



Authorgraph No.73: Hazel Townson

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Hazel Townson interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**.

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'I simply can't write a serious book. I have tried to write a tear-jerker but gave up - I *always* end up making it funny.' True, her books are rollicking rough-and-tumble fun, but Hazel Townson herself is quietly spoken and neat to the point of demure, tapping on her word-processor in a wondrously tidy study in a wondrously spick and span bungalow on a new estate in Prestwich.

Even her press-cuttings collection, going back almost 40 years with all her contributions to **Punch**, is a model of efficiency. She looks what I suspect she remains at heart: an organised, well-informed librarian, totally committed to children reading. And although she is hospitably unfazed by interviewers who kick over cups of coffee on her pastel-patterned carpet, being photographed the previous afternoon had been a trauma. Beneath that quick smile and those bright, long-lashed eyes there surely lurks a worrier.

No surprise, then, to learn that the discipline of honing down a book *after* it is written is what occupies her. She cares almost as much about soothing kids' problems and fears as making them laugh. 'It takes six months to produce one very thin book! It may be only 7,500 words, but it's taken *months* to cut that down from three times as long when I wrote it. It's one of the many lessons I learnt from **Punch**, especially the cartoons: one word can tell so much. Rumer Godden once said, "It's what you take away that shapes the book," and having been a librarian and watched children plough through a lot of verbiage that isn't necessary to the enjoyment of a story, I am so afraid of leaving in that sort of thing I work to the point of obsession to reach the absolute skeleton.

'Each word is important for a seven-year-old struggling to read. You need only a few hints for children to work things out for themselves, and hopefully if they've enjoyed the book they'll read it again for another layer of meaning - the satirical layer, perhaps, like the send-up of the art world in **The Shrieking Face**, or the consolation of laughing at someone else being nagged (**One Green Bottle**), or confused (**Gary Who?**), or neurotic over their health (**Pilkie's Progress**).

'You think I'm hard on parents? Well, parents are hard on children! As I go round schools I do come across these "ferocious women" [I'd commented on some of her adult characters], 'kids not allowed to do homework, say, and the sort of home life that breeds school vandals. Children can have a terrible time, quite honestly, but if you get them to identify with a problem in a book, make it funny, then they're laughing at themselves and may feel better.

'There are two reasons for reading: to escape your own problems - the Lenny and Jake stories are pure escapism - and to find out how others tackle their problems. But I always want characters children can identify with, down to earth, realistic, with reasonable dialogue, which is why I go round schools and listen to them talking.'

Unlike most children's authors, she is positively stimulated by reading other people's books ('I'd much rather read a

good children's book than an adult one'), and, even more unusually, has an expert background knowledge of the field 'because I came to it all from the other end.'

An only child -'I used to sit and write when other people would have been quarrelling or playing'- she was born in Nelson, moving within two years to the small industrial village of Hapton which had grown around the cotton mill where her father was manager (today her husband, too, is a director of a textiles firm). When she was seven she had permission to go into school early to copy poems from an anthology into a special book she had saved up for. 'I loved that, and I still remember things like "Drake's Drum". I won a penny prize for writing another verse to "Wee Willie Winkie"! I think I was going to be a writer from that moment, but I never thought of it as a viable career.'

Accrington High School, then English ('I was hopeless at everything else') at Leeds University ('quite a struggle then, especially for girls'), where she was 'an absolute washout, clever but lazy. I concentrated all my energies on the theatre group and being assistant editor of the **Union News**. One day an advertiser let us down, and the editor said to me, "Write us a poem three-and-a-half inches long," so I got out my ruler and wrote a bit of comic verse. The advertiser kept on letting us down, and I kept on getting a verse in, until it was a regular feature.

'Someone said, "Why don't you send one of those to **Punch**, I do believe they pay for them?" They took it, and I was paid five guineas - a fortune!' So began a freelance relationship that was to last many years. 'I learnt such a lot from **Punch**, particularly from Peter Dickinson who was assistant editor then and used to write comments on everything. It was an adult audience, but the same sort of satirical humour.' It was Peter who pointed her to prose. "'But what shall I write about?" "What are you doing at the moment?" "Bringing up two babies." "Write about that." "It isn't funny." "*Anything is funny if it happens to somebody else* - stand outside yourself and look at it and you may see the funny side!'"

So the next week a horrendous journey to visit her mother - babies and baggage, big pram put out at the wrong station, teddy overboard to be decapitated by train - at first produced tears but was followed by a pioneer prose piece, 'The Pram Now Standing'. Later, when her son and daughter were at primary school and she was chafing at home, **Punch** sent her some children's novels to review which she so relished that she decided not only to write one herself but to be a librarian.

With the cheek of the innocent, she simply rang her library and said if you've got any jobs, consider me; a week later she was solving a crisis for them as part-time assistant on the counter. She was hooked. A day-release and evening course at Manchester Poly (including a history of children's literature) qualified her - and, juggling work, study and two young children, she was certainly no longer bored. She rose from children's librarian to Chief Assistant Librarian for Bury, in charge of and buying books for 110 school libraries and 11 public service children's libraries. She gave up to write full-time, but is appalled at the suffering inflicted on libraries today.

'Manchester itself has never had a school library service - but now even the good outlying areas like Bury are at crunch point. It's dreadful. Schools have to "buy in", pay to belong to the service, and there is no longer a library allowance that *has* to be sent on *books*. People don't know what they're losing. Seven of us used to spend every Monday morning going through huge boxes on approval, reading them and picking out those for schools' booklists - without that service teachers won't know what has come in and will be swamped by it all. Most teachers know so little about children's literature; they don't keep up to date and have no idea about modern writers. And if we don't catch a child between seven and 11 we've probably lost a reader for life.

'Klaus (Flugge, of Andersen Press) has agreed to put a note on the back of the title page of all my future books: "Your library is precious - use it or lose it."'

As well as visiting schools she chairs (opinion-less) the Lancashire Children's Book of the Year Award with a panel of 14-year-olds -'plot and speedy action come first, then characters, while style comes nowhere!' She herself is not drawn to writing for teens; the closest is her new **The Secrets of Celia**, school essays 'written' by a lass of engaging energy and charm - 13, Hazel thinks, except that 'I never mention ages, just in case, so anyone can identify as they like.' No

question of literary style, either, for Celia's punctuation is erratic, to say the least, as was the spelling in **The Deathwood Letters**. Hazel Townson defends herself against the charge of enshrining mistakes or 'bad English' in print by claiming that authenticity is essential. 'And how can children recognise the right thing unless they see the wrong as well? In school a teacher would explain, or use the book as a sort of testing game.'

Grabbing a reader is what matters. It was this conviction that prompted her to write when, as a librarian, she conducted her own surveys and found two-thirds of her borrowers never reached the end of a novel. She drew up a formula for the ideal book (the 'Manageable Book' for reluctant readers, described by her in detail in **BfK 61**, March 1990) which tackled covers, titles, type-size, display, length, cliff-hangers, characters, humour - everything.

'When I started the surveys the only books for reluctant readers were the old drab Antelopes, and many of those were historical which these kids won't pick up.' She herself was later to move to Antelope from Brockhampton ('few publishers did short books in the 70s') until they rejected her sixth title, **The Great Ice-Cream Crime**, with the immortal words, 'This is not the sort of thing young children want to read. They want quiet, domestic kinds of drama.' Which was enough to make her decamp to the fledgling Andersen Press, where **Ice-Cream** was an instant (and continuing) success. She and Klaus Flugge, with editor Audrey Adams (and Tony Ross, David McKee and Philippe Dupasquier), have lived happily ever after.

Like all the others in his stable, she is devoted to Flugge, paying tribute to his eye (and heart) for an artist, and his willingness to give writers a say on illustrations. 'But why are paperback covers changed from the hardbacks - they always seem older - while the inside illustrations aren't changed? Crazy - and children do notice. When editors tell me it's due to market research, I answer, "I *do* market research every day: I go into schools and I see children, and they say they don't like the covers!"

'Let's face it, publishers don't often meet the children, don't get out and stand in front of a class and hear what they say.'

Hazel Townson began by listening to children; she gave up her library work because she was driven 'to *reach* these children that no one was reaching'; and she will go on listening for as long as children will go on talking. And we know how long that is.

Photographs by Lucy Rogers.

Hazel Townson's books are published by Andersen in hardback and Red Fox in paperback. Given here are details of those mentioned in the Authorgraph:

The Shrieking Face, ill. Tony Ross, 0 86264 065 2, £5.95; 0 09 941310 8, £2.25 pbk

One Green Bottle, ill. David McKee, 0 86264 164 0, £5.99; 0 09 956810 1, £2.25 pbk

Gary Who?, ill. David McKee, 0 86264191 8, £5.99; 0 09 965530 6, £1.99 pbk

Pilkie's Progress, ill. Tony Ross, 0 86264 149 7, £5.99; 0 09 956360 6, £2.25 pbk

The Deathwood Letters, 0 86264 305 8, £6.99; 0 09 983500 2, £2.50 pbk

The Great Ice-Cream Crime, 0 86264 005 9, £4.95; 0 09 948640 7, £2.25 pbk

Her new hardback **The Secrets of Celia** (0 86264 382 1) will be published in April this year, priced £6.99.

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