



# Authorgraph No.60 ? Joan Lingard

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**Joan Lingard** interviewed by **Valerie Bierman**.

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?I was born in a taxi cab in the Canongate of Edinburgh?s Royal Mile? ? Joan Lingard?s entry into the world could have come straight off the pages of a novel! She remained in the city until she was two when her family went to live in Belfast where she was to spend the next sixteen years. ?It was where I learned to read and write and formed my first friendships and where I went to school. It formed the framework on which I look out on the world ? my terms of reference.?

It was during this time in Belfast that she began to write ? out of necessity. Here was a young girl crazy about *books* but whose local library resembled a shed and was full of grubby moth-eaten *books*. A fastidious little girl, she turned the food splattered pages over with a post-card and read ? Pollyana, Katie, Dimsie, Enid Blyton and the Chalet books. ?Through all the splats I read and read!? When she found her supply of reading drying up, her mother suggested she should try writing her own, so at the age of eleven, she got hold of lined paper and a supply of green ink (?it seemed more artistic?) and produced her first story. It was about a girl called Gail who had an adventure in Cornwall. The fact that Joan had never set foot in the place didn?t worry her in the least. She followed this tale with others set in even more exotic locations from the Yorkshire Moors to Brazil.

At the age of sixteen, after the death of her mother, she left school and had an extraordinary time teaching fifty-four Primary Two children in a condemned building in Belfast due to a desperate shortage of teachers in the early fifties. She followed this with a spell in the Ulster Bank and then, following her father, returned to Edinburgh to work in the public library.

Someone suggested she train as a teacher and a quirk of fate brought her to the door in the Canongate outside which she?d been born and she enrolled as a student teacher at Moray House College. After her training, she taught for a while enjoying in particular the two-teacher school in the village where she lived outside Edinburgh. During this time she continued to write and one November day, sitting with her six-week-old daughter, a letter from London dropped through the letterbox. She still remembers the excitement of reading that Hodder & Stoughton were going to publish her first novel **Liam?s Daughter**. This was the first of six adult novels and it was only when author and friend Honor Arundel suggested she write a story for young people that she seriously considered this genre.

?It was one of those situations where you realise that you have a book in your head and it?s been waiting to come out ? you need a stimulus to finally trigger it. I wanted to write a book about prejudice. I wanted to say to young people ? you don?t have to accept your parents? prejudices. You can think for yourself. It?s only with the young that you can really break the mould.?

Joan Lingard?s Kevin and Sadie books are now read throughout the world ? **The Twelfth Day of July** was a landmark

in fiction for young people when a controversial theme was turned into a novel. She followed the young Protestant and Catholic couple through seven years of their lives in five books. **Across the Barricades** is her most popular and best-selling novel which is also used extensively in schools. It says something of the book's appeal that even though children have to 'do' it in class, lines of them can be observed queuing up to buy it at book fairs. Surely the ultimate accolade for any author? Available world-wide, it also won Joan the prestigious Buxtehude Bulle prize chosen by a jury of young people and adults in West Germany. This meant an enormous amount to its author as did a post-card recently received from a group of blind children in London. 'They told me they had been on holiday in Bangor, Northern Ireland, and had just eaten ice-cream in the place where Kevin and Sadie sat, and made a pilgrimage up Cave Hill.' Another letter had come from a Japanese girl who, at twenty-three, still read the books which gave her 'fortitude and help' to cope with her chauvinistic family.

Joan returned to Belfast for the setting of **The File on Fraulein Berg**, a story of three schoolgirls during the War who suspect their German teacher of being a spy. They follow her on and off buses making the poor woman's life a misery. The story was based on Joan's own antics with two friends at school who also suspected their German teacher. **Fraulein Berg**, she admitted, was written 'partly as an act of contrition'.

A sense of place is the crux of most of her novels, whether in Belfast, Glasgow or Edinburgh. Many characters are displaced - Kevin and Sadie, Maggie and her granny, and particularly the characters in her latest novel **Tug of War**. 'It matters greatly to me as my characters grow out of the background and are what they are because of it. If they leave that place, then this becomes a theme in itself. I have written about it in a quieter way in **The Gooseberry** and **Strangers in the House** - both about families being displaced through remarriage.'

The strength of the family is also a major theme running through her books and her own one has provided the theme for two of her most important titles - **The Guilty Party** and **Tug of War**. The first was based on her younger daughter Jenny's experience in the anti-nuclear movement after she was arrested with a friend while putting up posters for a CND jumble sale. This was at the age of fifteen. Jenny went on the protest at Greenham Common against Cruise missiles and was eventually arrested for obstruction. Determined to plead not guilty in order that she could make a statement in court, she was sentenced to a fine and, on refusal to pay, went to Holloway Prison for eight days. Her sister, Bridget, camped outside with friends keeping a vigil and was supplied with food brought by sympathisers. Through her daughter's involvement in the anti-nuclear movement, Joan founded Scottish Writers Against the Bomb.

Did she feel that children's books should be a vehicle for personal views? 'Books always contain personal views of the authors. I write about what possesses me. I admit that **The Guilty Party** is the most polemical I've ever written, but I'm not trying to brainwash. I'm trying to stimulate readers into thinking for themselves. I think it's important to stretch the imagination.'

**Tug of War** had to wait many years before being written, but with the advent of perestroika the time had come to tackle her most difficult book. 'It's a strange thing about books and the time when they do gel - the idea can be mulling around in the subconscious for a long time, then there comes the moment when it suddenly clarifies and you can begin to write that book. So I wrote **Tug of War**, based on my husband's experiences as a refugee in Latvia in 1944 when he was eight and his brother was fourteen, taking both points of view. I talked on tape to both my husband and brother-in-law asking them to put their minds back to the days when they left their home in Latvia. The action covers four years until 1948 during which they travelled Europe.' The timing of the book was astonishing as the week it was published saw two million people linking hands through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The freedom movement has seldom been out of the news and the book's appearance has been particularly timely, symbolising the people of Latvia's bid for freedom. The story of twins Astro and Hugo's separation and their appalling tribulations on their trek from place to place makes gripping reading. Seldom has the plight of displaced persons been so graphically expressed for young people. Why had she chosen to write this as a novel and not a biography?

'I believe that fiction has more impact. It can be more selective, highlighting the most dramatic incidents. Keeping a tight hold on the story line, you can create more rounded characters than in non-fiction. For a start, you can get inside their heads. I wouldn't have dared try to do that if I'd been writing about my actual husband.' This summer, Joan and

her husband visited Latvia. A poignant return for Martin after all these years, and for her the opportunity to see for herself the background of her novel. It was a happy family reunion ? one which might happen in a further novel?

Over the past few years, there have been books for younger children, too. **The Freedom Machine** is the story of a young boy setting out on a journey of discovery on his bike, Gulliver ? his freedom machine ? to escape the problems at home, and **Frying as Usual**, a tale of an Italian family who own a fish and chip shop. (Incidentally, notice how many times chip shops feature in Joan Lingard?s writing! She says the chip shop was a great draw in her childhood.)

As she now has a four-year-old grandson, Russell, the idea of writing for an even younger age group appealed and this year should see the publication of a couple of picture books. There is also a sequel to **Rags and Riches** to come, following the fortunes of the two Edinburgh teenagers, Seb and Sam ? humorous, lighthearted stories which Joan finds a contrast to her more serious writing.

1989 was an extraordinarily busy year, seeing not only the publication of **Tug of War**, but the appearance of an adult novel **The Women?s House**. In spaces between there have been visits to Denmark, Dublin, Belfast, Latvia and Russia, with schools visits the length and breadth of the UK. But the writing itself remains more important than any travelling.

?I know that writers say they write for themselves and when I?m in my study, I feel as if I?m living in the places my characters are inhabiting, whether a refugee camp in Germany or the narrow streets round the corner where Sam and Seb live. At the end of the day writing is about communication. When I finish a book there has to be another stage. The novel that I?ve written has got to leave me to be printed and disseminated. Otherwise there would be a tremendous sense of incompleteness.

### **Some of Joan Lingard?s many books**

(published in hardback by Hamish Hamilton unless otherwise mentioned)

**Across the Barricades**, 0 241 02167 7, £6.50; Heinemann Educational, 0 435 12203 7, £3.25 non net; Penguin Plus, 0 14 03.2624 3, £2.25 pbk

**The Clearance**, 0 241 89021 7, £5.50; Heinemann Educational, 0 435 12228 2, £3.25 non net; Beaver, 0 09 947730 0, £1.99 pbk

**The File on Fraulein Berg**, Heinemann Educational, 0 435 12267 3, £3.25 non net; Beaver, 0 09 938290 3, £1.99 pbk

**The Freedom Machine**, 0 241 11882 4, £6.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.2369 4, £1.99 pbk

**Frying as Usual**, 0 241 11759 3, £6.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.2370 8, £1.99 pbk

**The Gooseberry**, 0 241 10023 2, £6.95; Beaver, 0 09 934090 9, £1.95 pbk

**The Guilty Party**, 0 241 12081 0, £7.50; Penguin Plus, 0 14 03.2502 6, £2.25 pbk

**Rags and Riches**, 0 241 12204 X, £6.95

**Strangers in the House**, 0 241 10671 0, £8.50; Beaver, 0 09 955020 2, £1.95 pbk

**Tug of War**, 0 241 12816 1, £8.50

**The Twelfth Day of July**, 0 241 01984 2, £6.95; Penguin Plus, 0 14 03.2506 9, £1.99 pbk

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