

My books, and my life

Helen Forrester

Résumé: *N'ayant jamais vraiment voulu écrire pour les enfants, Helen Forrester explique son ambivalence devant un public lecteur qui en est venu à apprécier ses oeuvres, sans les comprendre tout à fait.*

I have first 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. They can, also, be read on several levels; they are not on the whole sexually explicit, nor have I exploited violence. And that is a relief to a lot of grown-ups trying to find something for teens to read.

The four books which I wrote about my own life are *Twopence to cross the Mersey*, *Minerva's stepchild* (in paperback, *Liverpool Miss*), *By the waters of Liverpool*, *Lime Street at two*.

I must tell you that I only intended to write one short book about my life. But reader interest, expressed in hundreds of letters, was intense; so my publishers put on a lot of pressure, until I agreed to write something more. The result was four books, the first one published in 1974. All of them are still selling many thousands a year.

Judging by the children's letters to me, there is much they miss in my books. It's quite curious. In these books, *children* see a girl deprived of everything they take for granted, and most of them are very shaken by it; a lot of them write to tell me how moved they were by the stories. They do *not* see what a damning indictment of society the books are!

For example, though my father drew welfare money for me, and I was the child always at home when the Public Assistance Officer came to count heads and make sure neither parent was working, none of our official visitors cared that I was only eleven and should, therefore, by law be at school.

So a very studious child was deprived of basic education. Only the local librarians knew me--we had a tiny Carnegie library in the district and its books were very tattered. They saved books for me, but they were not about to interfere with a family where both parents were obviously very well-educated and *upper class*, despite their shabbiness. As it was, the books they recommended fed a growing mind--admittedly in a very haphazard way, but it kept me from atrophying completely. A surprising number of young readers do not

seem to understand at all this kind of mental starvation.

In my books, I do not tell of the pain of physical starvation, not much of the terrible lethargy that under-feeding breeds. (Incidentally, the starving rarely riot; it is the semi-starving who take to the streets). In writing, I assumed that my adult readers would know about this--and, indeed, many of my generation do, and their letters are a frightful confirmation of all of which I wrote. Adults do sometimes recognise the pain of it, because they have correctly interpreted scenes of starvation shown on T.V. They really *see* and feel the suffering and understand the consequential illnesses.

Again, youngsters do not always understand the pain of being an outcast, first in one's own family, and, secondly, from one's *class*--British class, which grows more stiff-necked every year. If children understood fully what ostracisation really means, they would be much kinder to children who differ from them, either in colour or physical disability or in dress--because not all kids are little savages. So most of them miss this in my books. I imagine that it is almost impossible to describe it to a Canadian, because society here is fairly egalitarian--unless, of course, you are black, or Vietnamese or wear a turban--or are very old and frail.

Many children would understand the pain of losing a mother; few child readers comprehend the bereavement I felt at the loss of my Nanny, the closest I ever had to a real mother. We moved so much that she left us when I was seven; likewise my grandmother was cut off from me when I was eleven, and I was an adult before I understood why. The books contain only hints of this, a hint being enough for a good adult reader.

Like Charlotte Brontë, I am a very passionate woman who approaches sexual passion obliquely. I could have exploited the loss of my first fiancé, the first person to whom I gave absolute trust, the first person to whom I was truly bonded, like a newborn child is bonded to a loving mother. To have to bear that loss silently and alone, because he was a Catholic and I was a Protestant--I would have received no sympathy from my Protestant parents; they would have regarded it as a Judgement on me, in a city which was, then, like Belfast is today, riven down the middle. Had I felt able to write much about it, I think I would have lost the children's market; the books would have been too painful. As it was, it marked my own life forever.

Incidentally, only very recently, near the end of my life, am I able to look at it squarely and realise how much my life was enriched by an ordinary, but intelligent Liverpool seaman, who had himself faced some extraordinary situations, and was, at that time, in daily fear of his life, once he sailed over the bar; and, indeed, when he was in port since we were already being bombed. He was a man who had seen a lot and seemed to know how people ticked. You know, Charlotte Brontë, in writing *Jane Eyre*, did not have to use a single sexy word to express a passion which has never been exceeded in subsequent books--and neither did I. Young kids would not see it, but adults do.

In friendly Canada, it is hard for a child to visualise having no friends. I do not mention much my lack of friends, little girls to giggle with, to look at boys with, to play with. I got few chances to play with anyone, and none in Liverpool. To this day, I cannot *play* anything, except Snakes and Ladders--which is sufficient for my little grandson. Because we were isolated in the country, I played with the brother next to me, who is also singularly lacking in social arts. Both of us are great readers--one of the few good things I can say about my parents is that they let us read whatever we liked; I suspect they simply did not care. In those days, of course, the gutter press stayed in the gutter or in locked drawers; it was not on library shelves, as it is today, in the name of freedom of speech! And Penny Dreadfuls were known for what they were--amusing garbage.

When I was older and had six cents to spend, the things I did for pleasure were late night ones that could be done after my brothers and sisters had been put to bed, or after night school. I danced--everybody danced in the 1930s; I went to the theatre, sitting so far up in the Gods that the actors looked a couple of inches tall; and I went to the late night cinema show, which began about 9.30. Or I had a late night coffee with Sylvia, the friend mentioned in my books --we used to put the world to rights for hours and hours over a single cup of coffee. Incidentally, my latest book, *Yes, Mama*, is dedicated to her; she died last year and her loss nearly broke me. Yet there was a barrier between Sylvia and me, a kind of polite no-no land, where we did not touch much on our private lives. I can't quite explain this, but it might be, in part, that I was ashamed to share with her the desperate shifts to which my family and I were put, to survive. Also, my life had made me a very private person. So altogether, I do not have much to draw on to write about children's relationships, for children.

When I was writing these books, I was very careful to *underwrite*. I thought, "Younger generations are not going to believe this, so I must be careful, not be too passionate about the family's and my sufferings."

I think it was well that I was so circumspect; the books might have been unbearable to read, like some of those on the Holocaust are. You can be so sad, so precise in descriptions of suffering that you turn the reader off! They can't bear it either--and they feel guilty, in a roundabout way.

Writing about oneself is not at all an easy operation. Many beginner writers think that they have a unique experience in their lives, and that it should be easy to write a book about it. But it ain't necessarily so! I wrote and published three successful novels before writing about myself.

One must understand first the construction of a book and how to keep the reader turning the pages, no matter whether you are writing a novel, an autobiography, or a travel book or a treatise on a railway system.

This knowledge may, of course, already be safely lodged in the subconscious mind of an omnivorous reader; but the careful dissection of a few books on

similar subjects can be illuminating to a would-be writer.

I learned to read, almost as I learned to talk, between three and four years of age, and I have been reading hard ever since. And I am still learning about authorship.

Sometimes, an innocent question or remark sparks an alteration in style. For example, my son was kindly checking the manuscript of *Three women of Liverpool* for typing errors, when he asked casually, "How do you make a coal fire?"

One of the characters in the book was building the first fire of the day while she spoke, and I had given no details of exactly what she was doing. In consequence, he was unable to visualise the scene. In his centrally-heated world, he had never seen something which I could do in my sleep!

I realized, again, that what was obvious to me was not necessarily obvious to a younger generation, and I immediately rewrote the chapter. And a man brought up with gas central heating had no conception of the *slavery* of coal fires!

I have been very careful of this type of thing ever since, particularly now that I have a devoted younger readership for *all* my books.

Once, when I was talking to a Grade Five class, I realized that the children had no idea what it was like to be verminous--which half the world is every day of its life. In the books on my life, I had taken for granted that most people had had some exposure to vermin--for example, head lice were quite common even in the middle classes, when I was a girl, or a flea or even a bug or a louse could be picked up whilst travelling in a train. But such an experience is very rare nowadays. I had to explain to them in detail what these little creatures are, how they lived on one's blood by biting or even burrowing under one's skin, how some of them were carried into our houses by the ever-present rats and mice.

I had to explain to them how their bites itched maddeningly; how one scratched them until the skin broke; how lack of water, and dirty surroundings, meant that you caught impetigo or scabies very easily--or staph infections--in the opened skin, and could become covered with sores--and that there was no doctor to come to your rescue. Only the pharmacist, the poor person's friend, would take a look at your sores and sell you a two-cent tin of zinc ointment or sulphur ointment, if you *had* two cents to pay him with. He might also suggest shaving your head or rubbing your hair with paraffin. It didn't do much good, I explained to the kids, because miles and miles of housing were infected with bugs, fleas and lice, and rats and mice. I have woken up in the night to see my whole bed swarming with cockroaches.

I think the children thought I was telling them a tall story; but they were horrifiedly scratching themselves by the time I had finished! I bet a few mothers wondered why some of them were suddenly so upset when they got a mosquito bite, poor little lambs!

Times, thank goodness, have changed for the better in the west. But if we are going to write for youngsters we should remember that they do not know what we know. We should remember it, even if the children make us feel we are doddering idiots, because we can't use a computer or are afraid of being bitten by the garburator!

Younger writers, tempted to write about themselves for the benefit of teens, might bear the same advice in mind. They can cut themselves off from a lucrative and well-heeled older readership, by using current slang or loosely bandying about new words like byte, capslock, launch window, ejector, contacts, without making their meaning clear.

I have been asked a number of times if I would write a book specifically for young adults, but I always refuse, because I cannot imagine a thirteen-plus being anything but an adult in full--not just a young adult. The reason is that by the time I was twelve, I was, perforce, grown up, a street arab in a great port, with tremendous responsibilities for a young family which had to be fed on a minute budget, and so were a lot of my contemporaries. They were already in the workplace as bound apprentices and there were others allowed by the Education Committee to leave school early, because they would starve if they were not allowed to work.

Finally, I would just like to add that I always hope that young people will learn from their teachers and school librarians that books are not simply something on the reading list to be got through, somehow, but that they are meant to give pleasure and relief from the day-to-day worries of life; that they can expand their ideas about the world and enable them to deal better with their life. They can be a welcome opiate which does no bodily harm; they can open doors into unknown worlds.



I had *not* expected that the books about my life would inspire young people. But I have had some touching letters telling me that my life *has* inspired them to try again, bless them. I always reply to them and continue to write until their letters seem more cheerful, and, just perhaps, I saved one or two from hanging themselves.

Helen Forrester of Edmonton used the story of her own early life in Liverpool in *Twopence to cross the Mersey and its three sequels*. Her *Someday, Mama* has been on recent bestseller lists here and in England.

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