

Profile: The Accidental but Fortuitous Career: Cora Taylor, Children's Writer

• Bonnie Ryan-Fisher •



Cora Taylor (in the picnic area of her acreage)

Résumé: Dans une entrevue décontractée, Cora Taylor nous parle de son oeuvre romanesque pour la jeunesse, du monde de l'édition et de l'équilibre fragile entre les nécessités de la vie familiale et celles de sa carrière d'écrivain et d'enseignante.

Summary: Cora Taylor responded to my request for an interview with the invitation to have lunch at her office in Edmonton. I arrived to find a cluttered, friendly apartment office with an incredible view of the river valley. Over the next several hours we shared coffee, food, and rambling conversation about Taylor's writing, about marketing and publishers, about her family, friendships, and making a home, about her teaching and her students, about her dreams and goals, and her often breathtakingly busy schedule. This article is drawn from almost half a day of talk.

It was the luckiest thing that could be," Cora Taylor says of her accidental entry into the field of children's literature. Her first book, *Julie*, had its beginnings in a dream and, like most of her books, in a character. The fragment of dream, of a child standing on a hill watching ships coming across the prairie, was jotted down in a bedside notebook and left to rest. But the feeling lingered: "The feeling of the beauty of these ships coming across the fields and also the incredible sadness because she couldn't tell anyone ... What would happen if she told people?"

A couple of years later, the fragment was resurrected when Taylor took a course with Rudy Wiebe and began searching for short story material. Two surprising things happened then. Taylor, who says she always had difficulty

getting short stories long enough, found that she had a story that wouldn't stop. "This one went on to thirty pages," she says, "and I was arbitrarily having to end it." And Julie was taking over. "This character and her point of view was so much more interesting and the others were being pushed into bit parts ... I was worried, and I think I even said to Rudy at one point 'This is starting to sound like a children's book....'"

Taylor had not begun with the idea of writing for children. In fact, she had the idea that no one takes children's literature seriously. She had no background in the field beyond her introductory course in children's literature at university which covered no Canadian authors and only one living author, E.B. White (who has since died).

Yet *Julie* exploded on the Canadian children's literature scene in 1985, beginning its incredible journey to fame when it was a finalist in the Alberta Writing for Youth Competition, later published by Prairie Books, taking numerous awards including the Canada Council Award for Children's Literature. It has been published in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA, and translated into Swedish and Dutch. Taylor says that *Julie* and her second book, *The Doll*, are still the ones most familiar to the school audiences she often visits.

Yet, that *Julie* was published as a children's book at all was a surprise to the author. Begun as her master's thesis and intended as an adult novel, the manuscript was put on hold when Taylor's husband was diagnosed with a serious heart condition. The arbitrary deadline of December 30, for the Writing for Youth Competition in 1984, allowed her to finally focus, seven years after the novel's beginning, and bring it to a close. At that time Alberta Culture sponsored two writing competitions and alternated the years. Taylor sent the manuscript off half expecting to have it returned as unsuitable for the youth category. Instead, it was a finalist.

Taylor feels that part of the secret of *Julie's* success can be traced to the rules she broke in writing it, including not using "pabulum words" for her young readers. *Julie* was written as an adult novel that just happened to have a young protagonist. Taylor says that she was suddenly called upon to speak to a variety of groups across the country on children's literature, while she was still trying to understand just what children's literature was herself.

She began *The Doll*, her second novel, believing that she was writing a book about reincarnation. In a conversation at the Children's Book Centre, she recalls being told "You're writing a time travel, you know. It's a genre." Suddenly she stopped and read dozens of time travel books in the middle of the writing process. Taylor says she is glad that she did this because it helped her to solidify her own ideas. Time travel is not just adventure to her. The experiences of the past must impact upon the present, must change the way the character lives her life in the present. Once again, character is the impetus.

With five novels to her credit now, Taylor has not changed her mind about the importance of character. Her 1994 book, *Summer of the Mad Monk*, is built around the character of Pip, a young boy growing up in a prairie town. Pip's character began in the stories her late husband would tell her of his own

prairie childhood. In fact the story began before her husband's death. It was to be her next novel after *The Doll*. "[T]hat one was based on his life and his childhood and I knew I couldn't work on it right away." Taylor's personal favourite among her books to date, *Summer of the Mad Monk* was voted Book of the Year for Children by the Canadian Library Association.

Asked about the relationship between biography or autobiography and her writing, Taylor smiles. "I remember reading C.S. Lewis talking about his writing, that he saw it and wrote what he saw. Whereas, I just have a character and then move from body to body so each of them is going to contain a lot of bits of me": bits of Taylor and other significant people in her life. Her grandmother, who was the model for the grandmother in *The Doll*, was a very important person in her life. The grandmother in the book Taylor is currently writing is a cross between "Mrs. Polifax and Auntie Mame," she says, but is also the kind of grandmother Taylor would like to be. The relationship between truth and fiction is an interesting one for her. She recalls her own difficulty making adjustments to the truth when she first began writing about the family of her own great grandparents. They had five children and so she used five children in her story. One turned out to be totally superfluous. "When you're teaching creative writing, this is a major thing for people to be able to jump from the truth into playing with the idea of fiction.... You start with something based on something and it takes awhile to want to make adjustments." Yet, "things that work best are things based on truth you didn't realize. They sort of drift in and then you think, oh yeah that was based on such and such."

This subconscious work is something Taylor is particularly good at. Her characters live. Their lives are real and their experiences touch readers. However, she admits to some surprise at what touches her readers sometimes. In two separate instances, school children reading *The Doll* were given the assignment of creating a play, a scene from the book. Both groups chose the scene where Meg talks to her parents about their divorce. Taylor had never considered *The Doll* as being a book about divorce and yet she concedes that she had been both parent and grandparent in these situations, worrying about the impact on the child. Perhaps it is her own warmth and intensity when it comes to feelings about family and home that underlies Taylor's success in recreating both in her novels — her laughter is fond when she speaks of writing tales around all seventeen of her grandchildren; she feels regret at missing the opportunity to hold onto some of the "Shearer family" land in Saskatchewan, which was recently sold back to the government. She admits to feeling sorrow even now about giving up "the farm" two years ago and moving into the city.

More and more, she "camps" now, living part of the time in Edmonton where she also maintains a separate, homey office, a space she has come to love. She grabs one of several prepacked suitcases as necessity dictates, travelling to do readings, writer-in-residencies, workshops, speaking engagements and the like. For two precious months each year she forgets the cold north and the bustle of her life and takes respite in California, where a diary substitutes for conversation, and she writes. *Julie's Secret* was written there, as were *Ghost Voyages* and *Summer of the Mad Monk*.

Cora Taylor takes her commitment to writing for children quite seriously now and remembering that she had once thought a book published for kids was a book no one would read, she exudes enthusiasm talking about the wonderful support network children's writers have through libraries and schools. She was once asked to do twelve readings in a Moose Jaw library and remembers thinking "Margaret Atwood couldn't get twelve readings in Moose Jaw."

She has a great deal of respect for her readers. Having learned from the success of *Julie*, she does not consciously write for a young audience, she writes for a "me" audience. And she hopes that "I'm giving in a non-preachy, teachy way some guidelines and some kind of ideals." Books also allow young people an alternative too to the extremely visual orientation of television and film. "[Those] don't bring the smells and the touch and the taste," Taylor says. "And I read somewhere that children's strongest sense is not vision. It is taste and smell. Smell particularly ... I've always really used that in my books." Perhaps it is because of this that she has mixed feelings about an upcoming film version of *The Doll*. The screen play is being done by Connie Massing and Kicking Horse is doing the movie. Taylor is certain both will do a good job. Still, she says she is dreading the first time she goes into a schoolroom and hears "We've seen the movie but we haven't read the book."

Most of all it seems that Taylor revels in the freedom that writing for youth allows her, freedom to indulge her imagination. "You know," she says, "if you wrote a novel like *Julie* for adults, about someone with ESP, it would be in the funny section in the bookstore." In her new book, *Vanishing Act*, one of the young protagonists has discovered a spell for invisibility and Taylor says, "I'm having a ball with it. When I was a kid I desperately wanted to be invisible."

She sets herself new challenges with each book, trying to do something different. *Vanishing Act* was originally conceived as a mystery. She now calls it a spy thriller. It is written from three characters' points of view. In the future she hopes to write a pure fantasy, to bring *Julie* back in a third book and perhaps to write a sequel to *Ghost Voyages*. And yes, she still plans to someday write an adult novel. "But not for awhile yet. I'd like to get ten books out before I would feel I could take the time off to do something. You know, I'm starting in a different field if I do that."

Finding home again is also one of her goals. In the whirlwind of activity, she has a dream of unpacking the boxes that still remain packed since she left the farm, unpacking them in a place on the prairies, on top of a hill with a view. "You can't lose the sky, you know."

Published Works

- Julie*. Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985.
- The Doll*. Western Producer Prairie Books, 1987.
- Julie's Secret*. Western Producer Prairie Books, 1991.
- Ghost Voyages*. Scholastic, 1992.

Summer of the Mad Monk. Douglas and McIntyre, 1994.
Vanishing Act. Red Deer College Press, 1997.

Awards

For *Julie*:

Alberta Writers' Guild, R. Ross Annett Award for Excellence in Writing for Children, 1985; Canada Council Award for Children's Literature, 1985; Runner-up for Ruth Schwartz Award, 1986; Canadian Library Association Book of the Year for Children, 1986; Children's Book Centre "Our Choice"; Short-listed on Pacific Western Library Association Award, 1988.

For *The Doll*:

Ruth Schwartz Award, 1988; Runner-up for Canadian Library Association Book of the Year for Children, 1988.

For *Julie's Secret*:

International Youth Library White Raven, 1992.

For *Summer of the Mad Monk*:

Canadian Library Association Book of the Year For Children, 1995.



Bonnie Ryan-Fisher balances stay-at-home mothering, writing, and teaching, and has published both fiction and non-fiction in many magazines in Canada, the USA and UK, as well as in several anthologies. She teaches from her home office two philosophy courses for Athabasca University and two writing courses for the Writers Guild of Alberta, and occasionally she does writing workshops at her local library. In her spare time she reads and studies Medieval History.