



Authorgraph No.157: Linda Newbery

Article Author:

[Kate Agnew](#) [1]

[157](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

Linda Newbery interviewed by **Kate Agnew**.

Linda Newbery interviewed by Kate Agnew

When I meet Linda Newbery in her publisher's office in Oxford on a damp, grey January day, <!--break-->the proofs of her next young adult novel are just being sent out. Linda, I am to discover, is self-effacing and unassuming, and this is a stage she hates: 'I feel nervous at the thought of anyone reading it.' She doesn't let anybody see her work until it's nearing completion and no, she doesn't like to talk about it while she's writing either. David Fickling, his rushed, chatty joviality in marked contrast to his author's quiet countenance, intercedes, 'That's the mark of a true writer?.'

And Linda Newbery is indeed a true writer. With over 30 books to her name, she has been short-listed for both the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize and yet she remains unaccountably modest and, one senses, a little diffident. She's lucky, she says, to be able to spend her time doing what she enjoys. Writing is something that comes naturally: as a child she wrote endless stories in notebooks which got hidden in cupboards and eventually thrown away. She read extensively too ('all 36 Monica Edwards?' she recalls, smiling) and longed to emulate the authors she loved.

Later, working as an English teacher in a secondary school, Linda was given the job of running the school library, 'I was completely unqualified, but I did read a lot?'. There she encountered Jean Ure, Aidan Chambers, Jill Paton Walsh and Kathleen Peyton and was moved to think about becoming a young adult author herself. 'I wanted to write like the writers I loved,' she says simply. Getting a first novel published is rarely easy, but in 1988 HarperCollins published **Run with the Hare**, a story based on her experiences with an animal rights group. In 1990 there followed **Hard and Fast** and then, in the same year, **Some Other War**. The first book in what was to become a wide-ranging double trilogy, it gives a compelling account of the First World War through the eyes of twins Jack and Alice, contrasting their pre-War lives as servants with the horrors of trench warfare, the suffering of the wounded men and the courage of the VADs who nursed them. 'It was a time of enormous social change, especially for young women. I wanted to write about what it was like to be a woman in war-time, to be a VAD.' The pity of war, poignantly conveyed, is offset against the opportunities it presented. 'I wanted to show the excitement as well as the tragedy. It was an interesting time to be young.' Ruefully though she notes that two other novels about VADs came out within a year, 'We must have all noticed the gap in the market?'. War and wartime have gone on to form a recurrent theme in Linda's writing.

Linda's own father was a navigator in a Lancaster bomber in World War II, like Henry the Navigator whose disappearance on a wartime mission resonates through the story of a modern boy and his elderly neighbour in **At the Firefly Gate**. Noting the presence of World War II airmen elsewhere in her work, I ask whether her father's experience has fed directly into her novels. She pauses to think about it: 'Yes, certainly in a factual way, as he has very clear recall of his service life. But when I first wrote about Bomber Command, in **The Shouting Wind**, I wanted a female point of view.' Wartime experiences certainly exert a lingering influence over fictional family life in Linda's work, not least in **Sisterland**, where the discovery of a shocking and carefully kept secret from sixty years before eventually draws

together past and present. The book shares with **At the Firefly Gate** a sympathetic preoccupation with the relationships between young and old and a concern for all those family stories lost with the passage of time.

For **Polly's March**, published by Usborne as part of their 'Historical House' series for readers of 8+, the setting is the summer immediately preceding World War I, the story that of a young girl whose life changes irrevocably when she meets a militant suffragette released from prison under the Cat and Mouse act. The stultifying teas and polite conversation of her mother's drawing room hint at the future Polly's parents have planned for her, their drab monotony in pointed contrast to the boundless aspirations and free-thinking ideals of the suffragettes. It's a story that must surely inspire its readers, and I wonder whether perhaps Linda's writing is ever motivated by an educational or even a political agenda, but she is adamant 'I don't set out to teach anyone anything'.

There's certainly not a hint of the didactic in her books, yet learn one does, and not just about history but about human relationships too. Reading Linda Newbery's novels, one has the sense that she understands their multi-layered interactions, whether in the face of the seemingly impossible demands made by war on earlier generations, or the routine pressures of contemporary school and family life deftly chronicled in **The Damage Done**, or the **No Way Back** trilogy. 'I like to put characters into difficult situations and see what happens to them.' I ask Linda about those characters: always plausible, empathetic, eminently likeable figures: does she draw on real life? She laughs, 'that's the question people always ask authors. 'Are your characters based on real people?' No, they're not really.' She pauses, 'Well, I suppose sometimes when I was teaching I might conjure up a particular face, but that's all? What people don't realise is that it's much easier to make things up. You never really know what is going on in someone else's mind.'

Linda's latest novel **Set in Stone**, to be published in May by David Fickling Books, is an absorbing, thoughtful, jigsaw puzzle of a book, the shifting complexities of its plot and the half-understood perspectives of its narrators bringing to mind Wilkie Collins or Henry James. But if its atmosphere is that of a Victorian mystery, the setting combines the richly imagined detail of a George Eliot novel with the grace and light of a Vuillard painting.

Set in the late 1890s its backdrop is Fourwinds, a house in Sussex that seems almost palpably real. 'A sense of place is important,' Linda confirms, but this house, unlike **The Shell House** of her earlier novel, is not based upon a real place but drawn from Linda's research into the period. Its bright airy rooms and the pleasant open spaces of the garden belie the secretive world of those who live there. Arguably the most adult of her novels to date, **Set in Stone** has at its core a difficult, painful relationship that reverberates through the book but, as Linda points out, 'this isn't an 'issues' book.' 'I'd hate it if people thought of it like that,' she adds. While she's writing, Linda says, she doesn't think too much about a book's intended audience, that comes later; 'I write it for myself really.' It's true that she tackles controversial subject matter in her novels, but as we mull over the limitations of the crop of issue-driven young adult novels published in the nineteen eighties, I cannot imagine any reader putting this thoughtful, probing book into that category.

The coupling of sustained dramatic tension with thought-provoking plots has become a hallmark of Linda's young adult writing in particular. Here readers are kept dangling by the cleverly constructed narrative which tellingly juxtaposes the accounts of two of the characters, each of whom knows only part of the story but is intent on finding out more, their unreliable first-person narratives interspersed with letters that fill in a few 'but only a few' of the tantalizing gaps.

Research is crucial to Linda's work and, she says, an enjoyable aspect of writing. For **Set in Stone** she has been 'immersing (her)self in the Arts and Crafts movement'. As we talk over lunch in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum café, I reflect that it seems an appropriate venue for someone whose novels clearly reflect her love of art, architecture, history and music. She's been judging the Whitbread prize and talks animatedly of Hilary Spurling's biography of Matisse. Linda herself once thought of becoming an artist, but quickly dismissed the idea, 'I wasn't good enough,' she says, with typical modesty. She went on carrying a sketchbook though and one suspects that the habit of chronicling the world around still remains.

Recently Linda's writing has been taking off in new directions. The presence of a supernatural element in **At the Firefly Gate** and **Lost Boy**, a striking story set in the Welsh border town of Hay-on-Wye, represents a new development, one she has taken further in **Catcall**, to be published by Orion later this year. There's a picture book to

come too, and her next book for David Fickling will be not a young adult novel, but one for a younger age group. She hasn't, she says, got another young adult book in her, 'well, not at the moment anyway?'. I am surprised and more than a little disappointed, but seek solace (for myself if not for her teenage fans) in the knowledge that she is contemplating an adult novel. I know enough now about Linda Newbery to realise that it is pointless to ask too much at this stage; it'll stay under wraps until she's sure she's happy with it, but I can't help hoping that that won't be too long.

Kate Agnew is a bookseller, critic and consultant.

Selected booklist

Run with the Hare , 1988, HarperCollins, 0 00 692960 5, *also* Longman 1991, 0 582 08105 X

Some Other War , 1990, HarperCollins, 0 00 693614 8, *also* Barn Owl Books 2002, 1 903015 20 0, £5.99 pbk

The Shouting Wind , 1995, HarperCollins, 0 00 185612 X hbk, 0 00 674764 7 pbk

Flightsend , 1999, Scholastic, 0 439 01175 2, £5.99 pbk

The Damage Done , 2001, Scholastic, 0 439 99799 2, £5.99 pbk

The Shell House , 2002, David Fickling Books, 0 385 60389 4, £10.99 hbk, Definitions, 0 09 945593 5, £5.99 pbk

Sisterland , 2003, David Fickling Books, 0 385 60470 X, £10.99 hbk, Definitions, 0 09 947282 1, £5.99 pbk

At the Firefly Gate , 2004, Orion, 1 84255 195 7, £7.99 hbk, 1 84255 143 4, £5.99 pbk

Polly's March , 2004, Usborne 'Historical House?', 0 7460 6031 9, £4.99 pbk

Lost Boy , 2005, Orion, 1 84255 124 8, £8.99 hbk (pbk July 2006)

Set in Stone , David Fickling Books, 0 385 60748 2, £12.99 hbk (May 2006)

 [Linda Newbery + Books.JPG](#) [3]

 [Linda Newbery + Books.JPG](#) [4]

Page Number:

10

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '19): <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/157/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no157-linda-newbery>

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/kate-agnew>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/157>

[3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Linda Newbery Books.JPG>

[4] http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Linda Newbery Books_0.JPG