

“Tumbled Backwards into the Children’s Market”: An Interview with Helen Forrester

Kathleen Donohue

Résumé: *Dans cette entrevue accordée à Kathleen Donohue, la romancière d’origine britannique, Helen Forrester, maintenant établie en Alberta, nous parle de ses ouvrages autobiographiques portant sur son enfance à Liverpool. Elle parle également de ses rapports complexes avec la littérature pour la jeunesse.*

Although she says “I am not a children’s writer,” Helen Forrester, like Charles Dickens, has seen her work absorbed by children, adding to her enormous worldwide adult audience. Children play key roles in several of her novels, which may explain their appeal for young readers. Furthermore, like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the four autobiographical novels contained in *The Helen Forrester Omnibus* have been used in the classroom by teachers to help children face the darker aspects of life. Liverpool serves as the backdrop for most of her stories, and is the city where the novelist endured her family’s fall from wealth and status to extreme poverty partly as a result of the Great Depression. Although she was born in Manchester, England, and grew up in Liverpool, Helen Forrester has lived in Edmonton since 1953. Her late husband, Dr. Avadh Bhatia, was a renowned physicist at the University of Alberta. In July of 1994, I asked the distinguished author some questions about her novels, which are sometimes categorized as “Historical Fiction.” Helen Forrester sent the following replies.

DONOHUE: How did you get started writing?

FORRESTER: When I first came to Canada, I was bored to death by the life led by middle-class Ottawa women. They seemed so useless. So I thought I might write a book to fill the two years that I expected to be stuck there. I could not work at my career as a packaging consultant—nobody in Ottawa had ever heard of such an odd creature.

DONOHUE: Did you have a particular audience in mind when you first began to write the autobiographical books about your childhood?

FORRESTER: I wrote to alleviate boredom and spoke first to the average middle-class readers, male and female adults, in Britain. I found in addition a whole new market of people who do not usually buy books—the working classes of Britain and Australia.

DONOHUE: How did you select a publisher for your first book?

FORRESTER: Writers are rarely businesslike, but I am. With my first

manuscript completed, I spent two days in the Ottawa public library researching the lists of British publishers. Only one book was actually published in Canada: *The Latchkey Kid*. It did average well, I believe, but has since been republished in London by Robert Hale and has become one of my more popular books.

DONOHUE: I'm curious about the editing process in your work. Some writers seem to have a close relationship with their editors, while for others editors are less involved.

FORRESTER: I have a very nice relationship with both my HarperCollins editors. None of them has ever changed anything in my books, except when a Line Editor (the slave who looks for grammatical errors, spelling errors, etc.) tried to rewrite *The Moneylenders*. She was newly down from Cambridge and obviously did not understand the limits of her job. My Head Editor was so mad that he fired her.

My son kindly reads my manuscripts to check that Canadians will understand what I am talking about. For example, in *Three Women of Liverpool*, one of the women makes a coal fire. He felt that Albertans, at least, would not know how this was done, so I included the method in my description.

DONOHUE: How did your husband and son respond to your writing success? Were they supportive?

FORRESTER: My husband wondered why I should bother, but accepted that I needed a hobby. My son never knew much about it until he was an adult. Now he is tremendously supportive and helpful.

DONOHUE: How did writing about painful memories of your parents affect you?

FORRESTER: It made me understand that my parents were, indeed, totally unreasonable. I realized that nowadays they would have been jailed for their mistreatment of me, and they would have deserved it. I don't think that writing about them changed me personally.

DONOHUE: Were any other characters in your autobiography alive at the time you published? If so, how did this affect your portrayal of them?

FORRESTER: I was so careful not to "overwrite," that what I said was correct and could be confirmed by others, so I did not feel any threat. My eldest brother still remembers, and my youngest one said recently that he "knew how much he owed me." There are records in the archives of Liverpool of visits by social workers to our home; they must have reported on it, though nothing was done.

DONOHUE: Did you do much research for your autobiographical books, or do you just have an exceptionally good memory?

FORRESTER: I have an excellent memory and I do an enormous amount of research; I have done fifty years of it.

DONOHUE: Have you always chosen to write from your own experience?

FORRESTER: I do not necessarily write from experience. For example, I have never been to Lebanon; I have never been a seaman or been to sea; I knew nothing of the soap industry until I decided to write about it; I have never been

to Chicago, and so on. But I do my research very carefully.

DONOHUE: How do you start the writing process—with the plot, the characters, the setting, or something else?

FORRESTER: I begin by building a character, with details of his world.

DONOHUE: Liverpool is the setting for almost all your novels, but *The Moneylenders of Shahpur* is set in India. Is the story based on your own experiences in India?

FORRESTER: My publishers tell me I can write about anything I want as long as I write about Liverpool. This is because they can sell 100,000 copies of a new book in that area on the first day of publication. Even in *The Moneylenders*, Liverpool is mentioned, on page one. I did a lot research for *The Moneylenders*, though there I did have the advantage of having lived in Gujerat, India.

DONOHUE: Tell me about your pseudonyms, including “June Bhatia.” Where did they come from and why do you use them?

FORRESTER: Editors decide under what name you will be published. I finally insisted on everything being under one name, and Tom Maschler of Jonathan Cape invented Helen Forrester. All my work is now under that imprint.

DONOHUE: What books did you read in the Liverpool library as a child? Did you read, for instance, Francis Hodgson Burnett, who wrote about deprived female orphans, or Nesbitt’s *The Railway Children*?

FORRESTER: I never ever *read* in the library. I think I made that clear in my books. Neither librarians nor clients would wish a stinking girl and baby to be there for long. I have read *The Railway Children* and nearly all of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s work, including her large number of adult novels. I do not think either writer influenced me, except to make me aware of how style in writing can go out of date quite quickly.

DONOHUE: Canadian writers such as Kit Pearson and Alice Munro claim to have been profoundly influenced by L.M. Montgomery. Were you exposed to her at all?

FORRESTER: I have read Montgomery, but I am quite sure she did not influence me, because I read adult stuff all the time, and found children’s books very stilted.

DONOHUE: What else did you read as a child?

FORRESTER: Several libraries full of books, including my grandmother’s not inextensive one.

DONOHUE: What kind of teachers helped you?

FORRESTER: Experience of life and self-education have been good teachers. I always fervently thanked God that I never had to face the Alberta educational system. Other scientists working here moved to the States the moment their eldest child was six! (It *has* improved since then.)

DONOHUE: I’d guess that your readership is mostly female.

FORRESTER: I do not know who buys individual copies of my work, but I receive a lot of letters from both men and women, and from children who say

they have “got me as a project” and expect me to write their essay for them. It is obvious that many of the children do not understand the books, *if* they actually read them.

DONOHUE: I see a strong feminist streak throughout your work. For instance, at the end of *Lime Street at Two* you talk about the forgotten women who served in World War II, saying “But these were the women who would give impetus to the feminist movement . . . They did not realize it, but they were going to do a lot more marching.” To what extent have you been influenced by modern feminism?

FORRESTER: I am not a feminist and never have been. I am, however, observant of trends; I simply look hard at the world and then report my observations, sometimes in novel form.

DONOHUE: Your work would seem to be a valid site of inquiry for theorists of autobiography. Do you view your own work in light of recent academic attitudes toward literature?

FORRESTER: Critics and academics write the “great unreadables.” I have no faith whatever in their judgment, having lived most of my life amongst them.

DONOHUE: Why do you think children have taken to your novels? Is this because they relate to your characters’ isolation and displacement?

FORRESTER: On the odd occasion when I have read to a class, they have been obviously shocked and perhaps frightened that the same fate will befall them.

DONOHUE: In *CCL* in 1989 you wrote: I have to confess that I don’t write for children. I tumbled backwards into the children’s market, because, in some cases, I have written *about* children, particularly about my siblings and myself.” How did children, teachers, librarians, or parents discover that your novels spoke to children?

FORRESTER: Like Dickens, my books have always been marketed for adults. They must have been picked up by teachers or parents originally.

DONOHUE: What is the difference between your Canadian and your British audience?

FORRESTER: Like all Canadian authors, I suffer from very bad marketing and distribution in Canada. I write essentially for the British market; the Canadian market is very small. My books are read worldwide.

DONOHUE: Was there a supportive community of writers when you started, or did you go it alone?

FORRESTER: I have never had any support whatever from any Canadian writer. (Pauline Gedge, who is equally successful, complains of the same thing.)

DONOHUE: Which of your books has sold best?

FORRESTER: HarperCollins tell me that they have sold nearly 4,000,000 copies of their paperbacks of my books. To this figure must be added all my hard covers from the original publishers, book club copies, school copies, large print, special editions (like the Omnibus) and those on tape, making the estimate about another 1,000,000.

DONOHUE: Why do you think Canadians have been slow to recognize your accomplishments?

FORRESTER: Unlike Americans, Canadians are very suspicious of success. It is necessary to be a great success outside the country first, after which the word begins to spread. A Professor Rees of the University of Alberta, after a visit to England, wrote to the Edmonton Journal to say that the best known Edmontonian in England was Helen Forrester, far outshining Wayne Gretzky, the hockey player. This did draw the attention of Albertans to me!

WORK CITED

Forrester, Helen. "My Books and My Life." *Canadian Children's Literature* 54 (1989): 41-45.

Helen Forrester has published 15 novels, which include the titles in *The Helen Forrester Omnibus* (Bodley Head, 1990): *Twopence to Cross the Mersey* (1974), *Liverpool Miss* (1979), *By the Waters of Liverpool* (1981) and *Lime Street at Two* (1985). Her most recent novel is *The Liverpool Basque* (HarperCollins, 1993).

Kathleen Donohue recently completed an M.A. in English at the University of Guelph, with a specialization in Children's Literature. She wishes to thank Gay Christofides, Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston for their invaluable assistance and encouragement in the preparation and editing of this interview.