feels the threat to Ringden, too.

PEARSON: At first she believes in the war, as most people did, then she makes a real change in her life. I tried to show in the third book that she does become a pacifist.

FLICK: Many children now understand conscientious objectors' refusing to go to war.

PEARSON: Yes—even those boys who are so interested in war. When I talk about *Looking at the moon* I say, "Norah falls in love with someone and he's supposed to go fight and he doesn't believe in killing people," and they all nod their heads. They understand that completely. What I do have to explain is that this was an unusual way to feel in 1943 because everybody wanted Hitler to be beaten. Children today *are* pacifists, thank goodness. They've had it drummed into them since they were born.

Maybe this is a good time to go into *how* I write. As I said, I usually start with a setting and a situation. If the book is historical I've done a lot of research. Then I just start writing. I write the first drafts with pen and paper. I try to have a forward movement, to go from the beginning to the end without looking back.

After I write one draft, I read through it and make a detailed outline, about ten blank pages in a notebook for each chapter, writing down what I want to happen or change. Then I go through it again in the next draft on my computer. If I'm in chapter three and think of something more I want to put in chapter one, I add that to a second outline. Doing this makes me feel secure that I can fix the problems later. I keep printing out drafts and work on paper, not on the screen. I do about five drafts in all.

Having a forward movement helps with a plot. I rarely think about things like climax or sub-plot or peaks and valleys, the things I've read about in writing books. As I look back, I can see that some books are better plotted than others.

Like most writers, I have a dreadful time with plot. I try to make the characters

as real as I can and see what they want to do, then I hope for the best. But really, it's chance, a matter of luck. In the first part of *The sky is falling* I was just following history, so that was easy. Everything that happened to the kids happened to them in history, but when they got to Toronto I thought, "What now?" Developing Norah's character and Aunt Florence's character helped make the plot happen in the next two sections.

Sometimes I know the ending, as with *The lights go on again*. I'd been thinking about that book for years, so I knew the children were going to go back to England, but I didn't know the middle. In the first draft of *The sky is falling* Norah had an older brother and he was killed in the war. It was a terrible book, so I started all over again and turned it into a trilogy. But I knew I wanted somebody to die. This may be a convention, but the book *is* about war. Kids are starting to ask me, "Why did the parents have to die?" And I say, "I was trying to show how awful war is." I am very conscious of counteracting the interest in the books that boys show simply because it is about war. Again, I'm trying not to be didactic, but I think I do have to be responsible.

Sometimes plotting is serendipitous. Many readers adore the toy elephant, Creature. I had written the scene of Gavin's being bullied and sitting in his room for *Lights*, when I got a letter from a boy saying, "My favourite character is Creature and I'd like to know what happens to him." I thought, "I forgot all about Creature! What am I going to do with him in this book?" And since I'd forgotten about him I decided he would be lost.

Of course, he has to be found, and when he is he's what reminds Gavin of home. Creature, by the way, is featured on the cover of the Dutch edition of *The sky is falling*, so he obviously appealed to the illustrator, too.

FLICK: It won an award in the Netherlands, didn't it?

PEARSON: *Sky* was translated in 1991 and was one of the runners-up for the Silver Pencil Award. That honour indirectly affected a plot. I had Andrew marry Alida, a Dutch woman, in *The lights go on again*, as a small thank you. Originally, he married a French girl.

FLICK: *Sky* also won the Canadian Library Association Book of the Year Award, the very first Mr. Christie's Book Award, and the Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Young People.

PEARSON: Yes, winning the Bilson prize was especially satisfying, and it was very sad, too, because I never met Geoffrey Bilson before he died. I knew him through his two books about war guests: *Hockeybat Harris*, his novel, and *The guest children*, his excellent non-fiction work about the children who came to Canada.

FLICK: You are in good company in writing about the war. I immediately think of Magorian's *Goodnight, Mr. Tom*, and Nina Bawden's *Carrie's war*. When you were a child reader were you interested in children's fiction about the war?

PEARSON: No, because there wasn't much. The only book I read was Noel Streatfield's *The children in Primrose Lane*, which is a terrible book written

during the war, about some children who catch a German spy.

The first book that really moved me was *The diary of Anne Frank* when I was about fourteen or fifteen. Even so, I put out of my mind what happened to her at the end. I was chiefly interested in hiding out in the attic. I was a very innocent child, like a lot of children of the fifties. I wasn't aware of world events at all.

FLICK: Let's return to matters of writing technique, and style in particular. Overall, what are your strengths?

PEARSON: I think I'm good at character, dialogue, and structure—I always have a sense of the book as a whole. I'm poor at descriptions and I'm sloppy. I cringe sometimes when I read my work aloud. For example, I frequently have accidental rhymes. I will be reading out loud to an audience and I hear myself say, "Then Mrs. Moss was really cross," and I think, "How could I have missed that?" I do read each chapter out loud as I'm finishing, but these things still escape me. Perhaps having a good sense of the whole makes me impatient. I need to concentrate more on each word and sentence.

FLICK: You've remarked that reviewers often disappoint you because they don't say more about style.

PEARSON: Reviewers tend to concentrate on content, yet half the pleasure I get from reading a book is from the way it is written. Take Jane Gardam, for example. I relish the way she uses words. And in a few cases, I do like some passages in my work, and I would welcome a comment on my style. Somebody could say, "Well, this particular passage is done well." Probably this is asking too much.

FLICK: Would you say your hardest work with style occurs in the draft stages or in the revision stages?

PEARSON: The revision stages. After the first sets of drafts and outlines, when I'm thinking mostly about plot and characters, I finally come to a draft where I am looking at the words. This part is satisfying, but it can take fifteen minutes to think of an adjective. Writers approach revisions differently. Some—like Sarah Ellis—do the first chapter again and again until it's perfect.

Then the drudgery is going back to the draft on the computer and making it conform to the scribbled-over, written draft. Staring at the screen, then staring at the scribbling is also hard on my eyes. This time I'm going to take up a suggestion in *A passion for narrative*, a new book on writing by Jack Hodgins, and completely retype the later drafts to make them fresher.

FLICK: Have you worked with one editor throughout?

PEARSON: I've been very lucky, working with one editor for all my novels: David Kilgour at Penguin Books Canada. He's a wonderful editor. We sometimes disagree, but we usually compromise. The reason he's so good is that he says, "This doesn't work for me," but he leaves it up to me to make it work. He doesn't try to write the book.

FLICK: Does he give you strong indications of why something doesn't work?

PEARSON: Oh, yes. Because I was in Norah's head in *The sky is falling*, when

she got to Toronto she forgets about Gavin and so did I. As a result, I hardly wrote about Gavin in the whole middle of the book. My editor said, "The *reader* hasn't forgotten about Gavin." So I put in five or six scenes to *show* that Norah was neglecting her brother. David is so good at seeing such things.

FLICK: Writers are often under some pressure to conform to audience taste. A phrase that comes up in connection with your work is "delightfully old-fashioned stories ..."

PEARSON: I hate that!

FLICK: It must be especially irritating since the phrase comes from one of your own books.

PEARSON: Eliza's grandmother in *The daring game* says she's delightfully old-fashioned, and Eliza hates it. Somebody reviewing that book said it was a delightfully old-fashioned tale. Just recently an article in *The Vancouver Sun* said my books are "wholesome." Those two words, "old-fashioned" and "wholesome," drive me crazy. They make me sound like a Victorian maiden aunt, and they make the books sound too nice. I write about children as separate from adults, about children as children. But children aren't necessarily wholesome or old-fashioned—they can be nasty, subversive and rebellious, and I think I show that. Adults who don't know anything about children's books think if I'm not writing about Nintendo and Robocop, then the books must be wholesome.

FLICK: Do you write with a particular audience in mind?

PEARSON: When I first write I'm just inside the head of the character. In the later drafts I'm very conscious of the child reader, especially in writing the historical books. I think of what children will understand, what they won't understand.

FLICK: Is that why you present the children as puzzled in *The lights go on again* when they see a copy of *Life* magazine with pictures of Buchenwald? They know the labourers can't exactly be slaves, because they *do* know about slaves. Are you expecting your readers to find out more about these camps to solve the puzzle?

PEARSON: Not necessarily. A real problem with writing historical fiction is that modern readers know both more and less than my characters. That article in *Life* is shocking: Jews weren't even mentioned. I was astounded. It didn't even give them that credit. It just calls them "slave labourers." It was typical of the times that three ten-year-old boys wouldn't know what was happening. They will find out eventually, as the world found out eventually, and they will lose their innocence, as the world lost its innocence. I knew that I couldn't write a book about World War II without mentioning the Holocaust. That would be unethical. So I had to mention it at least and that scene was the only way I could think of.

I also think of what I can't explain. If I can't explain it and it's insulting to someone I will take it out. For example, I had Norah wanting to see "red Indians" in Canada: there was no way I could explain that we don't use that term now, so

even though the detail was historically correct, I omitted it.

Although children are the audience I write for, I do find, as all writers now, that as soon as you pick up your pen you also think, "Who am I going to offend?" I try to be as true as I can to myself and my young readers.

FLICK: Do children's book reviewers impinge upon your consciousness at all?

PEARSON: No, although I suppose I want my books to be seen as serious literature, liked by adults as well as by children. Of course the ideal book appeals to children *and* is good literature, like *Charlotte's web*. That's always my goal.

FLICK: E.B. White, C.S. Lewis and Tolkien all spring to mind as writers who did not "write down" to children.

PEARSON: No, but they were thinking of their young audiences. Tolkien less so, perhaps.

FLICK: And large audiences they are, too, despite reading fashions. I read that your books are selling well generally and that 89,000 copies of *A handful of time* have been sold in Japan.

PEARSON: They are popular, and that's wonderful—but Judy Blume is popular too! So I don't want only to be popular. One reason the war guest books are popular is that they are a trilogy, and children love sequels. The Japanese sales are a strange fluke. The book was picked for a compulsory book report contest, so I wonder how many Japanese children actually *like* it.

FLICK: Perhaps some children will dislike it as a compulsory book but, as happens in such cases, the book—and your others too—will reach a huge audience because of that, beyond the 89,000.

PEARSON: I hope so. All the libraries bought the book, so it will be available.

FLICK: What do you think children get out of reading good literature, and fiction in particular?

PEARSON: Identification, enrichment, comfort. Just escaping into another world. Turning into another person. Doing impossible things. I think it's important to be taken to other countries and be in situations that you would never be in, and fiction can do that. It is also important to be confirmed in, for instance, Canadian settings.

I don't think that every child is a reader, but I certainly think every child should get the chance to discover whether or not she is. Sadly, a lot don't get that chance. I don't know where I would be in my life without fiction. I couldn't live without it.

FLICK: When I hear you speak like that I can hear the writer, the child reader, and also someone who is trying to explain the importance of quality children's fiction for a class in librarianship. Three voices. Perhaps you would comment on teaching?

PEARSON: I like teaching adults. However, the last time I taught children's literature to would-be librarians at UBC I found it quite depressing because many students wanted to know only what was relevant, rather than what is enriching for children. They just wanted to know about current, popular writing.

Such students are defeatist from the start. "We want lists of books that kids like," they say, as if children have read all the books and made a judgment on them. Fortunately, there are always a few students who are going to be children's librarians who really care about literature and its power to affect lives.

FLICK: Has becoming a writer, especially a successful writer, changed your life?

PEARSON: Profoundly. I'm certainly much happier because I'm doing what I want to do, even though I also loved being a children's librarian. I regret leaving that behind, but this is more important to me. I find myself learning a lot about myself because I'm going back to my childhood and my feelings about it. Writing a book is a real growing process.

Writing has also opened up a whole new world of friends, because I've met children's writers across Canada. I think we're like a tribe—we support each other. Writing has also given me the opportunity to travel all over Canada talking about my books. That's so much fun.

But writing has brought out negative qualities I was never aware of—like greed! I got spoiled with three awards in one year, so now I feel disappointed when I don't get them. At any rate that's how I felt about *Lights* not being short-listed for the Governor General's Award. But it's character building. I have to keep reminding myself that *writing* is the only thing that's really important.

FLICK: You are very active in the B.C. book community, aren't you?

PEARSON: Yes. I knew it first as a librarian. I go to lots of literary events. I'm the President of CWILL BC [Children's Writers and Illustrators of B.C.]. We all know each other. I know quite a few writers who write for adults, too, of course.

FLICK: Your success as an author has also put you more and more in the public eye, hasn't it? I noticed, for example, *The Vancouver Sun's* "What are people reading?" section featured Michael Ondaatje, prize winner, one week and Kit Pearson, prize winner, the next.

PEARSON: That was unusual! I'm well known in the children's book world but I don't think I am well known in the general book world because few children's writers are. Look at the best seller lists. These never include children's books. And children's books are sparsely reviewed in Canada.

FLICK: Attention to children's books and to children authors is increasing, though. One sign of this locally was the 1993 Vancouver Writers' Festival.

PEARSON: This year was splendid, but this is the first year we have been treated to more than one children's writer. I love being asked to writers' conferences and festivals, and I especially enjoy those situations which include adult *and* children's writers, which give us equal status. This was the case at the Authors' Breakfast I read at in Victoria in November. Children's authors rarely ever get the chance to do a long reading for adults. When our books receive the same respect, it's wonderful.

FLICK: Perhaps we can end our conversation with a question about your place in the community of writers in Canada. Where do you place yourself? As a B.C.

author?

PEARSON: As a children's author, a Canadian. I don't think of myself as a B.C. author. I've lived in many places in Canada and I have family roots in B.C., Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and New Brunswick—but I don't identify with any particular part of Canada. I'd *like* to—I just can't decide which part I like the best!

BOOKS BY KIT PEARSON

The daring game. Viking Kestrel, 1986; Puffin, 1987.
A handful of time. Viking Kestrel, 1987; Puffin, 1988.
The sky is falling. Viking Kestrel, 1989; Puffin, 1991.
The singing basket. Illus. Ann Blades. Viking, 1991.
Looking at the moon. Viking Penguin, 1991; Puffin, 1993.
The lights go on again. Viking Penguin, 1993.

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