



Authorgraph No.69: Anne Fine

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Anne Fine interviewed by **Valerie Bierman**.

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It's a long, hard climb to Anne Fine's top floor flat in Edinburgh's New Town (a misnomer if ever there was one - it simply means it's newer than the Old Town). Once inside, you're met with elegant clutter, a grand piano, two cats, a golden retriever and a tantalising glimpse of the waters of the Firth of Forth and the hills of Fife through curtains of rampant green plants. The dog departs, as does Anne's younger daughter and we settle down to record this interview. Halfway through the afternoon, we discover the wrong button has been pressed so it's back to square one with three-quarters of an hour of blank tape .. .

Born in Leicester, one of five girls, Anne was admitted to school two years early when the Education Authority took pity on her harassed mother after the arrival of triplets. She rapidly learnt to read, but decided that listening to a story was too slow and preferred to read alone, a view later shared by her daughters. Reading was varied and unstructured with little interference from home or school. Trease, Geoffrey, and Treece, Henry, were devoured as was Buckeridge, Lucy Fitch Perkins' `Twins' series, **Swallows and Amazons** and her great hero, Richmal Crompton's `William', whose anarchic antics can be glimpsed, one suspects, in some of her own creations.

A degree at Warwick University and marriage to academic Kit Fine was followed by `a decade of camp-following my husband'. It was when he took up a Professorship in Philosophy that she found herself in her present flat with a baby a few weeks old. `The flat had no central heating and faced north, we had no furniture and I was in my "green" phase and painted all the walls that colour which made it look even colder. I was so lonely, so miserable away from my family and friends, I went into a depression which would now be diagnosed as post-natal.'

She's still unable to explain why she began to write and what led her to produce what she terms her `only truly sunny book', **The Summer House Loon** - a gentle story of Ione (named after the new baby), her blind father and the delightful student Ned Hump. The book's birth was not swift. It was sent to two publishers, both of whom returned it with encouraging but rejecting letters so it was consigned to a Jiffy bag and shoved under the bed to gather dust for three years whilst its owner went off to sunnier climes in Palo Alto, USA. However, just before leaving, she had the foresight to ask a neighbour to post it after her departure as an entry for the Guardian/Kestrel Best Novel by an Unpublished Writer Competition. This was duly done and to her surprise she found she'd come joint third to Jan Mark's winning **Thunder and Lightnings**. The trip to London for the prize-giving lunch yielded £50 which was promptly invested in a typewriter. The Fines were still on the move, now in Canada where their second daughter, Cordelia, was born and there they remained for nine years. Eventually Anne decided to leave Kit and returned to Edinburgh to the same (but warmer!) flat.

Some twenty books later, these years provided her with much of the background experience which often surfaces in her novels. Subjects sometimes controversial, certainly unconventional, are always shot through with a wonderful black

humour which lightens the gloomiest situation. She makes few concessions to children.

'I don't underestimate children, especially those who read a lot. They will have come across many ideas through books and through talking with intelligent people. They are more sophisticated and advanced in their thinking even though they may not be able to articulate these ideas. Just because they can't reproduce ideas at an adult level is no reason to think they can't take them on board.' Recurring subjects are divorce, and animals which often come to a sticky end, but Anne Fine has a totally reasonable explanation:

'Every child who has a garden has an entire graveyard buried down there. If you ask in a primary school who's got something they love very much buried at the bottom of the garden, a whole forest of hands will wave at you. If you added up all the animals in my books who come to a grisly end and compared them to the animals who come to a grisly end in Britain every year, I'd probably end up statistically very accurate.'

With a divorce behind her, she again has a logical explanation over the realism that is her hallmark:

'If I'm writing about divorce, I know what parents say in anger in front of the children. I know children know what's going on. I don't kid myself that everyone lives in cotton wool.'

Her ideas are borne out brilliantly in **Madame Doubtfire**, the hilarious story of a family trying to stick together post-divorce and to the unconventional method of housekeeping resorted to by their father. Other books have also grown from observations of those closest to her like **The Granny Project**, which came from watching her mother look after three old people in succession until their deaths, and seeing the effect those twelve years had on her. But this book, too, has its hilarious moments as the four children try to prevent their parents putting granny into a home. One particular evening, during an important dinner party, granny decides to join the assembled guests and comes downstairs from her bedroom:

'As Mrs Harris struggled with her hatpins, a shower of blue feathers shimmered through the air and landed on the pretty china dishes heaped high with fresh peach sorbet. Picking one more than usually moth-eaten specimen off his own serving, Henry's headmaster said "Have you come very far, Mrs Harris?" "No distance at all," Henry's mother assured him. "The shortest of walks, I can do it in no time." "That's wonderful." The chorus was spontaneous. The talk all at once was on what a marvel Henry's mother must be to make her way at eighty-seven through that perplexing labyrinth out there of Circles, Crescents and Closes and still arrive in time for dessert.'

But Anne Fine sees her skill as being able to take a serious situation and make it funny:

'High comedy comes out of high emotion. High emotion comes out of tension-filled situations between people who matter to one another. You can't really get emotional fireworks at a cocktail party. If someone gets on your nerves, you simply fade away, say excuse me, go and get another drink or go to the loo. It's only in families that you're locked up with people you can't get away from.'

No doubt a psychiatrist could advance some sort of theory as to why her characters frequently pour out their feelings from the confines of a cupboard, as in **Goggle-eyes** or her adult novel **Taking the Devil's Advice**. **The Stone Menagerie** is also set in a confined space, that of old animal cages in the grounds of a mental hospital. It's another happy, if unconventional, plot which sparked off criticism on publication in 1980 over the suitability of the setting for a children's book. But the background came from ideas hatched after visiting several acquaintances in mental homes over a summer, and the result was a lighthearted, ingenious book with serious overtones.

An avid collector of newspaper cuttings which can reveal the germ of a plot, she relished the one describing a fete where the fund-raising depended on gambling on the placing of a cow pat. This resulted in **The Country Pancake** - a wondrously euphemistic title! And reports on bullying gave rise to her award-winning **Bill's New Frock** which tackled this subject around the framework of a young boy waking up one day and finding himself changed to a girl. This book triggered off Anne Fine's remarkable coup of scooping the pool of awards in 1990, including a Smarties Prize, the Guardian Fiction Award, the Carnegie Medal, and the whole topped off by the awarding of a 'Nibbie', a kind of writer's

Oscar in the shape of a large bronze nib given by the Booksellers' Association for the Children's Author of the Year.

I was curious to discover if her writing technique was as imaginative as her plots but there's no state of the art technology here, no word-processor lurked amongst the greenery.

'Definitely not. I hate machines - even the vacuum cleaner because it clogs up. I have to write in absolute peace and quiet. I use a soft pencil, a rubber and a pencil sharpener. I write a sentence, rub out and go over it again and again until it's absolutely right. Then when it is, and it could be hours or months, I move on to the second. I never do a draft. Every single sentence hangs on the one before - I make no changes. I can't think ahead (I can't play chess). I follow the feelings of the characters.'

Teenagers and the trials of families riding out the storm of adolescence are a favourite preoccupation. One is at the centre of her latest novel, **The Book of the Banshee**, published this summer. Will Flowers picks up an old journal at a library second-hand book sale. It's written by a boy not much older than himself who describes life in the trenches in World War I. William Saffery writes of the battles around him. So does Will Flowers. His combatants are himself, parents, small sister Muffy and his teenage sister Estelle. As he writes of their clashes, he sees a parallel with the life of long dead William Saffery and feels a bond between them. But it's the descriptions of the cut and thrust of teenage warfare that will strike a chord in the hearts of fellow sufferers, in particular the state of those creatures' bedrooms.

'Together they peered in. I didn't need to come any further to know what they were seeing. I've been in Estelle's room often enough sifting through the mess trying to find things of mine. I once cut my toe on a tin of condensed milk on my way across to my best denim jacket through piles of abandoned woollies and her old tight droppings. And Muffy's mouth organ was lost in here for a week under a drift of knickers. ..'

A civilised calm is now returning to her own household with lone studying at Oxford and Cordelia in her last year at school but the scars obviously are deep! If she ever runs out of ideas - a highly unlikely thought - she will consider founding her own organisation for parents - 'Victims of **Obstinate Moody and Irritating Teenagers**'. There will probably be a rush to join. At least the acronym will look good on letter headings.

Anne Fine's books mentioned in this Authorgraph are:

The Summer House Loon, Mammoth, 0 7497 0184 6, £2.50 pbk

Madame Doubtfire, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 120012, £6.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.2633 2, £2.99 pbk

The Granny Project, Mammoth, 0 7497 0186 2, £2.50 pbk

Goggle-eyes, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 12617 7, £7.95; Puffin, 014 03.40718, £2.50 pbk

The Stone Menagerie, Mammoth, 0 7497 0343 1, £2.50 pbk

The Country Pancake, Methuen, 0 416 14982 0, £6.95; Mammoth 0 7497 0567 1, £2.50 pbk

Bill's New Frock, Methuen, 0 416 12152 7, £6.95; Mammoth, 0 7497 0305 9, £2.50 pbk

The Book of the Banshee, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 13114 6, £8.99

Her adult title mentioned is **Taking the Devil's Advice**, Viking, 0 670 831913, £12.99; Penguin, 0 14 01.3107 8, £4.99 pbk.



[Anne Fine in house.jpg](#) [3]

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