

# My own imagined world: a panel of three authors

*Sandra Price* (moderator); *Marianne Brandis*; *Jean Little*; *Barbara Greenwood*

## **Sandra Price:**

Marianne Brandis, Jean Little, and Barbara Greenwood present their thoughts about the creation of imagined places that will capture readers' interests and involvement, and will also prompt and stimulate reflections on values and self.

## **Marianne Brandis: A DIFFERENT "SOMEWHERE" — THE LIVES OF WORKING CHILDREN**



Many people read books in order to discover and inhabit an imaginative world other than their own. Young readers especially do this, and they are attracted to worlds full of adventure and pleasure. But they are also interested in a type of novel which offers a very different world, one in which the characters work for wages and often lead exhausting, comfortless lives.

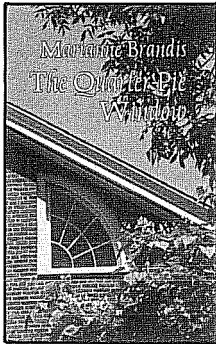
In this group are a number of historical novels. They are usually set in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, when child labour was a fact of life, and they give realistic pictures of children's working conditions. They may also deal seriously with class distinctions, with the problems faced by orphans and children at a time when social service agencies were almost non-existent, and with other aspects of the real life of that time which, put together, make up a less than attractive imaginative world.

In *The quarter-pie window*, I create such a world. The main characters, Emma and John Anderson, are orphans; how they came to be so is narrated in *The tinderbox*, the earlier novel in the series. By the end of *The tinderbox* they are in the care of Mrs. Macphail, an aunt of theirs but a stranger to them. Mrs. Macphail owns a hotel in York (Toronto): at the beginning of *The quarter-pie window* Emma, aged fourteen, becomes a chambermaid in the hotel, and John, aged ten, is put to work in a nearby livery stable.

For the period — the novel is set in 1830 — Emma's working conditions are more or less average. She works from early morning to bed-time, with an hour or two free in the afternoon if there is no other urgent work to be done. She is paid a low but not unreasonable wage. She has a small bedroom to herself, is fed adequately, and is not physically punished by either her employer or the older servants.

I put Emma to work because I wanted to explore that aspect of the life of the time. The work is presented in a matter-of-fact way, neither prettified nor laden with a heavy freight of indignation at the exploitation of children.

Other writers dealing with the subject emphasize different aspects. In *The shantymen of Cache Lake*, Freeman shows children working in a logging camp and becoming involved in the loggers' struggle to set up a union, and in *One proud summer*, by Hewitt and Mackay, the young female protagonist is shown working in the Dominion Textile factory in Valleyfield, Quebec, and then taking part in the strike of 1946. In both of these books, the main issue raised is that of the right of workers to form a union. As in *The quarter-pie window*, however, the fact of children working is taken more or less for granted.



The work done by children in these books is hard drudgery and not, in itself, appealing; it may lead to action and adventure but the children are not allowed to skimp on the labour for which they are being paid.

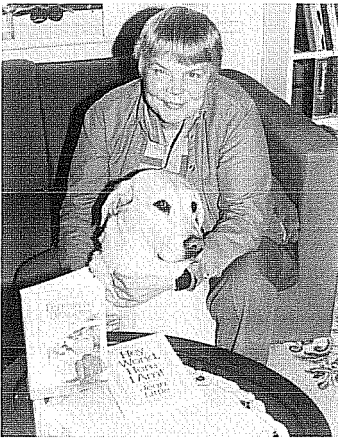
Why do modern children read books like this?

Part of the answer is, I think, that the labour and hardship are shown to have advantages and serve a purpose. By means of the job she holds, Emma meets people, both those of the lower class like her fellow servants and gentry like the hotel guests. These contacts enormously increase her knowledge of the world and help her to define her place in it. Her parents were poor but educated people; Emma thinks of them as gentlefolk, and consequently she is offended and disoriented when she is first put to work as a chambermaid. But as the book progresses, the job and the contacts she makes by means of it help her to find a place in the urban world of York, which is more complex than that of the frontier hamlet where she grew up. Furthermore, by means of the work, she acquires information which gives her a certain power and allows her to help the hotel guests who have befriended her.

Surprisingly, modern young people understand all this, even though their own lives lack both the hard labour and the benefits which Emma derives from the work. They are quite well aware that they are reading not an account of the lives of all nineteenth-century working children but a modern and fictional presentation of one such life. But they respond with

vigorous and absorbed interest to Emma's experiences and to the suggestion that work can be more than a way of earning a salary. As an instructor at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto, where I teach students in their late teens, I know that many young people nowadays feel that their lives lack purpose and scope. They acquire an education because they know that without it their prospects of employment would be poor. But they seem to regard the education, and the work for which it prepares them, more as compulsory parts of growing up than as ways of broadening their lives and providing opportunities for self-realization and creativity. Teachers who work with the slightly younger teenagers who read the books which I have been discussing tell me that their students share this feeling. The imaginative worlds presented in these novels are certainly different from the worlds which modern young people inhabit in real life. However, while the hardship of the lives of working children may not be attractive in itself, the idea that work can be useful and positive in other ways than the salary it brings is one of the aspects that gives these novels their appeal.

**Marianne Brandis** has written two historical novels, *The quarterpie window* (1985) and *The tinderbox* (1986). Both are illustrated with original wood engravings by G. Brender à Brandis, and published by *The Porcupines Quill*.



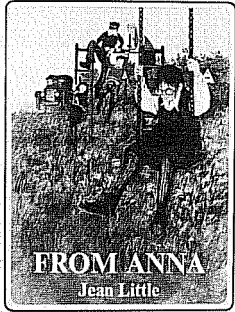
#### **Jean Little: A KEY TO THE GARDEN**

When a writer for children is asked to discuss the theme "Somewhere meant for me: realism, history and fantasy" she may wonder whether to start with the "somewhere" she discovered as a reading child or to stick to the "somewhere" she hopes reading children find in her books. In my case, I suspect the one has a direct bearing on the other although I was unaware of it as I began to write. To a lesser or a greater degree, something of the story I most loved as a child is present in every

story I myself have written.

When I was a lonely little girl, I longed to find "somewhere meant for me". I, the daughter of two medical missionaries, had lived in Taiwan and Hong Kong until I was seven. When my family returned to Canada, I spent my first year in a Sight Saving class with other visually impaired children. Then we moved to Guelph where no such special class existed. My mother was the only woman doctor in town. I was the sole child in Grade Four who

could speak “Chinese”. My poor eyesight meant I had to have extra attention from the teacher. And I was cross-eyed! Not surprisingly, I failed to find friends or a sense of belonging at school. I did, however, find both in *The secret garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett.



It was not the only book which I reread with unflinching delight. Yet no other story offered such healing, refuge, and hope. It was a lovely blend of fantasy, history and realism and I was captivated by all three.

Since *The secret garden* was published in 1911, Burnett herself was writing about a world not too far removed in time from her own. But by the time I read the book, Mary's trip to England by ship, train and horse-drawn carriage allowed me to share in an experience which was no longer possible. What was important was the fact that Burnett wrote about such events without self-consciousness. No effort was made to teach or to explain. The reader was simply placed in that other time and allowed to absorb it as naturally as Mary did. Thus, as I read, Mary's time became mine, a sometime meant for me. When I, years later, wrote my two novels set in the past, I tried to follow Burnett's example.

The “somewhere” to which the book transported me was, to an urban Canadian child, as fantastic a setting as Narnia or Middle Earth. The enormous house filled me with bliss. Everyone said our seventeen-room house was big but Misselthwaite Manor had over one hundred rooms. So many passages that you could get lost! The moor stretched all the way to the sky and was covered with flowers I had never seen. All those walled gardens over which Ben Weatherstaff ruled were incredibly vast to a child who had only a small backyard. When the author added to all this the mystery and privacy and strange beauty of that hidden garden, safe from adults, I was in heaven.

Perhaps because of my limited vision, Misselthwaite Manor is more vivid to me than most real houses I have visited. My own physical setting lacks detail. As I began to write, I wanted children to know that a child can invent or discover secret gardens closer to home than Yorkshire. So Sally Copeland in *Mine for keeps* claims a bit of unwanted ground behind her family's garage and makes it her own. The Alm Uncle's hut, Sara Crewe's bare attic, Anne Shirley's haunted wood would all still be there to enchant children but I wanted them to know that, even in an ordinary backyard, they might create a special “somewhere”.

Much as I enjoyed living in another time and taking for my own that magical garden, it was Burnett's very real people, Mary especially, who drew me back to her novel. Like many a child before and since, I saw

myself in Mary Lennox.

I had ample reason. After all, Mary starts out by coming from a faraway country. Other children tease her and leave her out of their play. Although she is not cross-eyed, you know, right from that wonderful first sentence, that she is decidedly homely. When she reaches England, nobody likes her. She is selfish and sulky and lazy. So are most children. So, definitely, was I.

Once, when we were living in Hong Kong, Mother had come into my room and found me lying back while the Amah put on my shoes. My mother made it very clear that expecting someone else to dress you, while you were capable of dressing yourself, was downright wicked. Imagine my sense of kinship with Mary when I heard her asking Martha, "Who is going to dress me?" I was not, after all, the only disgracefully indolent child in the world.

Then selfish, lazy, sulky Mary finds the key to the garden, to friendship and to her better self. I was comforted and reassured because I found that transformation entirely credible. All I had to do was keep searching for a Canadian version of Dickon, Colin and the robin. When I did, I too would have the key to the garden.

I am thankful that I was an adult before someone told me that the Canadian "robin" is a mere thrush and quite inferior to Ben Weatherstaff's cheeky friend. Perhaps Canadian children are also a different breed for, while I have met many Colins and Marys, I have yet to find a Dickon on this side of the Atlantic. I'm very much afraid that Dickon is pure fantasy.

The heroes and heroines in my books, however, are not. They lose their tempers. They are bullies sometimes. They grumble. They are lazy and they are afraid. They are like Mary and me. They are also kind, joyous, helpless with laughter, brave, generous and even industrious. In these moments, too, they resemble Mary and myself. My hope is that children reading the stories will feel as closely akin to them, as I still do to Mary, and will know that this particular somewhere is intended for them.

**Jean Little** of *Guelph*, has added an autobiography, *Little by Little to her series of novels, the latest of them being Different dragons.*

### **Barbara Greenwood: SOMEWHERE — IN THE CANADIAN PAST**

Both as reader and writer, I have always found the "somewhere meant for me" not in real places but in the imaginary places found in books. Looking more closely at my long-ago dreams and fantasies I realize they almost always took me into the past.

As I pondered how this all started I remembered my Grade 2 teacher



reading the class a book called *Smiling Hill Farm*. I've never been able to find the book in any library and I'm sure it wasn't wonderful literature but to this day I can call up images of its pioneer family climbing into a covered wagon and the slow journey through the woods of Indiana to *their* special place — the hill on which to build first a log cabin, in later years a larger frame house, and finally a brick house. I entered fully into that special place and it coloured my day-dreams — those precursors to every writer's written stories — for years. The books I chose for

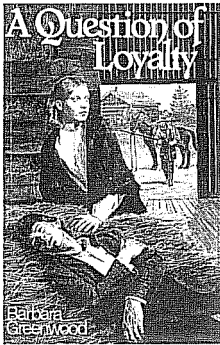
myself were all set in the past. In Grades 3 and 4 I followed the Oregon Trail, was captured by Indians, rode with the cattle ranchers and built railroads. Later, through the magic of books, I found myself in English castles or gypsy wagons, even on Chinese junks.

One place I never found myself on these story-trips was in Canada's past and by the time I was in my teens I wanted to know "Why not?". I knew interesting events had taken place here. I lived in Toronto near Eglinton and Yonge. Almost every day I passed the post office with its blue and gold plaque that tells of Mackenzie and his rebels gathering at Montgomery's Tavern before their brave but fruitless march down Yonge Street to try to wrest their rights from the Family Compact. The story fascinated me and that earlier Yonge Street of mud and wild emotion became for me a very special place. Here was something of my own country and no one had written about it. That special place lay fallow in my imagination for many years before I tried to make it live for others as it lived for me.

When I decided to write and asked myself that all-important question "What shall I write about?" it seemed natural that I should set my stories in the past, and even more natural that I should set them in Canada's past.

Of course, I wanted to be published. Did it make any sense, then, to write an historical novel for children? Isn't it received wisdom that children don't read historical fiction? My experience as a teacher and a mother told me that children read any story that catches their imaginations. Therefore my job as a writer was to create a story that would engage their interest despite its historical setting.

I was now committed. The next task was to decide *how* to do it. Stories are about characters in conflict. The Mackenzie Rebellion offers many such situations. My book, *A question of loyalty*, centres on a family who find a wounded rebel in the barn and then have to choose between the safe and politically correct action and a dangerous but humanitarian one. Having found the conflict, the heart of my story, I had to "dress the set", create the place. My research into the period showed that many of the rebels tried



to escape across the Niagara River. Common sense suggested keeping the story in a compact geographical setting, so I have my rebel, Dan Peterson, take refuge in a barn near the village of Queenston, the one point at which the river is narrow and calm enough for a person to row across in a small boat.

I visited the area to establish in my mind the “lay of the land”, but I also needed the “feel” of the times. Novelists build “place” detail by sensory detail. What did it feel like, smell like, taste like, sound like in a farmhouse in the 1830’s? Several years earlier, as the mother of four children aged five to fifteen, I had needed an oasis of peace and quiet in a life of bustle and noise. Because of my interest in Canada’s pioneers, I found that oasis in our local museum, Gibson House. As a volunteer guide I spent an afternoon a week dressed in 1850’s costume sitting in the front parlour doing embroidery, churning butter in the kitchen, helping with the baking, learning to spin. I literally took the feel of that house, those olden times, in through my ears, eyes, and fingers. That experience was invaluable in creating the Wallbridge home. Also, because I needed to know what each member of a farm family would do from dawn until dusk, I read diaries of the times, making lists of everyday jobs and activities. This kind of primary research is what the historical novelist needs to build a book’s “special somewhere”.

Having created the place for my story, having made myself comfortable in the Niagara Peninsula of the 1830’s, I found it best to let the research sift to the bottom of my mind. As I put my characters on stage, as Deborah Wallbridge went out to the barn one morning, found the rebel Dan Peterson and began to make the choices that were to involve her family in their flirtation with treason, I found that, out of all the information I had collected both sensory and factual, the right detail would separate itself from the mass to highlight a scene: Deborah snarling the thread she was spinning as she listened to Dan’s story; or her mother fishing in the bake oven with a bread peel just as unwanted company arrives; or the look of the candle at the end of a dark and frightening lane when Deborah is being chased through the woods. The skill in creating that special place in the past was not so much in collecting information as in stripping it away so that background details enhanced rather than smothered the story. The essence of every story, after all, is the people and the conflicts with which they have to wrestle.

**Barbara Greenwood** lives in Don Mills. She published *A question of loyalty* with Scholastic Inc.