Conversation with ... Anne Fine

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Abstract *An interview with Anne Fine with an introduction and aside on the role of children's literature in our lives and development, and our adult perceptions of the suitability of childhood reading material.*

Keywords: Anne Fine, children's literature, didacticism, emotions, nostalgia, stories, childhood

Philip Gaydon's interview with Anne Fine was recorded as part of the 'Voices of the University' oral history project, co-ordinated by Warwick's Institute of Advanced Study. The project marks the fiftieth anniversary of the university by interviewing those who have studied, worked or lived near to the university since 1965. We now have over two hundred interviews with former staff, students and local residents and are hoping to speak to many more people throughout Warwick's anniversary year. This growing collection is stored in the Modern Records Centre on campus and will provide a unique and comprehensive insight into Warwick's history. Our interviews also reveal a great about the development of Higher Education and research in the UK, the history of student life and politics, and the social and cultural history of post-war Britain more generally.

Dr Grace Huxford, IAS Research Fellow in Oral History

Introduction

While adults have stormed and battled as to what children ought and ought not, may and may not read, the children themselves have slipped intrepidly across the battle lines, helping themselves to the books they love with grand unconcern about what we think of The Wizard of Oz or Hans Christian Andersen. But

> *even though children little heed our great debates and ignore our cannonades over their books, it is certain that the production of children's books is an adult activity in which we have every right and duty to be vitally interested. (**Taylor, 1962: 799**)*

> *Take the thoroughly energizing example of Anne Fine. She is the very model of the British children's writer of the end of the century. (**Hunt, 1999: 15**)*

There are a growing number of Warwickians making their mark in the children's literature world. English Literature PhD student Laura Wood recently won the 2014 Montegrappa Scholastic Prize for New Children's Writing with her novel *Poppy Pym and the Pharaoh's Curse* (forthcoming). Warwick Writing Programme tutor Leila Rasheed has been on the scene since her deliciously titled *Chips, Beans and Limousines* (2008) and signed a multi-book deal with Disney Publishing Worldwide in 2012. Philosophy and Literature BA graduate Sally Nicholls won the Waterstones' Children's Book Prize with her first novel, *Ways to Live Forever* (2008), which was subsequently turned into both a film and stage play, and Philosophy and Literature MA graduate Sarah Crossan's Coventry based prose-novel *The Weight of Water* (2013) was shortlisted for the 2013 Carnegie Medal as well as her latest novel *Apple and Rain* (2014) being on the current shortlist with the winner to be announced on June 22nd. It has been my pleasure to work with or interview all of these authors at some point.[1] They, amongst many others at the University of Warwick, have helped or inspired me in solidifying the groundwork for what I hope will be a growing and lasting scene of children's literature study here.[2] However, of all Warwick Alumni the biggest contribution to children's literature by far has come from Anne Fine.

[1] For interviews with Nicholls and Crossan, see **Gaydon** (**2013**).

[2] As of April 2015 there will be a children's literature reading group open to all staff and students, and Chantal Wright (Assistant Professor in the English Department and children's literature translator), Emma Parfitt (PhD in the Sociology Department), Emma Wood, Leila Rasheed, and I have been given the green-light to form a research group. Rasheed already convenes a Warwick Writing Programme MA module on 'Writing for Children and Young People', and I will also be convening a module called 'Embodying Ethics: An interdisciplinary exploration through children's literature' for Warwick's Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning in the 2015 autumn term. In the near future, we also hope to resurrect Jackie Labbe's 'Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature' MA module and create an undergraduate module wholly dedicated to children's literature.

Since graduating from Warwick in 1968 with a BA in Politics and History, Fine has written over fifty books for children and eight for adults, won the Carnegie Medal twice (for *Goggle-Eyes* in 1989 and *Flour Babies* in 1992), been a highly commended runner-up three times (for *Bill's New Frock* in 1989, *The Tulip Touch* in 1996, and *Up on Cloud Nine* in 2002), been shortlisted for the Hans Christian Andersen Award (the highest recognition available to a writer or illustrator of children's books, 1998), undertaken the position of Children's Laureate (2001-2003), and been awarded an OBE for her services to literature (2003). Warwick presented Fine with an Honorary Doctorate in 2005 and her photo adorned one of the 2014 "people who innovate" banners on the drive onto main campus. Add to this that almost everyone I spoke to before this interview had related tales of childhood reading heavily influenced by at least one of Fine's books, and you can imagine why it was with a certain sense of impending awe that I entered Milburn House to meet and interview Fine.

As one would expect, Fine offers the insights of one who is both passionate about and steeped in practical experience of children's literature. Many of her comments can be used to explore why children's literature is both an area of fascinating academic study and an important aspect of life in general. Before reading the interview however, I invite the reader to briefly contemplate a few quotations and questions in order to orientate themselves in relation to the subject and have personal experiences readily to mind as they read.

It is a frequent occurrence when I mention that my PhD is on children's literature that people's eyes light up as they wait to find a way to introduce their childhood books into the conversation. If it transpires that I have not read, or, worse, not even heard of, their book it is as though a gulf has suddenly been created between us. How can I possibly live in a world where that book did not play a role in my growing up? To many of us, our childhood books and reading experiences *matter* to who we are. They are the sources of some of our defining moments of curiosity, wonder, guidance, emotional upheaval, adventure, aesthetic pleasure, identity, friendship, and familial bonding. Alongside their involvement in these moments, their pages also contain characters who we cared for a great deal, acted in ways we could not (whether badly or well), and provided inspiration in a variety of situations such as playground games, conversational examples, and fancy-dress costumes. Those experiences and characters were an integral part of that blaze of intensity and enthusiasm that characterises childhood, forges our later personality and dispositions, and lasts well into adulthood as a warming glow (**Hollindale, 1974: 14**). They took root and created a "fund of remembered images" (**Reynolds, 2007: 10**), powerful ones that "we couldn't forget if we wanted to" and which "lie at the very brim of

consciousness, ready at the right touch […] to be released into the rapid, electric currents of present thought" (**Inglis, 1981: 62**). Those books often go on to become artefacts, tangible representations of that previous state of being and past experiences, ones which we desire to pass on, along with all that they embody, to the next generation.

Already, some of this language may be causing readers to be wary, for nostalgia and romanticising are perennial issues one must always be careful of when dealing with and reflecting upon children's literature, particularly since the nineteenth-century when childhood became widely seen as a stage of "unquestioning innocence" (**Knoepflmacher 1998: 71**), and of purity, play, and free imagination that should, above all else, be "preserved, prolonged, and protected" (**Reynolds, 1994: 4**).[3] We must be alert to the potential scenario that these experiences never really shaped us or happened in the way we remember them, and that our current identity and concept of childhood are built upon a past we wish we had, rather than one we did have. We all have the capacity to creatively manipulate our past experiences in order to solidify a past self that would make sense as an antecedent to a present self that we like to think of ourselves as being.[4] However, with a caveat about nostalgia in mind, ask yourself now: Which reading experiences, characters, and stories stand out from your childhood? Why those ones in particular? If you do not have such memories, for not everyone will have experienced this of course, can you think of an experience that might parallel what is being described? Can you remember what it was like to be a *child* experiencing this?

In addition to the role and nature of immediate, personal experience of reading as a child, a lot of debate addresses the question of *what* to write for and give to children; a question that has been asked since at least Plato's *Republic*. Children remain in a state of disempowerment in many ways in contemporary society, and in children's literature this mostly manifests itself in the fact that which books are marketed or given to children often has to go through several layers of adult choice first: writers, publishers, parents, librarians, teachers, and so on.[5] Yet, children

[3] See **Carpenter, 1985** (**esp. pp. 7-10**) for a succinct account of this emergence, and **Nodelman** (**1992**), **Knoepflmacher** (**1998**), **Nodelman and Reimer** (**2003**), **Nikolajeva** (**2005**), **Reynolds** (**2007: 91**), and **Gubar** (**2009**) for a variety of discussions on the need to be critical of this idealised image in children's literature.

[4] Nostalgia has been linked to idealisation of the past since 1821 (**Rosen, 1975: 348**). For discussion of this sentimental propagation of false identity and its potential immorality see **Richards** (**1960**), **Campbell** (**1987**), **Savile** (**1995**), **Newman** (**1995**), **Butler** (**2004**), **Walder** (**2005**) on creating an "ethics of memory", and **Wildschut *et al.*** (**2006: 976**).

[5] This is assuming we are defining children's literature as literature that is expressly written with children in mind or is specifically set-aside for children rather than as the books which children read or are often given despite authorial or publisher intention or such processes as age-banding and marketing.

"are born helpless and incapable of judgement, so somebody must have the job of deciding what happens to them" (**Brighouse and Swift, 2014: 2**). How and when this judgement is then bestowed to the developing child, and their disempowerment alleviated, is not a question for this essay, but in many countries and for at least some of the child's life it is considered implicit that a child has the right to be cared for and adults have a duty to fulfil and protect this right. This includes a considered judgement of what material they are exposed to and when. The question of happy endings and gruesome material will be returned to a little way into the interview, so for now let us briefly consider pedagogy: How much and how obviously should children's literature *teach* children something?

The notion of overt didacticism in children's literature has been demonstrably waning since the mid nineteenth-century, with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) often being cited as the turning point. Not only does Alice "escape the moral-finder" (**Dusinberre, 1987: 59**) but authorial mastery is seemingly abrogated and, by Carroll's own admission, meaning is intentionally left to be decided by the reader (***ibid.:* 42**). Yet, whilst they may not express it so overtly, authors have learned some things about the world. They *know* things which are useful to children, and if they believe in certain moral ways of thinking, why should they not preach them? "My whole object in writing at all was to get the chance of preaching," writes **Thomas Hughes** in his 1858 preface to *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (**1971: xiii**). "When a man comes to my time in life and has his bread to make, and very little time to spare, is it likely that he will spend almost the whole of his yearly vacation in writing a story just to amuse people? I think not." Indeed, I have now run versions of The Philosophy Foundation's "What is a story?" session (**Worley, 2014: 99-104**) when teaching philosophy to 8 to 11-year-olds in local primary schools several times. To my great surprise, each time the children expressed the belief that a story *needed* a moral, message, or meaning. They intuitively decided that something wasn't really a story if it didn't have one. Many of them surrendered this as a *necessary* criterion for a story as the session went on, but their desire for a story to have a meaning that did not originate within them was retained. As someone whose PhD research is steeped in the movement away from moralising and towards children as co-creators of meaning this struck a chord and, as with the self-checks for nostalgia, reminded me that children often want things or think in ways we do not give them the space to express fully or take the time to wholly listen and understand. The second, and final, set of questions I invite the reader to consider before moving onto the interview is: If you were to write a children's book is there anything

you would rule out writing about or describing? Do you think a child's book should have a moral, a meaning, a happy ending, or anything else?

Interview

PG: Why do you write?

AF: I first started to write a book purely by accident. I couldn't get to the library because of a snowstorm and there was nothing to read so I sat down and started to write my own book. Writing suited me down to the ground and so, when that book more or less found a home, I thought, "Yes, this is the job for me," and carried on.

I didn't start off wanting to be a writer though. I was perfectly happy reading. I've been asked if I had to give up writing or reading which would I give up and I think I'd give up writing.

Also, although I don't write as therapy, writing does work as therapy. You can leave old selves behind when you write a book, especially an adult book. I often think, "I couldn't write that now." You change.

PG: You say "especially an adult book". One of the questions I ask a lot of the children's authors that I meet is what are the differences between writing for adults and writing for children?

AF: I'm always writing for the reader inside myself. I just seem to have an intuition, which some authors have and some don't, about what I would have liked at five, what I would have liked at seven, and what I would have liked at 11. I'm just very good at pitching them I think. You clearly have to drag the child you're writing about into the 20th – now 21st – Century because childhood has changed so much in so many ways, but nonetheless it's that pitching that does it.

I think that Jill Paton Walsh described it rather well. She said that when you're writing for adults you're writing to somebody who has shared the journey with you or can imagine sharing the journey. When you're writing for children you're writing for someone who may not have the faintest idea what you're talking about, so you cut at a different angle and depth.[6] You do occasionally have to make things that little bit clearer and I suppose you could argue that you're often a bit more protective. I

[6] See **Bawden *et al.*** (**2009: para. 14**)

rarely describe, for example, an irredeemable character, one where a child might think, "actually that is my mother", and then not offer any forward-moving hope. You've got to redeem them somehow haven't you? The world is not full of irredeemable villains; it just isn't.

I live near to a young offenders institute and I go in and give prizes and things and you just take one look at them and you think: "if I'd brought you up, you wouldn't be in here". There are horrible pressures on parents nowadays of course. They're very stressed and time-pressed and part of dual-job or dual-career families. Not only that, but a lot of these families are living in such straitened areas, bereft of decent education opportunities, jobs, housing, parks, social support, and so on. The parents didn't stand much of a chance growing up knowing how to parent well, let alone doing so in such difficult circumstances, so these children just weren't brought up properly. I feel the same when I go into prisons.

There are very few deeply evil people in the world. There are a few but they're so few and far between there's no point in my trying to write sensibly about them. I leave that to Gitta Sereny!

PG: Apart from hopelessness in relation to irredeemable characters, are there any other topics that you either shy away from or think don't belong in children's books?

AF: No, I think you could probably write about almost anything. There are things that *I* won't touch though. I don't like introducing children to gratuitous cruelty. I'm very uncomfortable about young children being given some of the *Horrible Histories* for example. I really would not want to be the person to introduce to a seven-year-old the notion of a red hot poker up the bum. And there are a few writers now who are sort of cashing in on torture-porn for young children who I think should look at what they're doing *very* hard. But I don't think there is any topic that you can't raise.

There are topics that you quite literally don't know how to raise though. At the moment, I think many my age, or even a bit younger, are struggling with the fact that we don't understand how childhood works now. For example, the fact that everybody's in contact with their mates all the time. We're the generation where, if you were on the phone for more than five minutes, somebody snatched it off you on the grounds that it was costing a lot per minute. You certainly didn't have your own phone and you didn't have any privacy. So it is hard for me to understand

what it is like to be somebody who, instead of having to sit and be reflective about their behaviour, just simply starts whining about it to their best friend and has their best friend saying: "Oh, what a bitch your mum is. That's so unfair!"

PG: Linking into this point about hopelessness, you're quoted as saying at Edinburgh International Book Festival, I think in 2009, that realism has gone too far and...

AF: No. I didn't say that, no.

PG: I was going to ask you if that was what you said. No?

AF: No, it was actually quite an interesting and infuriating journalistic twist. It was a room full of social workers and foster parents who had been invited to a talk about literature for children in care. Melvin [Burgess] and I were there and the conversation had become bogged down so I asked them, "Do you worry about what these children are reading and the gloomy endings with mums dying of drugs and all this sort of stuff?" There was a silence and then one of them said, "Well actually our children are such poor readers on the whole it's not an issue," and that was the end of the matter. But *The Guardian* gave it the headline, "Author calls for happy endings," and I got pilloried. Newspapers really ought not to play fast and loose with other people's careers like that. I got hate mail about happy endings.

PG: Well, I'm glad you put that right [both laugh].[7]

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"You don't have to end happy, but you do have to end hopeful."

Let us return for a moment to the issue raised in the introduction concerning what we believe we should write for or give to children in relation to the content of their literature and its endings. Fine has made it clear that she did not call either for happy endings or maintain that

[7] See Jones (2009) for other sources which have defended Fine against this article.

realism has gone too far, but she has argued for the retention of "forward-moving hope" as it takes into account the potential experience deficit of the child reader and more accurately reflects the reality of the situation as regards the amount and nature of evil in people and the world, and this is a point she will return to later in the interview. This brings us nicely onto something of an unwritten rule when it comes to writing children's literature: you don't have to end happy, but you do have to end hopeful. This is not merely an attempt to protect the innocence of the child reader, but, as **Inglis** argues, "is to show them an image of finer forms of life. We tell children of a more nearly excellent world not in order to anesthetize them but as a prompt to the future" (**1981: 279**). Indeed, argues **Zipes**, "once 'struck with hope' for a more humane world, children will want more" (**ctd. Clark, 2004: 118**). **Cadden** (**2012**) argues that the re-emergence of the epilogue in children's fiction, particularly in fantasy fiction, is, in part, to serve this purpose: "it can provide the implied reader reassuring completion beyond closure; it can calm fears that a particular and possible bad outcome won't come to pass down the road […] [it] gives emotional satisfaction […] [and] has the feel of a fable's moral" (***ibid.:*** **343-344**). As a case-in-point, one could argue that the entire structure of the third instalment of Veronica Roth's Divergent trilogy, *Allegiant* (2013), was designed, much to the novel's detriment, in order that such an epilogue could be possible.

This rule has stood for a long time but has, debatably, never really been broken. As **Craig** (**2014**) points out, previous Carnegie Medal winning novels such as Melvin Burgess' *Junk* (1996), Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* (2011), and Sally Gardner's *Maggot Moon* (2012) have all been debated as unsuitable because of their bleakness, and **Dresang** (**1997**) documents how the press surrounding Eve Bunting's 1995 Caldecott Award win for *Smoky Night* (1994) denounced the novel as appallingly hopeless when taking a literal reading. However, as Dresang continues, these stories are generally seen to have redeeming features that continue to allow for hope, or, when one researches a little further, their authors argue for the locating of hope outside of the text. For example, Jon Klassen, who took the 2014 CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal for his art work in *This is Not My Hat* (2012), declared that happiness and hope did not need to be in the ending, for hope was found instead in a story ending as it "should" and in the "act of community, of looking at one another afterward and agreeing that we enjoyed it or not" (**ctd. Furness, 2014a: para. 14**). I also heard the target of the usual attacks of this kind, Melvin Burgess, speak at the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature open-day in May 2013 and he confirmed his adherence to a particular, infamous phrase: "The hope is in the reader". Children's literature does not have to end hopefully, according to Burgess, because bleak endings are there to

shake and shock the reader, to awaken them to their own and other's situations, and to prompt them to find action and hope within themselves. However, whilst the hope may not be in the ending or text, the hope is still, for these authors, to be located somewhere.

The latest Carnegie Medal winner, Kevin Brooks' *The Bunker Diary* (2013), however, has come closer to creating a consensus that the rule has been broken than any other mainstream work of children's (in this case, teenage) fiction. It tells the story of Linus, a teenage boy drugged and kidnapped by a stranger and kept in an underground bunker with five other victims. Unlike other controversial Carnegie winners, *The Bunker Diary*, according to **Bradbury**'s review, "has all the hallmarks of an issue-led discussion piece rather than a literary novel, and seems to have won on shock value rather than merit […] [Brooks'] novel is a uniquely sickening read" (**2014: para. 4**). **Craig** adds that the novel "is depressing both in its nature and its lack of redemption; as a children's critic, I refused to review it on publication" (**2014: para. 9**). Brooks embraces this criticism, however. He readily admitted in his acceptance speech that what stopped the book from finding a publisher for ten years was not the darkness of the novel, but the fact that it wasn't perceived to contain even the slightest inkling of hope. He stated his belief that this was untrue and that the novel does contain hope, but that even if it did not it would not matter. Whilst he might understand and respect the rule that underlies the hope-based school of thought he does not agree with it. Children, particularly teenagers, are aware of the world, they understand a lot and do not need to be fed artificial hope or be told that everything will be alright. Indeed, although he does not explicitly state this, it is implied in his speech that adherence to such a rule has contributed to the bringing about of a situation where a massive potential audience of children and young adults who don't read for pleasure aren't being attracted to reading because they see it as "elitist, babyish, boring, or out of touch, or just something you have to read for school" (**2014: 10'47"**).

The other charge levelled at *The Bunker Diary* is that its violent and disturbing content is gratuitous and sickening. Helen Thompson, chair of the judging panel, defended the novel by arguing that "children and teenagers live in the real world; a world where militia can kidnap an entire school full of girls" and fictional words create an "essential thinking space" for children to consider their feelings and reactions in relation that (**ctd. Furness, 2014a: para. 15-16**). However, as Fine argues above and in a review of Melvin Burgess' *Doing It* (2004), even if such cruelty and thoughts do exist, they are too small a portion of reality to warrant publishing as children's literature, just as "the ignorant, upsetting views of four racists, or four anti-Semites" do not need publishing in a book for young people simply "on the grounds that these

foul, deluded people really do think this way" (**2003: para 14**). Children, as Fred **Inglis** has argued, may well like a dose of terror at times, whether this be in the form of ghosts and ghouls or attempted rape and torture, but it should be reserved for "well-controlled times, with a warm fire and all the lights on all the way upstairs to bed" (**1981: 280**). Stories such as *The Bunker Diary* are, arguably, too abrupt and violent in drawing back the curtain or removing the mask.

Returning then to one of the questions posed in the introduction: If you were to write a children's book, is there anything you would rule out writing about or describing?

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PG: One of the things that I really like about your work is that you write for such a variety of reading abilities and ages. Do you have an age that you prefer to write for?

AF: No, the idea comes first and then you think: who'll like this most? For example, seven-year-olds love nagging, so you write *Nag Club* (2004) and you write it for seven-year-olds.

PG: You tackle a lot of political, social, and ethical issues in your books. Do you focus on the issue first, or do you create a story and then the issue arises?

AF: It's always the issue first. There will be something that interests me, and then I wait, and then the book either vanishes because nothing comes to be a vehicle for it as it were, or it does. So, for example, *The Tulip Touch* (1996) was written in reaction to the tabloid paper's uncompassionate, illiberal, stupid, half-witted response to murderous acts committed by children. "Lock them up and throw away the key. They're little evils!" I mean: "evil"? What bollocks! That story is illuminating the fact that you don't get that sort of behaviour out of nowhere.

I was once giving a talk in Warwick for Egmont[8] and I hadn't got my notes in order so I was hiding in a room and putting the papers in order and in comes this woman who says to her friend, "So I just got his bicycle," – this of her stepson – "and his tape recorder and his radio and his iPod and I flung the whole lot in the bloody pond." And the other woman said, "Quite right, I'd have done the same myself." You think, "*What*!?" So, I come out and I look at these monsters and they were perfectly normal people. Add that to the fact that I was living in Scotland at the time and I was going under this bridge that said, "Since you went under this bridge yesterday 320 Scottish families have fallen apart," or some horrific number. And so that's when you start to think, I'm going to write a book for children in reconstituted families that will be honest about the way they might be feeling about the situations that they're in and the people that they're having to deal with.

So sometimes it's a subject that interests me, sometimes it's something I think would be a good laugh, but sometimes I just get mad. Like *The Road of Bones (2006)* was out of fury at the ignoring of the huge anti-Iraq march in 2003 and the starting of the war because Blair just went on and carried on doing exactly what he wanted to do with his ghastly convictions. There is no place for conviction politics of that sort.

PG: What do you find that the children you interact with find most interesting about your books?

AF: I think children's responses to literature are usually personal. They identify with somebody they could believe in. So, *The Angel of Nitshill Road* (1993) is a book about bullying. That gets a lot of letters because there's a certain point at which the fearless Celeste breaks apart this terrified atmosphere created by Barry's bullying by calling him out when he's taunting someone for not being normal. She says, "Normal! Normal? Do you think you're normal? Is it normal to want to go around making people unhappy? Is it normal to do this and make people cry? Hands up if you want to be normal if being normal means being like Barry Hunter?" Nobody puts their hands up and he's just crushed. It's slightly cruel even for a bully *but* you get so many letters saying that that book was a huge comfort to the child.

I also get a lot of letters about *Goggle-Eyes* (1989) and often they're critical. For example, they might say they thought it was a marvellous

[8] Egmont is the largest specialist children's publisher in the UK whose mission-statement is to inspire children to read.

book until they got to the end and the main character started to like her stepfather and actually they've got a stepfather and they'll never ever like him. Then again, this child wrote to me years later saying that he had been reading the book in school and he described this ghastly documentary about South African rebels being tortured that he shouldn't have been watching because he was too young and he said, "I didn't feel alone anymore because I realised I'm not the only person to cry when I see cruelty against people."

These are the sorts of thing that make them write to you. It's like C. S. Lewis' nice point: "We read to know that we are not alone".[9] You don't feel crazy anymore if you realise that there's somebody out there that you sympathise with in a book, or someone who has just as strong feelings as you, or feelings about the same issue. You don't even have to be the same sort of person as them. I think it must be a very lonely thing to be a bright child at times, because bright children worry terribly about things. They need to know other people do too.

PG: Continuing with child reaction, on your website you talk about getting a lot of response letters to Step By Wicked Step (1995) and you said that was the reward for having to put in so much effort on what was a very emotionally draining book. What was it that children attached to there?

AF: It wasn't just the children actually, but for many it was somebody validating their negative feelings about their home no longer being their home.[10] As we all know from having guests, even if they're guests you invited and you quite like, your home is not your home anymore. They might be just out in the hall, listening to what you're saying or they might be just annoying you simply by the way they eat. I've known children, for example, who have got fat because it was their mum cooking and they weren't going to let the stepchild eat more of the food than they did. It was that sort of trauma, of your house not feeling like your haven anymore, which children responded to.

With adults, they often say, "I hadn't realised how difficult it was for her until I read the book." I think that's interesting; sometimes you have to point out to adults who are reading the book as well something they have missed or misunderstood.

[9] Words placed in the mouth of C. S. Lewis by William Nicholson in his play *Shadowlands* (1989).

[10] All of the children who tell their stories in *Step By Wicked Step* have a step-family and must live with them in some capacity.

PG: This idea of parents learning to empathise with children through children's literature is a very powerful thing indeed.

AF: But so few of them do read the books themselves or aloud to their children. Or they say they're going to and sit down but the phone rings and off they go. As I said, these are highly-stressed, time-pressed parents, and a lot of these phone calls are important work ones, but something's wrong there.

PG: Moving on from what the letters you get back from children say, what do you hope that children will take away with them after reading your books?

AF: Oh well, a good read obviously because that's the essential basis of it all.

Susan Sontag (**1964**) said that she thought the most useful thing that she could do with her fiction was increase the sense of the complexity of things, and I think that doing that for children is terribly important as most of them live with people who have strong opinions and people are all too given to saying things like: "It's perfectly simple, all you have to do is…" But it never is perfectly simple. If it was perfectly simple we would have sorted it by now wouldn't we?

Then I think advice. I try not to be too didactic in the books but there is no doubt that when you're writing for young people the books that they read serve an educational purpose, and by educational I mean emotionally educational as well. In *Goggle-Eyes*, there's this teacher, Mrs Loopy, who says, "Life is a long and doggy business. Some books help you live your life, others help you take a break, and the best do both at the same time." I suppose that as a character she is quoting me, as I feel that is true. I remember reading *The Silver Sword* (1956) and *The Hobbit* (1937) at school. There's stuff in both about fortitude, determination, resilience, and courage, and I remember being a bigger and stronger person at the end of them and knowing that I would know how to behave better. Those books don't just enrich you and they don't just furnish your mind but they can actually educate the moral senses in the same way that science trains the intellect and art makes you think about your life.

PG: In terms of education, your books are used a lot in schools. Do you ever have a sense that your books are being used rightly or wrongly or are you happy to just let them head off into the education system?

AF: I mean *[sighs]* if somebody tried to drag me to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* they would find themselves on the floor. Having pulled it apart in school myself and looked at the clockwork I never want to see that particular bloody play again. But now I love Shakespeare and understand how to read him. I do think that certain books must lay down their lives so that others may live and be read with understanding and knowledge of their subtleties, but I would hate a child to only come across my books through school and exegesis. I also think that there is some grim work done in schools. I get letters that make you shudder as they say things like, "Dear Anne, we have been reading *Bill's New Frock*. We have read chapter three. We have counted up the similes. There are 20 similes in all. I wish we could find out what happens but teacher says there is no time." These poor children are being taught sophisticated parts of speech but they're not being given the story, and many of these children are not being read to at home so they're not getting a book delivered in a proper way. At school they're chopping it up and you just think, "No wonder they don't read at home. The magic's gone, hasn't it?" Frightening. Absolutely frightening. Philip Pullman says it's like expecting a child to pull a clock apart and put it together again before they even have the concept of time, and I think that he's quite right about that.

I think the corner, hopefully, has turned, but essentially there is still a huge confusion of the process with the product. Art is a product and it really doesn't matter how you get there. It's what you get at the end that counts. To try and teach children to ape the processes of authors doesn't do justice to that. And it is only some authors that are being aped anyway. I come at it freestyle and don't know what I'm doing, don't make a plan, and don't draft my work out. I just start at the beginning and take my time to get through to the end and then stop. As a child I just sat down and flew.

PG: Coming onto your own experiences, I was reading your website and was particularly taken with how you described the lessons you most enjoyed as the ones where there weren't endless discussions or sharing of ideas. You most enjoyed the absolute silence in which you could write and learn to judge your own stories on your own basis. Do you feel that's something you'd like to see more of in classrooms today?

AF: I think it would suit at least half of them better than what they seem to be doing at the moment. I don't think they do nearly enough freestyle creative writing. But any way of writing is not going to suit everybody. So what is most important is that instead of being besieged with some ideology about what will work best, you have to come at it so that each child should have as many opportunities to do what works for them as possible. It will be quite important to get them to also learn how to do it other ways but it shouldn't always be one way or the other.

PG: In February 2012, you argued on BBC Radio Three's The Essay that children are still exposed to outdated gender stereotypes through the retention of classic works such as The Tiger That Came to Tea (1968). ***Hannah Furness*** *also reported in* ***March 2014****(****b****) on your staunch rejection of the idea of pink and blue marketing, and you were an early figure in relation to exploring gender issues in contemporary children's literature because of Bill's New Frock (1989).*[11] *Gender is clearly a topic that has spanned a great amount of time for you. Do you feel that you could explain a bit more about your current thinking on gender inequality or gender divides in contemporary children's literature and childhood?*

AF: Something that causes a problem is that much-loved children's books stay on the shelves for decades after the image they put over is out of date. Mum wiping her floury hands on an apron. Daddy with his briefcase. That's light years away from how our lives are now. My "consciousness raising", as you might have called it then, happened when I moved to the States in the 70s. The feminist movement had just begun and was extremely strong. I just absorbed it naturally and when I came back to Britain I was surprised that it had not taken off so much. But I did assume there would be solid progress. Where I perceive things as sliding back is when the notion of postmodern feminism came in. In this respect, it really is what's jokingly called The Curse of Po-Mo. You call it 'Choice', and as long as you've labelled it choice you feel free to go staggering around in silly shoes that are going to break your ankle, spend hours plucking your eyebrows, or lying on a table having Brazilian waxes. I just think, "What a cosmic waste of time. What a cosmic, cosmic waste of time." And it doesn't end up being choice at all. You just want to say: "Ladies, get a life, read a book, and don't spend your whole Saturday morning in Top Shop looking for the exact right avocado coloured this or

[11] *Bill's New Frock* tells the story of a young boy who wakes up one day to find out that he has to wear a frilly, pink dress to school and experience just what life is like when one wears such a dress. See **Butler** (**2009**) for a fuller exploration of *Bill's New Frock* in relation to the feminist, and queer and transgender movements of the early 1990s.

that. Just look at what's going on." That's why I wrote *Charm School* (1999). *Charm School* was a book I never thought I'd have to write.

Then of course you end up with these pockets of sexism that you can scarcely believe. A Prime Minister's patronising, "Calm down dear."[12] A level of sexism where you think, "You really should have got a sharp poke in the snout for that remark."

I'm quite despairing sometimes. I used to think that it was because so few people had thought about it. Now I think a lot of it stems from young people simply not knowing enough history and not realising what battles have been fought for them and how important those battles still are. Most importantly, I think they simply don't realise that women can so easily, become the pleat in the family economy to be let in and taken out as circumstances warrant. I am really shocked that women will still have children that men claim to also want, then put up with doing as many hours in a formal job and then come home and do two thirds of the housework.

PG: What was your time like as children's laureate, and, if you could do it again, is there anything you would do differently?

AF: I wouldn't do it again. It was exhausting. I'm really pleased with the things I did though and all of my projects are rolling along. For example, the interleaved braille picture books.[13] There are about 400 in the library, and every year more children go into transition to blindness or more blind parents want to share picture books with their children, and the prisoners still do brailing. I'm really proud of that as it is a marvellous resource for blind or seriously visually impaired children, and it's free. We send them two or three books to start off their little home libraries and they keep them forever. These may be the only books that a blind child is ever going to have because braille books are so expensive.

There are the downloadable book plates which are still up,[14] and there was the tactile wall for the blind school in South London which is lovely when you see the children coming out at break.[15] I just really enjoyed everything I did.

[12] A reference to David Cameron's infamous use of the Esure advert's catch phrase in an attempt to silence Angela Eagle in April 2011.
[13] http://www.annefine.co.uk/mhl/vi.php
[14] http://www.myhomelibrary.org/
[15] http://www.annefine.co.uk/tactile.php

Straight after that we had to start the "no to age banding" campaign because the publishers had decided that it would be cheaper and easier for supermarkets if every book had an age printed on the back.[16] Not just a sticker that you could peel off when you got home, but printed on the back. We have one of the most inclusive educational systems in the world with everybody in the same classroom, and if you have a book box that tells everyone how different they are or deflates their confidence because they're not reading in their supposed age band, it defeats the point of that. I thought that was grotesque and a lot of effort and time went into the campaign. It was a few years after the laureate I think, but it was possibly the most important campaign I've ever been involved in in children's literature.

PG: You saw Madame Doubtfire (1987) turned into the hugely successful film Mrs. Doubtfire (1993). What was that like as an experience?

AF: Well, I didn't really share it. I'm not crazy about being involved in these things as if it's not done exactly my way then I don't want it done at all. So I left them to it. Chris Columbus did write a nice letter saying that if I wasn't coming over for the filming then did I have anything I wanted to request. I thought I'd be like the sister in *Beauty and the Beast* who asked only for a single rose, so, because he had just made *Home Alone* (1990) and *Home Alone 2* (1992) which had execrably horrible children, and the whole point about the children in *Madame Doubtfire* is that they're normal children, I said: "Please don't make the children brats, that's all I ask." I think that is possibly one of the reasons why so many families like the story, because their children can identify with those children.

PG: Finally, what's next for you?

AF: I have just retold three fairy tales: *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, *Diamonds and Toads*, and *Rose Red and Snow White* and I've really enjoyed doing them. But what I'm going to do next I don't know. I might take a clinical teenager's view of the parent as if they were a science project…

[16] http://www.notoagebanding.org/

PG: Thank you very much, that's all my questions.

AF: That was absolutely a pleasure.

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