

# A long distance friendship

*Jean Little*

One rainy afternoon, when I was nineteen, I discovered a perfect book. When I finished it, I sat still, unwilling to put it down and let its magic end. It held everything I most loved in a story. Its heroine, Tamsyn, was a lonely little misfit who went to live with a large rambunctious family. After suffering agonies of shyness, she gradually and convincingly won through to a gloriously happy ending. Not only did I find the characters, the setting and the plot entirely satisfactory but the words themselves sang. I hoped the author had written lots of other books. The very next day, I went to the bookstore and ordered my own copy of *The armourer's house* by Rosemary Sutcliff.

In the next ten years, I bought seven more Sutcliff novels. I treasured each but I was particularly moved by the way she wrote of people with disabilities. All my life, I had had eyes which looked peculiar and I had only partial vision. During my university years, I worked as a counsellor at a camp for crippled children and, after graduation, I became a teacher of children with a variety of handicaps. When I searched for books about disabled young people to share with my students, I found only maudlin stories which invariably finished up with a miraculous cure. Rosemary Sutcliff's stories were a refreshing exception. Her hero's limp or stammer or useless arm was never the central focus of her books but only one attribute among many which helped shape the life of her main character. Sutcliff saw that a handicap was more often an inconvenience than a tragedy, yet she made clear the frustration and the aloneness her heroes experienced. I remember wondering how she knew exactly how it felt. I also remember wishing I could write like that.

Then, in 1962, my first book, *Mine for keeps*, was published. My heroine, Sal, had cerebral palsy and, like Tamsyn, had to adjust to life as a member of a lively family after having spent years in a residential school for crippled children. Simultaneously with the book's publication, I myself underwent surgery intended to reduce the pressure caused by glaucoma in my left eye. The operation was only temporarily successful. A year and a half later, the eye had to be removed.

Although I had always done my real seeing with my right eye and despite the fact that my new plastic eye looked far more normal than my real one had, I slid into a frightening depression after the operation. This was made worse by the fact that, at first, my right eye had difficulty in focussing steadily enough

for me to be able to read. I chose a book with clear black print and grimly set about practising reading. The book I chose was Rosemary Sutcliff's *Outcast* and it not only helped me to correct my recalcitrant vision, but it also rescued me from my sense of isolation. When I reached the last page, I, along with Beric the outcast in the story, had a feeling of homecoming. Rosemary Sutcliff had made this happen. I had to find a way to thank her.

I did it in my second book, *Home from far*, by having Jenny, the heroine, find healing after the death of her twin brother by reading about Beric and Drem. When I was sent complimentary copies, I parcelled up one along with a copy of *Mine for keeps* and mailed them to Rosemary Sutcliff, care of her publisher. I taped to the outside of the package a letter explaining everything. I told her not to write back, but she did.

*May 12, 1965*

*Dear Jean Little,*

*What a lovely surprise! I took both books to bed with me and neglected all the work I had meant to take, and read one of them one evening, and the other the next. I was so thrilled to find the mention of my books in Home from far, which I love, but Mine for keeps I think I loved even more. You have done Sal so beautifully and the relationship between her and the other children. It is so true that children (though they can and do gang up to bait a lone child for some reason: a strange accent, a different home background, or square-peg-in-round holishness) are mostly angelically kind to one of their own number with a physical handicap. That was certainly my experience at school. I was never left out of anything, and a little girl, much younger than me and the School Devil in general, used to always wait behind for me at "break" so that we could come out more slowly behind the rest. You have brought that out so well in your story. You must remember your childhood very well. Oh, how you make me remember the need for a "private place," secret even if a very open secret, and the agonizing seriousness and importance of one's friendships. (Why, oh, why do so many adults think that children don't feel deeply or that they forget so soon!)*

*I shall treasure both books. Thank you again for sending them to me.*

Her letter delighted me but clearly my explanation of why I had sent her the books had never reached her. I wrote again, thanking her for all the joy her writing had brought to me and telling her also that I would be in England that summer. If she happened to be in the lull that comes between books, I would love to meet her. If she were involved in writing, I would rather read the book.

*July 23, 1965*

*Thank you for the letter. The first one must have come adrift... How unresponsive you must have thought me! I am so sorry! It will be lovely to see you... Come to lunch or tea or preferably both...*

*It's always pleasant — and stimulating — to meet other writers and talk shop together; one of the nice things about being a writer! I'm so sorry you have had so much trouble with your eyes. . . I can imagine how you hated that plastic eye and felt outraged and violated by it, however nice it looks. One grows used to one's own scars and learns how to carry them lightly, and they become a part of one's self. . .*

As we approached Barnham Junction, where Rosemary's father was to meet our train, my friend, Carol Kent, was excited and I was petrified. I thought again of the letters which lay hidden in the purse on my lap.

This woman clearly knew scores of writers, all of them brilliant. I had glimpsed a couple but I had never attempted to converse with one. She expected our visit to be "pleasant and stimulating." I felt about as stimulating as a tapioca pudding.

And what precisely was wrong with her? I couldn't see well and Carol couldn't prompt me. Rosemary would be bound to notice if my friend hissed at me, "She has two heads." When you can't see, whether or not to try to shake hands is always a problem. If you thrust your hand out first, the other person may be unable to reach it. If you dally a moment, you are apt to miss their extended hand by a good six inches. What if, in my ignorance, I made some appalling blunder? As the train slowed down, I was verging on hysteria.

I liked her father at once. He was so shy that he made me feel braver and he was so proud of her. In this, he was like my own father who, when I had two poems published in Toronto's *Saturday Night*, wrote under an assumed name to the editors, asking for more information about this gifted poet, Jean Little. Discovering what he had done, my seventeen-year-old self had been outraged, but by now I had grown up enough to see how endearing it was of him. As I detected that same partisanship in Rosemary's father, I felt calmer. Maybe our meeting was not going to be a disaster after all.

We had a lovely time. I remember being ridiculously taken aback by her English accent. I had read her books and her letters in flat Canadian tones, of course, and she did not sound the way I thought she should. This feeling wore off almost immediately but it provided us with an initial topic of conversation. After lunch, we moved outside and sat talking in the garden. It was there that I permanently "broke the ice" by falling through a lawn chair and becoming stuck fast in its wooden framework. Rosemary, who turned out to have had Still's disease, a form of arthritis, in early childhood, was unable to come to my aid. Carol was too helpless with laughter to be of any use. When, by wriggling backwards, I finally managed to extricate myself, my posterior and my dignity were bruised and my dress needed mending but nobody was feeling self-conscious any longer.

I have not described Rosemary herself — but then, even though I have visited her twice since that first time, I have never seen her clearly. Always there

have been other people there as well and although the conversation has been entertaining it has necessarily remained largely superficial. I feel I know Rosemary much better through her letters than from our actual meetings.

When I returned to Canada, I reread every Sutcliffe book I owned. Then I wrote the very best bread and butter letter I could, thanking her once more not only for her hospitality but for the friends she had given me in her stories. I told her I might write again, because I wouldn't be able to resist, but I did not expect her to write back. I would rather she wrote a book for all of us who loved her work than use the time writing letters, even to me. Mailing it, I felt a pang. It was all over.

Her answer came four months later. When I look at the letter now, eighteen years later, it is not hard for me to understand why friendship flowered between us. She tells me of her father's illness and death, of her struggles to get on with her work, of their elderly golden retriever, Simba, whom I had met, and of her new, long-haired chihuahua puppy Benbow, whom she had bought to amuse and comfort both herself and the old dog. I too am chiefly interested in people, books and dogs.

She and I have written back and forth ever since. We have rarely answered each other's letters promptly. We have written when we needed to blow off steam, when we wanted to celebrate or brag, when we were suffering from writer's block, when we had acquired or lost a dog, when we simply felt like writing a letter. Often we have written about writing itself, our own and each other's.

In that first "thank you letter," I told Rosemary how impressed I was by her ability to write vividly about experiences she obviously could never have had. Every good writer does this, of course, but her books seemed so charged with physical action that it seemed incredible that they had actually been written by the small disabled woman with whom I had sat drinking tea in a sunny Sussex garden. I have trouble describing things I had never seen: birds, gardens themselves in any detail, peoples' individual facial features. How did she do it? I also remember noticing how her heroes, when they were hurt, ran or rode off alone into the hills or woods to nurse their wounds in private. How often, I thought, Rosemary herself must have longed to be able to escape like that. It did not occur to me then that this might be one of the reasons why she had learned to travel miles and centuries away without stirring from her chair.

Rosemary responded to my thoughts thus:

*March 3, 1966*

*I think all of us who write have a kind of extra bit to our imagination so that we really can know how it feels to do things we never have done. Otherwise none of us would be able to write of things we hadn't experienced ourselves. And it certainly makes life much more fun! I have no experiences of many things, like riding a horse at full gallop, that come into my books, but I can write about*

*it well enough to fox someone who has. And I have no experience obviously (if you rule out reincarnation) of how the process of making love feels to a man, but I managed it well enough to make at least three men I have heard of jump to the conclusion that Sword at sunset was written by a man, despite the woman's name on the cover. So of course you can do the same thing about seeing gardens. It's one of the "perks" of being a writer. . .*

She was right. Four years later, when I was working on *From Anna*, my heroine compared her family's Christmas tree, alight with candles, to her friend Isobel's, which was strung with coloured lights — and she knew hers was far more beautiful. As I wrote this, I became Anna and saw it even though I had never really seen a tree lit with candles. I too had foxed my readers.

Rosemary replied:

*And I'm glad about the candlelit Christmas tree. It's odd, isn't it, this business of experiencing what one hasn't experienced? Something to do with the truth of the spirit as opposed to the truth of fact. People who don't themselves write creatively, and even quite a lot who do, are always fascinated by it and cannot imagine how it's done. And to the initiated, it's so simple. It must be awful to be bound by one's actual experience!*

It is simple, as she says, and yet she herself would agree that it is mysterious even to "the initiated." You invent people and then, bit by bit, you feel them becoming real, alive, independent of you, their author. Finally, one hot summer morning in 1969, as you sit at your typewriter, you become the child you are writing about and you stand, eyes wide, before a tree lit with tiny candles and you don't even know you have left the hot sticky morning to go to a winter night thirty-five years earlier until you emerge at the end of the chapter. Once this has happened to you, it becomes complicated to answer a question many children ask, "Are the people in your books real?" I now say, "They are more real to me than you are." Anyone lucky enough to experience this miraculous shift to another identity will know what I mean.

Identification with a fictional character happened to me almost completely when I wrote *Kate* in which the main character tells the story in the first person. I was prepared for some of the difficulties and delights of letting Kate tell her own story, but others took me entirely by surprise. Rosemary had written both in the third person and in the first so she knew all about it.

*September 10, 1970*

*Writing in the first person is an odd experience, isn't it, especially the first time one does it. It has an immediacy that the third person can't have and yet it raises a whole host of new problems, such as the fact that you can only see people in the story through the eye of the storyteller. You quite often have to somehow show the reader things about them that the "I" doesn't see or doesn't*

*understand . . . It's all very odd, this business of writing, isn't it? Creating people and getting so involved with them, as though they were flesh and blood and spirit in their own right.*

When I sent her a copy of the published book, two years later, she pleased me by writing:

*January 8, 1972*

*Bless you for Kate! I love her. She's such a lovable person. And such a person! I find it fascinating too to see people I had met in the earlier book (Look through my window) through her eyes. You have managed that very, very well and convincingly. But of course you had Kate to tell you what they seemed like to her. It's a beautiful book, Jean, and I loved every word of it.*

Two unexpected things I had to settle before I could even begin to write *Kate* were why and when Kate was supposed to be putting down her story. Was she looking back years or months? When she wrote the first chapter, did she already know how her story was going to end or was that still in the future? Was she writing down her memories for her grandchildren or merely thinking things over? Should I put it in a journal form? I went to books I loved which were written in the first person. I remember feeling awed when it dawned on me that Charlotte Brontë had Jane Eyre tell her whole story and even address her remarks to "dear Reader" without once telling why on earth she was going to all that trouble. I finally had Kate know everything up to the end of the second last chapter before she began. When she had been over it all, she knew what she had to do next and I knew how she was going to end the book.

Often Rosemary or I got stuck. I began one letter by saying, "I am writing you this letter to get out of having to rewrite Chapter Two AGAIN." Rosemary was not just politely sympathetic; she knew exactly how I was feeling.

*July 20, 1975*

*Writer's block! Oh dear, as you know I've been having it myself. And, although it's better, I'm still not clear of it and I still have that feeling, "You'll never write another book and anyway you're no good at it!" It's murder, isn't it? It seems to affect one's whole life, not just the writing part of it. I suppose that's because the writing permeates our whole lives anyway.*

What balm it was for me to know that even such writers as Rosemary suffered from it! It did not end the despair or cure the paralysis but it provided much needed solace.

In that same letter, Rosemary writes about a new periodical to which I had given her a subscription. The magazine arrived ahead of my explanation. In my letter, I told her that I was busy rereading all of L.M. Montgomery's books

before writing an article about her work.

*July 20, 1975*

*Canadian Children's Literature — the first copy arrived a few days ago and I had a kind of feeling it might be from you. It looks to me as though it is going to be good. . . The L.M. Montgomery books. The Emily you mentioned among her heroines isn't by any chance Emily of New Moon, is she? Because I read that in hospital, aged about twelve, sleeping out-of-doors in part of the ward and reading in the summer dusk with the stars pricking out and the bugles from the distant barracks sounding "Lights Out." It remains magic in my mind and I've never been able to trace it because of not knowing who it was by. How I loved it!*

She had guessed rightly of course, and I decided to send her not a new paperback edition but an old secondhand one with a ring on its cover where a child had set down her milk glass.

*August 29, 1975, and October 4, 1975*

*I got this air letter all ready. . . to write to you over a month ago. . . to tell you that Emily had arrived and how thrilled I was, and how I felt (and still do) as though you had magically made me a present of a little bit of my childhood back again. And then I thought "No, I'll read it first," — but my only time. . . for reading pleasure is in bed. (And anyway, in bed. . . at night was the right place for reading Emily of New Moon again after all these years.) . . . Oh my dear, it's a lovely book, and full of purple patches and over sweetness, but it's so warm and above all, the magic is still there! I was so thrilled when I opened the parcel (Yes, much nicer to have with the ring left by somebody's hot milk on the cover, than a new paperback!) And then I was almost afraid to begin reading, in case what I had read before wasn't there — like going back to some place one loved years ago and finding it has been turned into a housing estate and all the May trees have been cut down — but I needn't have worried, it was all there, and lots that I had forgotten, even some that hadn't registered with me at the time.*

*And now it has joined the ranks of the very elect on my bedroom windowsill, for whom the sitting room bookshelves are not good enough, — Kim and The tailor of Gloucester and Cyrano de Bergerac and Sonnets from the Portugese and a very few more. . .*

When I gave Rosemary a subscription to *Canadian Children's Literature*, I also wrote to tell her that the editors had suggested that she and I write back and forth about our writing, discussing among other things our reasons for writing about children with handicaps. I told her for the first time of the criticism I had received about writing "bibliotherapy" rather than good fiction, and that I had learned from friends that my books were not on the shelves of Boys and

Girls House, the prestigious Canadian children's library in Toronto. After making a speech to the New England Librarians' Association, I received a personal letter from a librarian at Boys & Girls House. In my speech, which had been published in *The Hornbook*, I had said that I wanted children who were different to find themselves in my books and to realize that they too could be heroes and heroines. The librarian wrote advising me not to do this. "Your parents never allowed *you* to brood over your handicap," she said. How they could have prevented me she did not explain. While it is true that books which concentrate unduly on a handicap turn into sermons instead of stories, I felt that my books, on the whole, did not make this mistake, and that the focus had not gone askew in the book, but in the reader's preconceived notion of what a book with a disabled heroine which was written by a disabled writer was bound to be like. Rosemary agreed. When I told her that I was considering giving up writing and returning to teaching, she urged me to go on writing the books "that came to me wanting to be written." She also, I learned later, wrote a letter to Boys & Girls House about her belief in my books.

Rosemary & I went on writing to each other about our dogs and our families and whatever else spilled out on paper, but we did not write the letters for *CCL*.

Again urged by the editors of *CCL* to write about my friendship with Rosemary, I put together, with her consent, this sampling of letters and memories. I enjoyed going back through the letters immensely. My deepest regret is that I have to omit such an enormous number of "good parts." By now I have over fifty letters and there isn't one that isn't fun to read. From the slapdash hurried notes to the letters several pages long, they are all warm, entertaining, evocative, often moving and beautiful.

Thank fortune that one rainy afternoon, when I was nineteen, I discovered the perfect book.

*Jean Little* will be publishing her eleventh novel with Penguin (soft-cover) and Viking (hard-cover) in late 1984. It is titled *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird*. A film of another one of her books, *Home from far*, has been released by Atlantis Films (Toronto).