

pointed out an incongruity, she always had a suggestion that was far more interesting to take its place. And in terms of overall plotting, although my characters were not as free to move about the country or act in certain ways as people of today, the plot possibilities from all the reading I'd done over the years provided more than enough opportunities to keep them busy. Quite often I could even use the limitations of the era to benefit the story. In *Within a Painted Past* it is the contrast between the 1898 character of Lily and the 1988 character of Allison that creates the tension and interest. In *Tess* the young heroine's spirit is the spirit of the still-untamed prairie itself.

Both *Tess* and *Within a Painted Past* were welcome learning experiences. I hope, in time, I will be pulled into the past again.

**Hazel Hutchins's** subjects include the historical, the gently fantastical, and the humour of family life. Her latest book is *Yancy and Bear* (Annick, 1996). She lives in Canmore, Alberta, and has a home page at <http://www.inkspot.com/~ohi/inkspot/authors/hutchins>.

## MY HISTORICAL FICTIONS

*Jean Little*

**Résumé:** L'auteur explore la dimension autobiographique de ses récits historiques comme *From Anna* et *His Banner over Me*.



Jean Little

Every so often, I hear a librarian or a bookseller or a teacher say that children do not like reading historical fiction. I do not believe them. I remember too clearly my child self being kidnapped by a book and transported into another age, another time, adventures no longer available to children like me. It was magical. It was what kindled my interest in history itself. I have shared such books with children in the 1990s, loaning them my copies or listening to taped books with them, and I have found that any child with imagination and curiosity can soon be enchanted by a good historical novel. Once in awhile, it takes a bit of coaxing but, after they have finished a couple of chapters of *Warrior Scarlet* by Rosemary Sutcliff or *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom* by Katharine Paterson or *Shadow in Hawthorne Bay* by Janet Lunn, they won't put the book down.

I particularly remember *The Spartan* and *Downright Dency* by Schnedeker, and Robert Louis Stevenson's novels and, a little later, all of Rosemary Sutcliff's wonderful books which I collected and read and reread. Hester Burton's novels

were a delight and Leon Garfield's held me spellbound. I have never lost this fascination and I always feel excited and delighted when a promising new historical novel becomes available as a Talking Book.

In Canada, too, we have good writers of historical fiction: Joan Clark, Barbara Smucker, Claire Mackay, Barbara Greenwood and Marianne Brandis to name only a few. If children do not find such books on their own, they can be introduced to them by a good teacher or parent. No child should stay trapped in the present when books are ready and willing to transport her or him out of it. Learning of the joys and trials faced by long-ago children puts ours in perspective and helps us not to whine about the ills we encounter.

There are, of course, several sorts of historical fiction. Some authors present the big names or big disasters or big battles of the past vividly. But I am the kind of reader who skipped through the parts of *War and Peace* that had to do with Napoleon because I wanted to get back to Natasha and Philippe. I like the hard events of history to be the backdrop and the lives of ordinary people of my chosen past to tell their own story. My first attempts to write fiction about the past were in the two books *From Anna* and *Listen for the Singing*. Anna Solden, the heroine of both novels, lived in the recent past since she was only seven or eight years older than I. Perhaps some would quibble at my calling the books historical fiction. But those seven or eight years bridged a chasm too wide for me to write simply from my own recollections of childhood. My heroine came from Germany and had lived there during the years preceding World War II. Her culture was different from mine and the anxiety her family was experiencing in Germany was not one I had ever known. I had to learn about that time and those people, the songs they sang, the food they ate, some of their fears, the names they gave their children and so on.

*From Anna* began as a short story I wrote as a teenager about an event in my own life. I was enrolled in a "Sight Saving Class" when I was seven. I had moved to Canada from Taiwan and had not lived in an English-speaking country before. In that classroom, the understanding teacher had us weave wastepaper baskets for our parents as Christmas gifts. I thought mine perfect and wished to celebrate my joy in its making. I did not want to write about my own life, however, so I invented a German child named Anna Solden who was the family misfit. There once had been a real German girl called Anna Solden. She had worked as a hired girl for my great-grandmother and she had made Grandma's siblings stop calling her "Fatty." That was all I knew about her and I used her name casually, having no notion that I was inventing a girl who would be the heroine of two novels and who would bring me hundreds of fan letters from children who were drawn to her because they, too, felt like lonely misfits.

The first of the two books was far easier to write since Anna was only nine and her world was limited to her home, her classroom and her father's grocery store. I had the Soldens living on Bedford Road in Toronto in the house my family occupied a few years later. I had never been in Germany except for about an hour I spent in the Transit Room at the Frankfurt Airport so I made Anna and

her family live in Frankfurt. Only recently did it cross my mind that the reason I selected that city might also have something to do with the fact that Heidi had lived there with Klara and her family. Since I, in imagination, had been Heidi often as a child, I had spent more time in Frankfurt than I realized. I had a record of Pete Seeger singing “Die Gedanken Sin Frei” and talking about its being sung in Germany at the very time I had in mind.

Writing *Listen for the Singing* required much more research. When you do not see well enough to read easily, doing extensive research presents almost insuperable obstacles. I remember my mother reading through micro-fiche until she became motion sick while she found out for me such things as what movie she was playing at Loews’s theatre in 1940, how much things cost and when exactly Canada declared war on Germany. That was a real puzzle. I remembered clearly the day we went to war when I was seven but no newspaper ran the headline “Canada Declares War.” I finally learned that Mackenzie King delayed declaring war officially for several days to underscore our independence from Britain. Men were enlisting before the official declaration took place.

Although to the children who read Anna’s story, it is definitely “historical,” most of the events within both books were within my own lifetime. I was on fairly safe ground but also had to face the fact that my contemporaries also remembered those days. I had to be careful to get it as right as possible. I was reassured however after giving the manuscript to a German woman to read. She made several corrections in chapter one and then stopped.

“What else was wrong?” I asked.

She looked shamefaced.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I got so caught up in the story that I forgot to look.”

I did not attempt setting a novel in the past again until I wrote *His Banner over Me*. It is the story of my mother’s childhood beginning when she was four and ending when she was seventeen and in her second year at medical school. Writing this one took courage since none of what happened was within my own memory. Yet I had heard family stories told over and over again throughout my life. I did have to check certain things. A local history was a great help. Family diaries provided the right voice in which to tell of my parents’ romance, which I included in an epilogue. But mostly I listened to my mother. She was alive when I began and supervised the writing of the first few chapters. Then she died and robbed me of her knowledge while setting me free to be more inventive than I might have been with her reading over my shoulder.

The family story which triggered the writing was the one about nine-year-old Gorrie Gauld going to the station in Regina to say goodbye to her parents who were returning to the mission field. She had to watch them go knowing that she would not see them again until she was sixteen. Much as she grew to love the aunt and uncle with whom she was left, I found this picture haunting. And there were other stories, too, which I loved almost as much.

It is the small details that make historical fiction work, I believe. You need to

know what hymns they sang, what their family traditions were, what sayings were passed down, what riddles were set, what advice was given to children, what chores they had to do, what books they read, what games they played, what gave them nightmares. Finding these bits and pieces is like going on a treasure hunt — deeply satisfying when you stumble on a tiny bit that brings your whole scene to life.

I have just completed another historical novel which is set much further back than the others and, for which, I could not lean on any personal memories or family stories. It is titled, at the moment, *The Belonging Place*. While Anna's story is in part my own and Gorrie's is, I hope, close to my mother's, my latest story was inspired by an incident recounted in a local history by David Beattie. It tells of a pioneer family who heard a rooster crowing. Guessing rightly that that crow meant they had acquired neighbours, he and his family set out blazing a trail through the bush until they found the family whose rooster had kept calling out to them. I was charmed by this anecdote and thought, at first, that it would make a lovely picture book. I still think it would but, without my planning it, it grew into a novel. It takes place, I think, in 1845, and it tells the story of Elspet Mary Gordon who is adopted by an aunt and uncle after her mother is killed in a street accident. Elspet loves her adopted family and the village in Scotland where they live. She feels she belongs there. She is not at all happy when her father announces his intention to move the family to Upper Canada.

Always, for me, it is one small story that pulls me into writing a longer one. With Anna, it was the story of her weaving the basket. With Gorrie, it was the story of her going to the station to say goodbye. With Elspet, it is the thought of that child and her father following the rooster's crowing until they find friends in the wilderness.

I heard Rumer Godden say during a television interview that you must write your story first and research it later. First you have to make sure you have a story. When you do, you will know what questions to ask. That is how I have done it. At this moment, I am still asking the questions although the story is already written down. Thank goodness for friends like Barbara Greenwood who know so many answers! Also thank goodness for all the novelists who have gone before me. I can walk into the world within their stories and mine them for my own. It is exciting to invent people and start them talking and walking in an invented past. It gives you a feeling that, single-handed, you are winning that battle with mortality and making yesterday's stories become today's. You not only get to live more than one life but you are privileged to share more than one lifetime.

**Jean Little** lives in an old stone farmhouse near Elora, Ontario, with her sister Pat, her five-year-old great niece Jeanie, her great nephew Ben who is not yet one, six dogs and three cats. Jeanie loves stories and has inspired several upcoming picture books. Jean writes with a talking computer and travels with her black Lab Seeing Eye dog Ritz. She has three honorary degrees and is a Member of the Order of Canada. Her latest book, *Gruntle Piggie Takes Off*, came out in September, 1996.