



Authorgraph No.67: Lynne Reid Banks

Article Author:

[Stephanie Nettell](#) [1]

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Lynne Reid Banks interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**.

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Talk *flows* out of her. Memories, opinions, anecdotes, all vivid with facial expression and character-voices: Lynne Reid Banks is a compulsive storyteller. The clear voice, hair drawn back ballet-style, and a joyous love of colour and pattern echo her early ties with the theatre, while the comfortable figure and seething emotional energy now appear uncannily Jewish, mystically born of that youthful commitment to Israel, spiritual though not religious, which was to mould her entire adult life.

She was born in Barnes, one of the Regency houses in Castelnau her home-base until her mother left it in 1978. Now transformed, it was on the market at £685,000 just the week before our meeting and Lynne had sneaked a nostalgically covetous viewing: even the garden had been wondrously redesigned, removing an 'awful old garden shed' - and into her mind crept the magic of her sixth birthday and a brand new Wendy house...

The house was leasehold. Her father was a GP in a poor area of Hammersmith, lumbered with lifelong debt from his own father who'd bought the practice: her mother (clearly a power in Lynne's life) had been a well-known and beautiful actress who forever regretted dutifully giving up her career to become the good little doctor's wife. She sent Lynne, at nine deemed by her aunts a spoilt only-child, to a Catholic boarding school - oddly, since she wasn't religious and actually anti-Catholic - and then found a typically lateral solution to her daughter's desperate homesickness by herself moving into a cottage in the grounds and becoming a much-loved adjunct to the school.

In 1940 she fulfilled her patriotic duty to future generations by taking Lynne and a boy cousin as evacuees to the Canadian prairies; by the time their lawyer host, alternating lecherous benders with tedious remorse, had made their mistake clear, it was impossible to return. They eventually found independence in a little house on the wrong side of the tracks, and came home at the end of war. Lynne was 15, and influenced profoundly. Yes, she'd had an amazing time, but neither her own nor her mother's relationship with her father ever truly recovered; there was the cruel contrast of Canadian plenty with the grey grimness of post-war Britain, and the bitter fuel-less cold of 1946-7; more vitally, there was the sense of having missed something important of her country's experience. This acute sense of loss - of absence, guilt, whatever - was complicated and heightened by newsreels of Belsen and Auschwitz which so affected her that in the years to come she became engrossed in, captivated and fascinated by, Israel and its destiny and all things Jewish. Though not apparent at first, it marked out the path her life was to follow.

Heart set on the theatre, she refused to go back to school, though a resented secretarial training has ever after proved its worth. The Italia Conti was followed by pre-RADA in Hampstead, then RADA itself: unpublished short stories and plays were the by-product of five years in rep, but at 24 she was able to appear in her own Yorkshire family comedy, **It Never Rains But It Pours...** Her father's sudden death a year later, leaving a leased house and no income, redirected her to more profitable jobs, culminating in research secretary to Wolf Mankowitz - a wonderful time, on the fringe of all

sorts of things like **A Kid for Two Farthings**.

Then a call from BBC Television proved to be for *her*: her play was to take the prime-time Sunday drama slot. The ensuing work and diversions ended her job; the ensuing crucifying reviews ('It Never Rains But It Bore from a *friend*') ended dreams of playwriting tame and sent her blundering into journalism. 1955 brought burgeoning freelance opportunities, and an extraordinary crossed-wires moment (she was interviewing Aidan Crawley, editor of the groundbreaking News, while he thought she was after a reporting job) led to her becoming one of the first two women reporters in television. 'We *pioneered* vox pop interviews in the street - most men thought you were soliciting and sheered off.'

Not that these trailblazers were given the hard-news stories (and industrialists tended to assume they were warm-ups for the real interview later), but one roving report was significant - Israel in 1960. Nervous of fulltime writing, she continued working for six years while writing in the quiet moments of the news service - 'Half of **The L-Shaped Room** was written on ITN stationery'. Publication, a film, and that was *it*.

A turning-point in every way, for by then she had met Chaim Stephenson, an Israeli sculptor on study-leave in England ('the kibbutz can't stand bachelors, so he was probably meant really to find a wife-well, he found me'), and, in a decision that must have felt preordained, returned with him in 1962. From a Liverpudlian background, Chaim had gone to Israel in 1948, fought in the war, and helped found a kibbutz in the north. 'I fully intended to take him out of there - me' (she sounds like Miss Piggy) doing dirty farmwork in the country? - hut, eight years later, dot dot dot. I loved it.' Their three sons were born there in quick succession; Adiel and Omri are bible names, Gillon is a modern Hebrew name from 'gill', meaning joy. She has since written extensively on Israel, giving Israeli settings to four novels, and in 1979 published **Letters to my Israeli Sons**, an ambitious historical survey for her teenage boys that was both challenging and touching.

And in Israel, teaching English instinctively as a medium for self-expression - at a time when this was almost a crime ("Never let them make a mistake" was their fundamental rule) Lynne discovered a lifelong joy. Now, wherever she is in the world, India, - Tanzania, Nepal, as well as here and America, at the first opportunity she prowls into startled classrooms, hungry for the thrill of setting young minds alight.

Back in Britain to pick up both their careers, she published **One More River** (1972), which she's now in the process of rewriting for an older age-group in America. 'True, many of the suggested changes - like removing the preachy, authorial voice - are absolutely right for 20 years on. but American publishers do tend to underestimate the capabilities of their readership. I know, because I've been into hundreds of schools and seen these bright kids: their teachers want *stretching* writing and (a quoting voice) vocabulary enrichment. That's why, when they finally took **I, Houdini** (1978 in UK) to please me, so I'd go on turning out the **Indian** books, it then sold brilliantly, although it had been rejected by every American publisher because the words were too long. In fact there's a greater commitment to reading and literature in the States than here: they do more reading aloud in class and at home, and have all sorts of conferences and gatherings of teachers and librarians (*wonderful* for writers - a word-of-mouth recommendation for a teacher can mean 30 copies of a hook!).

'I get about 500 letters from America for every one from Britain - hardly a post when letters don't come. I *read* them all, but I can answer only very special individual ones - if one letter answers 30 children then it would be criminal not to reply, and fan letters are of course part of your bread and butter, but after 2,000 you do get a bit fed up.'

It took three years from finishing **The Indian in the Cupboard** (1981 in UK) for fan mail to begin. It was a surprise: 'I thought **Houdini** was a better hook, I'd been sure I'd hit the jackpot with **Letters** which absolutely *bombed*, and **Sarah and After**, still my favourite book, is one of the few out of print. But one night a long-distance call said the paperback rights for **Indian** had fetched a large sum at auction, so I thought, maybe they know something I don't - and they did! It took off, won awards, and it's made my fortune.' Success brought not only its two sequels but reissues from her unknown days, like the charming fantasy **The Farthest-Away Mountain** (1976, though written before she'd published anything).

How she invented a bedtime story for eight-year-old Omri, to counter his complaint about a grotty tin medicine cupboard ('There's no magic about new things, Omri'), about him, their house and his real-life friend Patrick, and how, when she was desperate for ideas years later, he reminded her, is now an established routine that takes about an hour. 'The Indian is in a long line of stories about miniature beings, and to avoid just another Pinnochio, I had to give him a real life somewhere else, so that he had a ready-made personality as soon as he appears.

'Teachers in Alaska point out that he is a stereotype, but if he had been too unlike everyone's idea of an Indian, especially children's, he wouldn't have had the impact.' She waves away my assumption that the cowboy-and-Indian stereotype was deliberate to allow them to break out into real, complex. feelings. 'You credit me with too much subtlety. Writers work intuitively - when I read long treatises about Omri being a substitute parent, enabling children to recognise the responsible caring role, I'm **pop-eyed!** I've discovered I do include messages in my books only because teachers are always looking for them, but I simply aim to keep the narrative moving and the characters developing, and to do that I must *like* the protagonists and believe in them - so they can't be too black or too white.

'When I look at books I wrote years ago I find stereotypical aspects I never intended. I myself seem to have been a victim of my upbringing, for now I blush at some of the things I said about the black guy in **The L-Shaped Room**, and **My Darling Villain** (which I'd even wanted to call "Kate and the Class War") may not fully have solved the problem of finding instantly recognisable signals without stereotyping.'

Anyway, what's real and what's a stereotype? A best-selling novelist lives in a low-beamed cottage in rural Dorset, vibrantly cluttered with world-wide folk art and the magnificent bronzes of her sculptor-husband, walking 'neath gnarled apple trees across a yard full of hens and ducks to the farm-building that houses her study and his studio... Oh yeah? Believe me, Lynne Reid Banks is very real - and very much alive.

Details of books mentioned in this Authorgraph:

The L-Shaped Room, Penguin, 0 14 00.1913 8, £3.99 pbk

One More River, Vallentine Mitchell, 0 85303 149 5, £9.95; Plus, 0 14 03.2509 3, £3.50 pbk

I, Houdini, Dent, 0 460 06873 3, £8.50; Lions, 0 00 673363 8, £2.25 pbk

The Indian in the Cupboard, Dent, 0 460 06992 6, £8.50; Lions, 0 00 673051 5, £2.50 pbk

Return of the Indian, Dent, 0 460 06239 5, £8.50; Lions, (100 673052 3, £2.50 pbk

The Secret of the Indian, Collins, 0 00 184746 5, £6.95; Lions, 0 00 673505 3, £2.75 pbk

The Farthest-Away Mountain, Lions, 0 00 672998 3, £1.95 pbk

My Darling Villain, Bodley Head, 0 370 30723 2, £4.50 pbk

Letters to my Israeli Sons and Sarah and After are out of print.

Other novels include:

The Fairy Rebel, Lions, 0 00 673220 8, £2.25 pbk

The Writing on the Wall, Puffin, 014 03 1479 2, £2.25 pbk

Maura's Angel, Puffin, 0 14 013 1842 9, £2.50 pbk

Melusine: A Mystery, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 12548 0, £7.95; Plus, 0 14 03 2793 2, £2.99 pbk



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