



The Borrowers Anew

Article Author:

[Judith Elkin](#) [1]

[17](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Judith Elkin talks to **Mary Norton**.

If you are already committed followers of the Borrowers, then you will be delighted to know that, after a gap of 20 years, Mary Norton has written a fifth book, **The Borrowers Avenged**.

<!--break-->

If you have missed them, now is the time to catch up. **Judith Elkin** went to talk to **Mary Norton** at her home in Devon.

Marcus Crouch has called the Borrowers: 'one of the few really original ideas in children's literature.' The idea of tiny people about 5' high, living under the floor, or behind the skirting board, who 'borrow' from 'human beans' all those small objects which keep disappearing, and put them to ingenious uses, is a very satisfying one. After all, where do all the drawing pins, safety pins, paperclips, matches and stamps go to? You know you keep buying them, but you can never find them when you want them. It is almost, as Roger Lancelyn Green once said, 'as if we always knew that the Borrowers were there but had forgotten the fact until Mary Norton reminded us of it.'

This is fantasy at its best. There is no magic and once the reader has accepted the possibility of the existence of these 'borrowers', everything else in the story follows quite logically, and perfectly calculated to scale. The stories depict a dwindling and precarious society through the characters of Pod, the brave, sensible, reliable father. Homily, the worrier, the inveterate housewife, and Arrietty, the bright-eyed daughter, the chronicler, the enthusiast. They are real characters with genuine family feelings and quaint, serious ethics.

The books are great favourites particularly with readers who like to get totally absorbed in what Mary Norton describes as 'the quiet of the book'. In the past 18 months alone, since Puffin reissued the paperback editions, 200,000 copies have been sold, with the original title **The Borrowers** continuing to sell 3,000 copies per month. They have been translated into 14 languages. Considering that her books have become classics in the children's book world, Mary Norton has a disarming lack of confidence in her own writing abilities, and is particularly anxious that children should like her new book.

For her, writing began as a necessity. Born in the early 1900s, she went on the stage at 18, married a shipping magnate and lived in Portugal for some years. In the 1931 slump, the company lost a fortune and Mary returned to England, where she began to write short stories for an American magazine, to support her four children. This was the age of the short story and she regards it as a wonderful training ground for her later writing.

Her first books, **The Magic Bed-Knob** (1945) and **Bonfire and Broomsticks**, later amalgamated into **Bedknob and Broomstick** and made into a film, grew out of stories she told her own children. But **The Borrowers** was written from her own childhood. 'It's a period piece,' she says. 'It began as part of an early fantasy in my life as a very short-sighted child, before it was known that I needed glasses. I was an inveterate lingerer, a gazer into banks and hedgerows, a rapt investigator of shallow pools, a tier-down by stream-like teeming ditches.' As she concentrated on the roots of the,

trees, the branches, the minute details of flowers and small creatures, she began to wonder 'what it would be like, to live among such creatures - human oneself to all intents and purposes, but as small and vulnerable as they? What would you live on? What make your home? Which would be your enemies and which your friends?' So, her fertile imagination invented all kinds of ways in which these small people could survive, move around and use odd human 'borrowings'. But this fantasy world was forgotten during her boarding school years. 'It was only just before the 1940 war, when a change was creeping over the world, as we had known it, that one thought again of the Borrowers. There were human men and women who were forced to live (by stark and tragic necessity) the kind of lives a child had once envisaged for a race of mythical creatures.' But she says she prefers not to read other levels of meaning into her books, as some people have done. These are 'practical stories' for children, not theological or political ones.

She wrote **The Borrowers** for fun. She did not really think anyone would like it. It was not the kind of children's book being written in the early 1950s, when children's books tended to be about nice happy, cosy, safe things. Nobody wrote about the struggle for survival in an alien world. But this is what **The Borrowers** is about. Mary Norton sees the stories as being about 'human strife... of people being brave under adversity' in their perpetual struggle for existence. She also saw the original book as complete in itself. But she had planned without the public outcry which demanded to know how the Borrowers survived once they had left the old house and ventured out-of-doors. Even she herself was beginning to think of Arrietty, Pod and Homily as real people and she too wanted to know what happened to them. So she wrote **The Borrowers Afield**. these first two titles both being set in her family home in Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire. **The Borrowers Afloat** was written from a thatched cottage near Hartland Point in Devon: 'If you listen to the murmur of the streams, it's like people talking in very low voices. I used to walk a great deal and listen and look.' The fourth book, **The Borrowers Aloft** was written from an old farmhouse in East Anglia where she had a friend who was a free balloonist. The details of the Borrowers' escape in the contraption made out of a strawberry basket, balloon, fountain pen and household gas were immaculately worked out and it would have worked!

How did she come to write **The Borrowers Avenged**, after a 21-year gap? She found herself, for the first time for many years, living in a remote corner of Ireland, free from the stresses of house renovation, and felt that perhaps a final summing up of the Borrowers was required. She thought that the wicked Platters who had stolen Pod, Homily and Arrietty in the last book, 'had it coming to them'. She found that she could easily pick up the threads and was 'as interested as anyone to know what happened to them'. It took a long time. She normally rewrites her books about three times and is terribly anxious 'not to cheat' in her immaculate miniature world. She is determined to use 'the right word in the right place... if you've got a good enough story going, it does not matter if the child does not understand certain words, he will get the meaning.' She is not a prolific writer, in fact does not really see herself as a writer at all. 'I don't feel the day is ruined if I haven't written anything.'

The Borrowers Avenged is longer than the original four books and the opening which, as in the previous books, introduces the Borrowers through the brief glances that humans may have caught of them, is also longer. But the characters are absolutely in keeping with the earlier books and once again the atmosphere, the fine eye for detail in the description of their surroundings is beautifully sustained. There is even a charming new Borrower, Peagreen.

Mary Norton deliberately tried to write a story which will stand on its own without reference to previous titles and yet in which all the relevant details of previous adventures are carefully recalled or introduced in some subtle way. She has succeeded. But I'd still recommend reading the other four titles first: it is such a pity to miss the immense pleasure of the earlier books.

I believe in the Borrowers. I'm just sorry I've never met them!

The original illustrator was Diana Stanley, a friend of Mary Norton. From **The Borrowers** (Dent).

Judith Elkin was at one time Head of Services for Children and Young People in Birmingham Libraries. Her invaluable book list **Multi-racial Books for the Classroom** (YLG Publications) is now in its third revised edition. Just published is **Nowhere to Play**, (A and C Black, 0 7136 2236 9, £3.95) a picture book about the children who live in the shacks of Caracas and their fight for a playground. It is based on a true incident but sadly the real children's battle did

not have such a happy outcome as the one in the story. Judith Elkin has done an excellent English version of the original text by Kurusa. Monika Doppert's pictures give a delightful and informative view of the children and their community. There's a place for this in almost any classroom.

The Borrowers (1952) Dent, 0 460 05104 0, £4.95: Puffin, 0 14 03.0110 0, £1.00

The Borrowers Afield (1955) Puffin, 01403.01380,£1.10

The Borrowers Afloat (1959) Puffin, 0 14 03.0458 4, £1.10

The Borrowers Aloft (1961) Puffin, 0 14 03.0453 3, 95p

The Borrowers Avenged (1982) Kestrel, 0 7226 5804 4, £4.95

Page Number:

21

Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20): <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/17/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/the-borrowers-aneu>

Links:

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/judith-elkin>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/17>