



Authorgraph No.132: Theresa Breslin

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Theresa Breslin interviewed by **George Hunt**.

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A palpable sense of place and of history informs all of Theresa Breslin's novels, including those which hurl their protagonists into distant realms and eras. She was brought up and still lives in Kirkintilloch, near Glasgow, where she has raised four children, and where, until two years ago, she worked as a public librarian. The sustained interaction with both local communities and amassed information that this vocation involves were some of the most powerful factors in her becoming a writer.

I worked for a long while in the mobile library, and one of our stops was at Gartcosh, a wee village really, though it did have a huge steel works. We used to stop at the shop there for our sandwiches, and there was an old fashioned primary school where the children were doing a local history project on the steel works. There was no written history to draw on, of course, so the children went out into the community to collect the stories from the older people. They learned that the the steelworks started as an ironworks over a hundred years ago, and when the war began all the men had to go to the front and the women had to stay behind to work on small armaments. Those that were painting the metal with red lead got an extra shilling or so and a pint of milk to ward off lead poisoning. When the blitz arrived the women could recognise whether the aircraft going over were enemies or friendly because of the synchronisation of the engines. We helped the children collect these stories together and to bind them into books.?

This participation in the creation of literature from the raw material of lived history and geography was later to inspire Breslin to become an author, together with the impetus she received from joining a Workers' Educational Association creative writing course in the late 1980s. One of her stories, never published, won first prize.

I knew then that I could tell a story, but I also felt at a loss because I thought that I'd told the only story I had in my head. But one of the most encouraging things the tutor said was that often the best stories are those that are going on around you all the time.?

One of the biggest stories of that time involved the wholesale de-industrialisation of the north, and its destructive effects on individuals and communities. The closure of the Gartcosh steelworks gave Breslin, and everybody else in the area, first hand experience of the human cost of mass redundancy. A number of other factors brought about her decision to write about this from a child's point of view: her first story had been told in the voice of a child; she herself had been a keen reader of romantic school stories in her own childhood, and the Sweet Valley High series was seeping into children's culture in the UK.

I know everybody's got to dream, but I thought, why not write a story set in one of our schools as it is just now, with our problems, our stories, our jokes??

The outcome was **Simon's Challenge**, a story set in a community, based on Gartcosh, in which most of the workforce

have recently been sacked. The hero of the story is a child whose father has left home, ostensibly to look for work, though it is clearly implied that he is fleeing a desperate sense of futility. Simon is left to help his mum look after his baby sister and to dream an impossible dream about owning a computer. His challenge emerges when he witnesses a robbery at a computer shop and is recruited to help track the culprit. The book won the 1987 Kathleen Fidler award (a prize specifically targeted at new authors for 8-12 year olds) and Breslin's career was underway.

Many of the themes that characterise her subsequent fiction were present in that first novel: a concern for vulnerable people; realistic depictions of locale, character and social issues; an appreciation of professional skills and techniques (in this case teaching and police work); an insistence that courage, decency and perseverance can alleviate problems, but never guarantee an entirely happy ending.

One of the most influential of the thirty odd books that have followed **Simon's Challenge** is **Bullies in School**, published in 1993, which originated in a request made to Breslin by a bullied child who wanted somebody to write about the issue. As a librarian, she was already well aware of the hurt children who used the library as a haven. The real hero of this book is Mrs Allan, the school librarian, who takes Siobhan, a victim of bullying, under her wing. During an expedition to a learning resource centre, Siobhan borrows a serpent-brooch, once belonging to a Celtic warrior-princess, which gives her the power, or at least the confidence, to defeat her tormentors. But no sooner has she successfully asserted herself against them than she begins to reflect their own cruelties back upon them. Only when the ambiguous power of the talisman is supplemented by reason and compassion is the problem uneasily resolved. This book, which contains an admirably lucid practical appendix advising children on how to deal with bullying, brought Breslin an immense amount of mail.

I had letters not just from bullied children but from siblings and other kids who hadn't realised what it feels like to be a victim. I think that this is an important point about this sort of fiction: it's not just about consoling victims, but enabling everybody to develop empathy.

It is implied in **Bullies at School** that Siobhan might be dyspraxic, and the related issue of dyslexia is at the heart of Breslin's best known book, **Whispers in the Graveyard** which won the Carnegie Prize in 1994. This was inspired by Breslin's observations of a bright and cheerful pre-school child who enjoyed the read-aloud sessions at the library, but became more and more withdrawn after starting school and realising that the stories she'd loved were trapped inside books, in a code she couldn't master. The book opens in a cemetery which is the haven for Solomon, a creative and imaginative child, full of anger at the teacher who mocks his learning difficulties, his verbally gifted but illiterate and alcoholic father, his mother who has deserted him. The story is driven by the links between these immediate anxieties and the history that binds Solomon to the dead who surround him: the graveyard is the former home of a wise-woman burned for witchcraft centuries ago, and when it is disturbed by engineers, her vengeful spirit is liberated. Breslin uses the intercession of a charismatic teacher, Ms Talmur, to braid the strands of individual psychology, community history and supernatural suspense into a compelling and convincing narrative. At the end of it, Ms Talmur has helped to restore Solomon's self-confidence, but as she leaves his life she reminds him that there will never be any easy answers for him.

Vulnerability and courage are also at the heart of **Kezzie** and **A Homecoming for Kezzie** (1995), books informed by her own family history. Beginning in a struggling mining community in 1937, they describe an orphan's search for a lost sister who has been deported to Canada under the notorious juvenile emigration scheme. The sequel opens with the advent of war, and focuses on the heroine's struggle for self-realisation during the social turmoil that accompanied the military strife.

Female perspectives on combat recur in **Death or Glory Boys**, perhaps her most controversial novel. Inspired by a close relative who entered the military after being attracted by a recruitment pitch offering cheap vodka in the mess and free boots, only to find herself to be a genuine crackshot, this is the story of four friends who embark on an army officer training scheme. The most cynical of them is a pacifist who is along for what he can learn about his ideological opponents, but it is he who is discovered to be the most promising officer. Meanwhile, the security forces are hunting down a maverick terrorist. The two stories cross when the terrorist is very nastily 'taken out' by a sniper before the eyes of the potential recruit. Breslin's appreciative descriptions of professional skill here extend to those of the marksman

and the military trainer, in a way that lead some reviewers (including the current writer) to mistake this for uncritical admiration.

?So many people didn't read that book properly. I was writing it at the time of the Gulf war, when there was all that enthusiasm for fighting. I wanted to describe what it is that leads people to find combat glamorous, and if you're writing for teenagers you've got to be honest and accurate about the attractions. It's like writing about drugs: you can say over and over and over again that it's all wrong and destructive, but they're not going to listen because they know there's another side to it. It would have been disingenuous of me, and completely futile, to have tried to write as if there was nothing alluring about the military.?

Breslin's fiction in recent years has diversified. The **Dream Master** novels (two published and one in the pipeline) still feature bullying and centre on a child with a learning problem, but Cy is a child who is able to navigate through his own dreams into adventures amongst remote civilisations, whilst running the risk of having the denizens of these dreams invade his own waking life. Breslin's passion for the connectedness of past and present, far and near, is expressed here in extravagant, lighthearted adventures arising from these collisions. Woven into the fun and wordplay are some acerbic reflections on the structure of narrative and the constraints of educational systems.

Breslin's latest novel is a more serious and substantial work. **Remembrance** (2001) is a meticulously researched account of the changes wrought by the first world war on the lives of five young people from a small community based on Kirkintilloch. Two of them are women for whom the collapse of the old order provides a means of empowerment (a theme resumed from the **Kezzie** books), while the young men, driven by complex and contradictory passions, enter the slaughter.

?I started writing the book using just the voice of the under-#8209;age recruit, but the more I learned about the war ? what really happened then was beyond belief ? the more I wanted to say, so the more voices I needed. I started writing letters between the characters, based on some real soldier's letters. They were talking about rats and starvation and bombardment, while at home the newspapers were full of absolute lies and adverts for domestic servants.?

Towards the end of the novel, there is a crucial episode when Alex, the under-age recruit, seeking vengeance for a brother killed at the Somme, levels his bayonet at the throat of a wounded German. Though Breslin completed **Remembrance** before the so-called 'war against terrorism' began, her recent visit to a writers' conference in the USA, when the possibility of Afghan and American communities communicating through literature was mooted, underlined the relevance of this episode to the current struggle. One could see Alex's choice at the point of this personal and historical confrontation ? between steel and flesh, between remorseless force and vulnerable humanity ? as a condensation of all the major concerns of Breslin's work.

Photographs courtesy of Transworld Children's Books.

George Hunt is lecturer in Education at the University of Edinburgh.

The Books

Whispers in the Graveyard, Mammoth, 0 7497 4480 4, £4.99 pbk

Kezzie, Mammoth, 0 7497 1771 8, £4.50 pbk (to be reissued in July)

A Homecoming for Kezzie, Mammoth, 0 7497 2592 3, £3.99 (to be reissued in July)

Death or Glory Boys, to be reissued by Mammoth in July.

The Dream Master, Doubleday, 0 385 41029 8, £10.99 hbk, Corgi Yearling, 0 440 86382 1, £3.99 pbk

Dream Master Nightmare!, Doubleday, 0 385 41036 0, £10.99 hbk, Corgi Yearling, 0 440 86432 1, £3.99 pbk

Remembrance, Doubleday, 0 385 60204 9, £10.99 hbk

Further information about Theresa Breslin can be found in **An Interview with Theresa Breslin**, Lindsey Fraser, Mammoth ?Telling Tales?, 0 7497 3867 7, £1.99 pbk.



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