An interview with Jean Little

Catherine Ross

Jean Little published her first book in 1962, the route into print and wide distribution having been smoothed when *Mine for keeps* won the Little, Brown Canadian Children's Book Award. *Mine for keeps,* about Sally Copeland, a child with cerebral palsy, became the first book in a grouping of related books set in Riverside, Ontario, a grouping that includes *Spring begins in March* (also about the Copelands), *Home from far, Look through my window* and *Kate* (both about Emily Blair and Kate Rosenthal), *Take wing,* and *One to grow on.* Forming another group, *From Anna* and *Listen for the singing* tell from the point of view of Anna the experiences of the Solden family, first in Germany as the Nazis are coming to power and then as newcomers to Toronto, during the dark years from 1935 until after the outbreak of war. In the interview, Jean Little talks about these books and other far-ranging topics: the books that had mattered to her as a child; bibliotherapy; the role of editors; Rosemary Sutcliff; the translation of her books into other languages; remembering what it is to be a child; and the mystery of knowing "how to do it" as a writer.

ROSS: Your story starts exotically, doesn't it, in Formosa?

LITTLE: My parents and grandparents were missionaries. My grandfather, a Presbyterian minister, went to Taiwan. My mother's family was born there, and then she and my father went back as medical doctors. Three out of the four us were born there too.

ROSS: Do you have any recollections of that time?

LITTLE: I do, but I was seven when I came to Canada, so all my memories are those of a young child. There are very few exotic, oriental memories.

ROSS: Another thing that was part of your experience growing up was that you were blind until you were two and then, I gather, you had an operation. . .

LITTLE: No, I didn't have an operation. I was blind as far as anyone could tell because I never reached for anything. My eyes were very scarred before birth. But after I was born, my eyes grew bigger and the scars shrank. The edge of the pupils came out from behind the scars, and I was able to see through this little space. My vision stabilized when I was around five or six. I don't remember not seeing. I saw differently with each eye. So I soon developed monocular vision. Years later I got glaucoma, just as *Mine for keeps* was coming out, and I had to have my left eye removed. Now I have glaucoma in my right eye and have lost most of the vision. I can see light and dark and things

and people moving. I can't see to read any longer, but that's only been for the last two or three years.

ROSS: There wasn't a moment as a child when suddenly you could see? Anna in *Listen for the singing* gets glasses and suddenly sees the world for the first time. That moment in the book is miraculous and is described as "She sees a world she had never known existed."

LITTLE: Just after I graduated from university a cousin showed me binoculars and I looked through them. I could see the leaves on trees and the shadows on the moon. I always had seen the moon as a flat thing and suddenly it was a sphere. I bought a monocular and through it saw the world as other people see.

ROSS: I wonder if this experience would give you insight into the business of perspective — the looking through windows — where each person is looking at the world through a different window.

LITTLE: Could be. It does fascinate me. When I was a child I realized that when we would all say, "What a beautiful sunset," it would be beautiful to me and it would be beautiful to them, but we were seeing different sunsets. Also, I realized quite early that people's memories were different. Two people would tell about the same event, but there would be two different stories.

ROSS: Was there something about your time at the University of Toronto that was formative for you?

LITTLE: People ask me if getting my degree in English Literature helped me as a writer. I think that my books would have been much the same if I hadn't gone to university. When children ask me how to become writers, I never tell them to take courses. I tell them to read and to write. If they read enough and if they write enough, and if they have any ability, they'll learn. As you read, partly subconsciously and partly consciously, you pick up ways of seeing things and insights into people.

ROSS: Stories were important to you right from the beginning.

LITTLE: Oh yes. I remember begging for them. We were fortunate in that my parents and my grandmother went on reading to us long after we learned to read. They still read us a bed-time story when we were young teenagers. Not only would they read to us but if they had any free time, they themselves read. And when I was a child, I used to tell my younger sister stories so she would do the chores. I would get the story to a very exciting point and then refuse to go on until she had made my bed. I had her running around as a slave from the time I was ten or eleven until I was about fourteen. And if I didn't stop at an interesting point, she wouldn't do anything. So from this very practical application I discovered how to end a chapter, on a note of suspense.

ROSS: You said that the books that mattered to you as a writer were ones that you had read as a child. Which stories were important to you?

LITTLE: *The* most important book, without any question, was *The secret garden.* I can easily trace how it relates to my books. *The secret garden* starts

with people saying Mary Lennox is the most miserable child in the world. She is totally nasty. And then, bit by bit, she turns into a decent kid. And she changes in a natural way. While some of the other things in the book are kind of fakey, Mary's own changing — you can really feel it happening inside you. In the beginning, Mary reminded me of myself. So it gave me great hope as well as a feeling of wonder to see this kid come round. The nasty Mary at the beginning of the book was me, but the nice Mary who triumphed was also me. Also she was lonely at the beginning but at the end she was rich in friends. I had no close friends until high school. But because of books I knew exactly what friendship was all about and knew what kinds of friends I wanted. In my books these are the two things that keep coming up over and over: the finding of friends and the change from an unhappy lonely child to a happier child. The change must be credible. Books like *Anne of Green Gables* also gave me hope. In one way or another, the characters all transformed their worlds from an initially unhappy place to a much happier one. I loved those books.

ROSS: Did you go right on to *A little princess?*

LITTLE: No, I didn't. I discovered it when I was about eleven. When I asked my mother for a perfect book, she gave me *A little princess.* It was a perfect book for me. I don't think it has been quite as much of an influence because Sara Crewe is a little princess from the first page till the last page. I wasn't.

ROSS: One of the things that you liked was how plausible the change was in *The secret garden.*

LITTLE: Yes, because I could believe in the change. In *A little princess* it was all miracles, but in *The secret garden* I could see it happening.

ROSS: If somebody had said to you then "What should the perfect book be like?" what would you have said?

LITTLE: I think that I would have wanted a book that was convincingly sad at the beginning and happy by the end. Children write to me saying that they like this too. The books that I liked best were written from only one child's point of view, so that I was right inside that child's mind. One of the things that bothered me terribly about *The secret garden* was that Burnett let the whole ending go to Colin. Mary is barely there in the last chapter. Even as a young child I thought that was wrong. I remember saying, "But what happened to Mary?"

ROSS: Yes, because the interest shifts to Colin and his father.

LITTLE: That's true. I also hated *Alice in Wonderland,* because it turned out to be a dream. I wanted it really to be happening to Alice.

ROSS: Does this mean that you would also not have liked fairy stories or legends?

LITTLE: Yes. I did not like — in fact I hated — legends. If it said "legend" on the book, I wouldn't read it. And although I read all the fairy stories, I wouldn't reread them unless I was reading to my sister. Cinderella became real for me, but most of them didn't. One fan letter that I got when *Mine for*

keeps was published said, "You would think that Sally was me." That was what I wanted and what I looked for in books: I liked fantasy only when it seemed real.

ROSS: You must have made up your own stories too as a child.

LITTLE: Oh yes. I lived in a world in which I was constantly making up stories. I wrote my first book in grade five, filling a whole scribbler. I got it from *Lassie come home* and Albert Payson Terhune. There was a child who lived at the top of a mountain with his mother in a little cabin. His mother fell unconscious, and off the boy went with his dog for the doctor. Every single disaster that you could possibly imagine happened. There was a flood and there was a desert. And when he finally reached the doctor he had to take the doctor back through all these dangers again. The boy had to hold the lantern while the doctor operated in order to save the mother's life. It never occurred to me to ask where the father was or what they were doing on the mountain or all those picky details. I realized then that I was having just as much fun writing as I did reading. And it was exactly the same kind of fun: I was getting into another world. The first real pull to write came from the fact that I found that I could escape through writing just as well as by reading. And it was just as exciting because I didn't know what would happen in the writing either. Even now, on the first draft of a book, I don't know how it will end. I never write the end first, or even plan it. I write the first third of the book slowly and the second third faster, and the final third all in one day because I want to know how it will turn out. That was partly what made me keep writing as a child. I loved to do it, and I got attention for doing it, and I was good at it.

ROSS: In your books, you have kids like Emily and Kate who write poems and have a writing club. Were you yourself ever able to find other children who shared your interest in writing?

LITTLE: No, but what I did find were the characters in L.M. Montgomery who had a Story Club. Also in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* they wrote stories.

ROSS: The children in *Stand in the wind* are able to share the reading of books with each other and therefore with the reader.

LITTLE: I have many letters from kids who say they enjoy learning about other books through my books. When I began to write I didn't include references to books. But then I realized that if my characters read books that were still available, then my readers could find the books I mentioned. And they do. Now I try to use people who are still alive and getting royalties. In the book I'm working on now, *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird* characters are reading Katherine Paterson's *The great Gilly Hopkins,* Dennis Lee's *Alligator pie,* and W.O. Mitchell's *Who has seen the wind?*

ROSS: When did you begin to think of yourself as a writer or as someone who would become a writer?

LITTLE: People asked me when I was in elementary school if I would like to be a writer. I thought it would be nice, but I had never seen a writer. In the Oscar Wilde story "The Happy Prince" a poet was starving in a garret.

When I was seventeen, my father sent two of my poems in to *Saturday Night.* They were published, and I got a cheque for thirty dollars. I decided then that I would become a writer. I got a job and was going to write in my spare time, but I made the mistake of becoming a teacher and had no spare time. But I was writing as a hobby, writing as an avocation, and writing all the time. Then when I was twenty-five or twenty-six I went to Utah. Virginia Sorensen was giving a writers' workshop. I went to hear her talking about writing novels. She had just won a Newbery Medal for *Miracles on Maple Hill.* There she was, a live woman. I somehow had the feeling that all writers were English. She wasn't English and she wasn't dead and she didn't seem to be starving. It never occurred to me that she also had a husband, and so she could have been making absolutely no money from her writing. To me she seemed to be working at writing and making a living. Everything she said, I already knew: make people come alive through conversation and don't start off with solid chunks of description. So I decided to take a year off teaching and I wrote *Mine for keeps.* Partly, too, I wrote it because of my class. Most of them had cerebral palsy, and there was no fictional treatment of any child with cerebral palsy available then.

ROSS: To you the most important thing was not something specific that you learned at the Utah Writers Workshop but just . . .

LITTLE: Just encountering a writer. A writer that I could see as comparable to myself. When I was in high school, Wilson MacDonald came to speak to the Rotary Club, and my father brought him to the house. I was so excited about meeting this writer. But he walked in and told me that if I took a spoonful of blackstrap molasses every day my vision would clear up. He also gave me a poem that he had written for White Cane Week. I was disappointed and hurt. I also met E.J. Pratt just before I was in grade thirteen. He read some of my poetry and was kind enough to discuss it seriously with me. He told me to stop using poetic contractions such as "twill" and "ne'er". These men were poets, and although I liked writing poetry, I wanted to be a novelist. I had not yet met a novelist.

ROSS: You must have felt for a long time in Canada that you were alone.

LITTLE: Oh I did. Even when I went to meetings for writers, I never met people who wrote the kind of book I wrote. But that has changed now. There are many children's novelists — Kevin Major, Janet Lunn, Barbara Smucker, Monica Hughes, Claire MacKay. . .

ROSS: Could you talk about the process of the book's coming into being?

LITTLE: Each book is different. *From Anna* began as a short story. When I was in high school I wrote a story based on my own childhood about a little girl weaving a basket for her parents' Christmas present. It was called "The Gift" and was only eight pages long. Later I turned it into a forty page story to sell at a church bazaar. The brothers and sisters emerged a bit. I sent that to my editor who said, "This is good, but I want to know more." Often a book

starts with a problem that interests me. The idea for *Home from far* came to me when I wondered what it was like for children who live in a foster home when they have a parent or parents still living. *Look through my window* started with a magnificent house that we lived in when we were teenagers. After we moved out, it was torn down. I decided to put it into a book so the house could never be demolished again. I had more fun writing that than any other of all my books.

ROSS: Once you've got the idea, there's the process of writing itself, which you have said goes slowly at first and then speeds up.

LITTLE: That's right. After I have an idea, I wait for a child to come into my mind who lives in that situation, and becomes real. Sometimes I write the first chapter and if it doesn't come alive I throw it out. But if I write a first draft or even most of a first draft, I can't destroy the book, even if I want to. Right now I have been working on a book for five years, and I've been so tempted to throw it out. But it would be like murdering the children, particularly the main character.

ROSS: *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird* has been in a period of gestation now for five years.

LITTLE: That is partly because my vision has decreased during this time, so it has taken me a lot longer. I had to find a whole new way to write.

Anyway, when a child comes into my mind, I begin writing. Sometimes I make a plan on an envelope, but it never works because the characters won't do what I want. I work on the first chapter a lot. The first chapter of *Kate* I rewrote twenty-five times.

ROSS: Would these be quite substantial changes?

LITTLE: Toward the end it would be just little things. Some chapters stay the same from the beginning. The first chapter is so important; it is like the foundation under a house. You have to suggest and build in the whole situation. When I initially wrote *From Anna* the first chapter was the family's arrival in Canada. My editor said, "I want to know what happened in Germany before they came." I backed up to the boat. I said I'm not going to go to Germany, but I'll do the boat. She said, "I still want to know what happened in Germany before they came." It was hard, because when you write a first chapter, you introduce everything. It's hard to put another first chapter in front of it. But I was glad I did, because the change made the book a lot stronger. Ellen Rudin is really a good editor.

ROSS: You have published with an American publisher throughout, haven't you?

LITTLE: That was accidental. When I finished my first manuscript, I went to the library and they had a form for the Little, Brown Canadian Children's Book Award. I submitted *Mine for keeps* to the contest. Once the book won the contest and they wanted to publish it, I didn't go looking around for someone else. When Helen Jones, who was my editor at Little Brown, retired, I

began working with Ellen Rudin who edited my next five books.

ROSS: What kind of sales would a book of yours get?

LITTLE: *From Anna* in the educational edition sold 30,000 copies in six months. It's sold well over a hundred thousand copies by now. When the books are new they sell from one to two thousand copies a year. There has never been a year yet that *Mine for keeps* has not made over a thousand dollars, and it has been in print for twenty years.

ROSS: Do you find that critics or reviewers say anything that helps you after you have written the book?

LITTLE: No not very much. Reading other writers and what they say about their writing is more helpful. I am defensive when I'm attacked. When Sheila Egoff's book *The republic of childhood* came out, claiming that I was writing bibliotherapy, I really thought that I should stop writing. After some time I realized that I just couldn't stop. I had to do the best I could and not listen. But I was hurt to realize that this kind of criticism had kept my books off the shelves at Boys and Girls House.

ROSS: This is your chance to answer people who call your books bibliotherapy.

LITTLE: The fact that I'm handicapped myself means that a lot of people, knowing this beforehand, feel that the handicap will dominate the writing of the book. Then, if I am are writing about a handicapped child, they think I will overidentify. And there is a body of people (and I've come across them over and over) who feel that if there is a problem in the book, particularly an identifiable problem like cerebral palsy, then the problem takes over and the story becomes adults trying to help the child adjust. Sometimes they are right. I've read books where the problem becomes the book, where the children aren't real, and where the whole thing is just a therapy session. But you have to read each book to see what it really is. You can't simply say that since this book is dealing with a problem it must therefore be mere bibliotherapy. It all depends on what the author has done with the situation.

Another point is that when I was a child I learned, largely from books, that others were like me. I completely identified with many of the people I was reading about. Anne Shirley and Heidi felt just as I did and yet neither had a physical disability. I learned that poor vision had not made me a different kind of creature. I found myself over and over again in books.

And it seems that the *reverse* happens — that kids who aren't crippled, mentally retarded, or whatever — recognize their own feelings and experiences in books about disabled children. They can realize that being handicapped is only one facet of a whole person, and they won't make the mistake of thinking that a disabled child is a completely different kind of being.

ROSS: Bibliotherapists tend to want to match a child who has a particular problem with a book which deals with that precise problem. But you want to allow your readers to look through different windows on the world.

LITTLE: That is one of the reasons why I sometimes put handicapped children

into my books. Four of my ten novels have handicapped children in them. However, all the books have children who have some kind of difficulty. I tried twice, in *Look through my window* and *Stand in the wind,* to write a book in which all the children were totally carefree. Both times I found that the book lacked depth until there was something for the children to work out. I feel that *all* children have challenges to meet.

ROSS: Unless there is a conflict or a problem of some sort to write about, you don't have a story.

LITTLE: Many people, including librarians, find it very difficult to like books which have current themes in them. The books may deal with alcoholism or divorce — this is the world that children are living in now — but some adults don't want these problems to be in the world of the book. So they say that such books are not literature.

ROSS: Perhaps one reason for the emphasis on "problems" in some discussions of children's books is that it is easier to talk about content or the problem than it is to talk about form. Do you yourself consciously think of formal concerns as you are writing?

LITTLE: I do so much more now than in the beginning. I now write the whole book from one person's point of view. In *Home from far,* the point of view went back and forth between two people. My editor kept wanting me to write it from one viewpoint, and I thought she was wrong. It wasn't until I remembered myself as a child reader that I realized the child wants to identify solely with the main character. Readers have to be a little older than the kids I'm writing for before they want to move into the consciousness of more than one character. I now try to show other people's points of view from what they say.

Some of the ongoing symbols that tie each book together are deliberate. I don't usually know what these are going to be ahead of time but, as I write the book, they emerge. Then I back up and rewrite it, tying the symbols in right from the very beginning.

ROSS: Can you think of an example?

LITTLE: Yes. In *From Anna* there are hands all through the book. Anna tries to take hold of her father's hand at the beginning. Her father's hand is usually there. She can't do things with her own hands. Another example is sight and insight — the two kinds of vision — which are used back and forth as symbols of each other. When Anna gets glasses, her mother finally says, "I'm the one who was blind." In the book I'm writing now, *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird,* the images are connected with flight, as they were in *Take wing.* There is so much that you put into a book intentionally; then there are other things that you are unaware of.

ROSS: One pattern that I have noticed in your books is the pattern of doubling. For instance, in *Home from far* you have twins — Jenny and Michael. But there are two Michaels and the second Mike has two dads. So there are two Michaels for Jenny and two fathers for Mike. The happy ending is a matter

of both Jenny and Mike realizing that accepting the second one does not involve disloyalty to the first. You have two parallel stories that are interconnected.

LITTLE: I often have that. It is clearer in that book because that's the one where the viewpoint shifts and so obviously there must be the two resolutions. But I think that in all of the books there has to be a resolution — or an ending, whether it's a resolution or not — for at least two people.

ROSS: There is often repetition with variation of the same situation. *In Mine for Keeps,* you have two "cripples," Sal and Piet. Both of them want to go back to somewhere, back to the school or back to Holland. But for each character a return would be a retreat and a defeat. Are you consciously designing this kind of doubling as you write?

LITTLE: I don't think that I'm thinking of it like that, but I'm always concerned with at least two main stories. In the book I'm writing right now, there are two main characters and they're both very important — a boy and a girl. Somebody said to me, "Why don't you write two books?" one about the boy and one about the girl. They didn't see that the two stories are interdependent. In my books there is both a main character and a secondary central character who reflects the main character. Like Emily and Kate.

In a way *Spring begins in March* is a reversal of *Mine for keeps. Spring begins in March* is about Sal Copeland's younger sister Meg, the tag-along at the end of the family. After I had written *Mine for keeps,* my sister said to me, "You have written a whole book about what it is like to be a handicapped child; you should write a book about what it is like to be the sister of a handicapped child." So I did.

ROSS: Another example of doubling occurs in *Listen for the singing,* where Anna's experience is recapitulated at the end of the book with Rudi's becoming blind.

LITTLE: Yes. I felt myself, before I had finished that book, that I had done too much. Not only did I have a recapitulation that way, but when the mother at the beginning of the book won't face the fact that the war has started, Anna goes in and jerks her out of it. Then she does exactly the same thing later on when the mother won't face the fact that Rudi has enlisted. When I read the manuscript, it seemed real, but when I went away from the manuscript it seemed too contrived. I got very unsure about it, and wrote my editor offering to change the two scenes with the mother at the last minute. She usually wants me to change a book long after I think that it is perfect. But this time she thought that it was fine. With a mixture of uneasiness and relief I left it.

ROSS: Is that still how you feel?

LITTLE: I'm not sure. When I'm looking at it from outside, I see these climactic scenes which seem repetitious. But when I read the book, there is so much else in between linking the scenes that the balance is much better. It is true too that in our lives, we reenact certain behavioural patterns with others. But

in the book, if you are going to make the characters fully rounded, you have to give them more than one trait. You also want to show their growth in response to the events in the book.

ROSS: Yes, this is especially true when a character shows up again in another book. What readers want to see in a sequel is some other aspect or facet of the character as revealed in a new situation.

LITTLE: One thing that fascinated me was how Rudi changed in *Listen for the singing.* I began to see inside him at the end of *From Anna.* Until that point he was obnoxious, but I eventually came to understand him. He became a likable person in *Listen for the singing.*

ROSS: An element of form that you mentioned earlier is narrative method. The only one of your books to use first person narration is *Kate.*

LITTLE: That happened in an interesting way. As my editor Ellen, who is Jewish, became more important to me, Kate, who is also Jewish, became more important to Emily. In *Look through my window* I enjoyed writing four poems for Kate. Later I wrote forty-five more poems for Kate and sent them to Ellen, not for a book but just for fun. All of a sudden I realized one morning that the poems were turning into a novel. They were getting longer and longer, and new characters like Sheila Rosenthal were emerging in the poems. I decided to write a book. Because the poems were all in the first person, the book began in the first person. I started it on a Monday and finished it — about sixty-seven pages — on a Wednesday. Wednesday morning I got a letter from Ellen which said, "Dear Jean, I think Kate wants to write a book of her own. Think about it. Love, Ellen." Everything that matters in the final book was there in the first draft. I enjoyed writing it in the first person, and I have toyed with writing other books that way. But it is limiting. There are exciting things that you can do through first person narrative but there are lots of things that you can't do. In the first person, the narrator must always be on the scene. It is harder to show other people's viewpoints. Even though you may stay within the consciousness of one character in the third person, it is easier to show what other people think than it is when writing in the first person.

ROSS: Before we leave our discussion of *Kate,* let me say that there is a very special child in that book — Susanna. At the beginning of the book, she is almost one of those children who are not quite children; as she is skipping, she becomes part of the chant that she sings.

LITTLE: Like those half-myth children that L.M. Montgomery has. I agree. Susanna becomes a poem rather than a child almost as if by magic.

ROSS: Like Dickon in *The secret garden.*

LITTLE: Yes, Dickon is definitely like that.

ROSS: You wanted Susanna to be a magic character?

LITTLE: Yes, I did. At the beginning. I think that she always remains a bit like that for Kate. Even when Kate sees her in the distance, she seems to be floating. I suppose too I was having Susanna balance off Sheila because Sheila

was so nasty.

ROSS: There you get the doubles again. The sisters Sheila and Susanna, with the two S names, seem like opposites but they are not really opposites. Kate sees one as wonderfully attractive and magic and the other as just awful, but by the end they could be considered as two sides of the same character. In romance, the design of opposites and doubles would probably be much nearer to the surface. But in a work of realism. . .

LITTLE: Both of them move to the middle. Yet I don't want to have all the characters completely explained. A lot of people are very complicated and there are some people who will remain enigmas to you always. There should be people like that in books too. The heroine or the hero shouldn't be able to understand everybody. But somehow in my books I can't make that theory work very well. I have this problem with my villains. I cast persons as villains and I don't want to be bothered understanding them. But against my will I come to understand them a little bit and of course then they get nicer.

ROSS: I like Susanna's being a magic character at the beginning. But perhaps it was successful because you used first person narration: Susanna was magic because Kate saw her as magic.

LITTLE: Yes, she was magic to Kate; that's right. Her name Susanna, which is not her real name, is part of the magic too. Names are something that I do in my books consciously. I often give characters two names — a name that they are called and a nickname.

ROSS: One name that struck me was Miss Sutcliff, the wonderful English teacher in *Listen for the singing.* Were you thinking of Rosemary Sutcliff?

LITTLE: Yes, I did that on purpose. I quite often put in names of people I know and like.

ROSS: Rosemary Sutcliff said once that she has only one story. All of her stories, she said, are about a boy growing up and finding himself and finding his soul in the process and achieving the aim he set out to achieve or else not achieving it. And other writers too, like Lucy Boston, have said that they have one story that they tell. It seems to me that to some extent this may be true of your books as well. I want to try this idea out on you and see what you think. In your books there is a conflict between two states of mind. One state of mind is represented in the books by images of being shuttered in: characters try to protect themselves from hurt or rebuff by closing themselves off from others. Examples are Piet in *Mine for keeps* and Mr. Lloyd, Rudi, and Anna in *Listen for the singing.* The other state of mind is the opposite: the wall is broken down or the character comes out of her shell, or the character reaches out to others and takes risks.

LITTLE: Yes. I think that is true. In my books I'm saying, without preaching, that it is really all right to move out — out of the shuttered-in world. My characters move, but each does it differently. And some characters are much less locked in than others. In *Look through my window,* one reviewer said that

Emily was a withdrawn only child. I don't think that she was withdrawn at all. That is ridiculous. She hadn't been part of a large family, that was all.

ROSS: This is the business of the reviewer trying to fit the book into the "problem" mould!

LITTLE: The other day I heard Monica Hughes being introduced, and the person introducing her said, "We just love her books. The latest book, *Hunter in the dark* — well, it's almost a *problem* book!" She couldn't believe that someone who would write fantasy would actually write a *problem* book. But of course, in fantasy, the realism and the problems are still there. People don't look enough for the fantasy in realism and for the realism in fantasy. We are too prone to sort books out, not only with labels like "bibliotherapy" but also with labels like "fantasy."

ROSS: We have been talking about your using a pattern of images in your books. Are you conscious of the images forming patterns as you are writing?

LITTLE: I know on one level, but don't on another. When I heard Monica Hughes talk about her writing, I found out that for her the process is highly structured. She has ten chapters, she plans the book before she writes, and she has three points of crisis, each one mounting from the one before. I sat there feeling totally traumatized because I just don't do that. But then I looked at the books and realized that I was doing almost exactly the same thing. That is what has to happen, to some extent, for the book to work. But I am not doing it with that kind of structural awareness from the very beginning. The book has to go through rewriting after rewriting. Things are thrown out. The book dictates its own shape. Then I see a pattern emerging. However, now I see much sooner than I used to which symbols are becoming important, and also I find titles much sooner. I have written a short novel for younger children, for seven, eight and nine-year-olds. It's called *Lost and found.* The opening sentence from the very first time I wrote it was, "Lucy Bell felt lost." It is about a child who finds a lost dog, but she also is lost herself. From the very beginning, I knew it was a double thing. The dog was lost but so was the child, and they both had to be found. That is the kind of pattern that you were talking about earlier.

ROSS: There is another quotation from Rosemary Sutcliff that I would like to ask you about. She says that all writers with an interest in their work which goes beyond the bread and butter level are aware of some kind of aim — something that they are trying to do. She says that this is especially true, or ought to be true, of people who are writing for the young. Is there something that you are trying to do?

LITTLE: I think what she says is true. You find yourself backing off, because when you try to tell what your aim is you tend to sound didactic. What I am trying to say through my books is that there is humanity in other kids and in parents; and that all these people are real. And then I am trying to share with them some of my own feelings of excitement about living. That living is a Yes

thing rather than a No thing. I often have characters starting off finding that life is very much a No experience — as you say, a shut-out, lost, lonely experience. I am trying to say, "I understand that, but if you could move toward a fuller, a more giving experience, you would be happier and you would be living more deeply."

ROSS: When I was talking to you on the phone, I said how happy I was to see that article of yours in *CCL* in 1975, "But what about Jane?" because it confirmed my hunch that you must have read and enjoyed L.M. Montgomery when you were growing up. When I was growing up, the L.M. Montgomery books were the only ones that I read that described an environment that was anything like my own. Children in books were usually going out to nurse the poor, or learning how to sail. The feelings that the children had might resemble my own, but hardly ever their external circumstances. So I appreciated the L.M. Montgomery books. It seems to me that your books are doing the same thing for my daughter that the Montgomery books did for me. Do you get this response from children?

LITTLE: I get fan mail largely from the States, but some mail from Canada too and many of the Canadian children mention this. If I had come upon my books in the middle of all those other books — *Little women* and *Swallows and amazons* — I would have been startled by the realism. But now there are so many books that reflect children's experience. It is not the place names that really matter; it's what happens. I have been criticized for the fact that the big decisions in the books seem so often to have been made by adults; but that is one of the realities of being a child. Yet Monica Hughes said something the other day that helped me with my new book. I realized that the child should be at least partially responsible for the problems she must face. In the best books that I have written, the problem has come from the child as well as from the outside. In *Kate,* it is her own prejudice that she is struggling with as well as with her father's problems. One of the things that I have trouble with is freeing my children from today's highly scheduled lives so that they can take part in the plot. In *Swallows and amazons* and all those books the children have unlimited time. But these days children's time is so structured, and I try to write out of their reality. Things have to happen in a world in which many decisions are made for them and the lives they lead are very, very structured. That's tricky.

ROSS: I remember as a child enjoying books in which the parents get killed off right away on the first page.

LITTLE: I do, too. In *Look through my window* I have the Sutherland children's mother getting T.B. and off she goes. In *Take wing* I have the mother breaking her leg. I may have other adults, new adults, move in. But that is different from the children's being with the same old grownups they have been with all along. The aunt can't find out everything fast enough.

ROSS: Aunt Jessica does a pretty good job of finding out, all the same!

LITTLE: I try to move the adults out of the centre. Rumer Godden once said that if there was a terribly important sentence to be said you *must* have a child say it. I realized how often I had made the mistake of having an adult come out with the insight. It has to come from the children. It may come through the adult, but it has to be rediscovered by the children.

ROSS: Have you ever had pressure from American publishers to make your settings more American?

LITTLE: Very little. When I first wrote, I had mentioned C.G.I.T. and they wrote back and asked me to make it Campfire Girls. I replied, "There aren't any Campfire Girls here." I have often deliberately, with their help, found a word that is acceptable in both places. For instance, I've talked about running shoes and they've talked about sneakers. We do talk about sneakers here too and so I changed. Over and over I find that there is a word that can be understood by both, and I settle for that. I look for the word that as many children as possible will understand, although I do try to use interesting and different ones. The publishers have never asked me to set the books any other place. People will sometimes say that their books have not been published in the States because the books are regionally based. But every book has a region behind it. I don't think that having a regional Canadian setting has anything to do with why a book is not published in the States.

ROSS: When I read about Riverside in your books, it seemed like Guelph to me.

LITTLE: Well, it is. I didn't realize that there was a Riverside in Ontario near Windsor. I decided to invent a place so that readers wouldn't say "Oh, that is so and so in Guelph." I was driving by Riverside Park in Guelph and I thought, Riverside is a nice name. But now I can't change it. One of the things that I liked as a child was finding a mention of a character who had been important in another book. So I do that. In *One to grow on,* they buy Jane a bicycle from the Copelands — Meg's old bicycle. I link the books by including the name of a character from another book. Kids write me and say that they love encountering a character that they had read about earlier. So I have to keep putting books in Riverside. I can't move *all* the characters to another place. But Riverside is just as Guelph as Guelph can be.

ROSS: You have had your books translated into what — Danish, German, Japanese. . . ?

LITTLE: Danish, German, Dutch, Japanese, and French. Almost all of them are translated into Dutch.

ROSS: The Jensen family in *Mine for keeps* and *Spring begins in March* might be one reason for the Dutch translation. And the translation into German is not surprising in view of *From Anna* and *Listen for the singing.*

LITTLE: They are not translating *Listen for the singing* into German. They said that they didn't think German children were knowledgeable enough about history, which I thought was an interesting sidestep. The book has all the history

a reader would need to know included in it. The other reason they gave for not doing the translation was because of all the Emily Dickinson poems, which would be a problem to translate. It is interesting that this one book has been translated into French and Dutch without any problem. However, there is a lot of poetry in the book; there is "Flanders Fields."

ROSS: Another Guelph touch! John McCrae was from Guelph. Have you ever been dissatisfied with the translations?

LITTLE: When *Mine for keeps* was translated into Japanese, I looked at the pictures, and there was Sal without crutches. I got someone to translate, and the name of the books was *Sayonara matsubazue*, which means "goodbye to the crutches." They had completely changed the ending. I made such a fuss that they let the book go out of print. Very very few times are there those kinds of endings for any handicapped child. It is hard on children if they find their reality in a book distorted by a sentimental ending. One of the points that was major to me about the book was that although she still walked on crutches it did have a happy and fulfilling ending. But the happy ending had nothing to do with her throwing her crutches away. The translator said, "It was for children, and I couldn't bear that it didn't have a happy ending." Well, I thought that it did have a happy ending, a very happy ending.

ROSS: Getting back to your *CCL* article "But What About Jane," you make some comments there that seem to have some relation to your own writing. One comment was, "Montgomery also remembered exactly what it was to be a child."

LITTLE: I try to. I remember when I started. When I was eight, I was going to Toronto to see a skin specialist. It was in winter. Mother woke me up early, and brought me an orange to eat. She had it all in little segments, and I arranged them on the windowsill. I was sitting there looking at them, and they looked like little boats. Suddenly I thought — and this was the first time that I thought this — that when I was grown up, or even a week later, I wouldn't remember them, sitting there on the windowsill. I sat there and I thought I *will* remember. When I am grown up, I will make myself remember all the rest of my life the orange pieces on this windowsill. Of course I have. And then I started doing it deliberately, somehow feeling that I was going to lose something very precious if I didn't remember. Over and over from the time I was eight on, I purposely remembered such kinds of things — just little sensations. I didn't do it to be a writer, but I think it has been a great help to me that I did do that. It is interesting to me — the things that you remember that won't turn into fiction and the things that you remember that will. Some of the things are very evanescent moments, but they are the ones that will make the book come alive.

ROSS: You take the remembered incident, but then you give it to someone else — a character in a book.

LITTLE: Which transforms it. But it makes it more true. When you transform

a moment of reality and put it into fiction, then you have made it true in the way that the past is not. The past is past and forgotten, but literature lasts. When my nephew Martin was six and my niece Allison was five, they were at the table one day. She was a slow eater. I had put a big napkin around her neck, and she looked down at herself and said, "I look like Madeline." I said, "You're not like Madeline. Madeline would eat her dinner, and you just poke, poke, poke." My nephew said, "You're wrong. You open the Madeline book in ten years, and Madeline will still be eating, but Allison will be finished." I tell children that this is one of the magical things about books that if you make a friend in a book, you can go back and the friend will still be there, just as Madeline is still eating.

ROSS: Do you get a lot of letters and responses from children in workshops?

LITTLE: Yes. A child asked me: how does it feel to be a blind person? I'm always being asked about being blind. Yet I had trouble with this question. You don't feel that you are a blind person. You feel that you are you. And sometimes you trip over the fact that you are blind when it gives you some difficulty and you are aware of it. Most of the time you are just living. But the question was presuming that if you were a blind person you had different feelings, and that was interesting. I've talked about that topic with kids since, using that question as a starting point.

ROSS: Have there been other interesting questions from children?

LITTLE: The hardest question that I was ever asked by anybody including you was asked me by a child in second grade. She said, "Miss Little, How do you know how to do it [writing]?" I tried hard to answer, saying, "You read good books and try to do it the same." When I got all through, she said, "I know that, Miss Little, but how do you know how to do it?" I would answer again, and she would say, "Yes, I see that, but how do you know how to do it?" Finally I realized that this was the big mystery; this is what I don't know either. I know how to write, but I don't know how I know how to write.

Published fiction by Jean Little

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Jean Little

Rosemary Sutcliff