



Reflections from Docksides School

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Bernard Ashley on his new series of school stories.

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There won't ever be a meet-the-author session without someone asking where characters and stories come from. For me it either precedes or follows, 'How do you manage to do your job and also write?'- the quick answer to which is that I couldn't continue with the job I do if I didn't have my **Way of Escape**(Graham Greene).

As to the other questions, plots come from the life around me and, like every writer who has ever put pen to paper, I also draw characters from the people I know. Reading biographies from Dickens to Hemingway bears out the universality of that. So I don't blame anybody for asking me if I get my child characters from the children I teach: but what I'm always at pains to point out is that no-one is lifted whole as a character and nobody's situation is taken complete; no-one is ever used. Writers don't work like that, if only because of the laws of libel. Like a doctor or a lawyer, I have a strict code of professional conduct which includes a meticulous regard for the pupil's and the parent's (and the teacher's) right to confidentiality.

Perhaps the nearest to a 'lift' was when I wrote **The Trouble with Donovan Croft**; but I had first gone to the parents of the six-year-old white elective mute girl for permission to create my ten-year-old black male. There are hundreds of situations which are the stuff of school life that can legitimately be used without the charge of dishonouring confidentiality: bed wetting; running off; not being picked; being picked on; being betrayed; being shamed; living with one parent or no parent; having a disability: all common elements of life in school, and fair sources for the writer so long as individual confidentiality is preserved. And real children are the stuff of story if only because they lead such dramatic lives. When were you last chased into the lavatory? But there must be no disguise: disguise thick or thin is against the code: what I use are the elements of a recognised situation and characters created from combinations of attributes. And before anyone asks, no, I don't carry on teaching for copy.

Docksides School

?is child of Clipper Street. Judith Elliott, who had created the renowned Banana Books at Heinemann, sought to repeat her success when she set about the first list of her own, Orchard Books: calling her series of 5,000-word complete stories 'Orchard Story Books'. Within this format several authors were commissioned to write their own mini-series. Mine were the Clipper Streets; but because Jean Ure was doing the Woodside School Stories I was asked to avoid too much school. Later, Julia MacRae asked me to do a similar series for her: but away from Orchard I could actively go for the school situation - so Docksides School came about: and - since I hadn't moved from south London, I set my school not too far away from Clipper Street, just a few miles down the Thames from Greenwich, where Henry VIII had created his dockyard at Woolwich.

I had my brief and I had a series of deadlines: and to spur me on, I had a good advance.

I know Dockside School. It has elements of all the primary schools I've ever worked in; and it looks like Meridian Primary School in Greenwich, an old London three-decker with narrow staircases and a small exercise yard under high walls, just along the road from where they filmed **The Krays**: in other words, like something out of Dickens, and with great dramatic potential.

Boat Girl

Many Vietnamese families have led dramatic lives, and there are Vietnamese children in many of our schools. Some have learned English better than their parents; and without lighting on an individual it was this thread which I first sought to unravel in **Boat Girl** - that frustration some children feel when their parents appear not to understand. I remember the annoyance of some Sicilian children in Hertfordshire when they had to do running translations of **Coronation Street** for their parents. (I can't be bothered: I only tell her some of it,' was a typical admission.) Many of us have conducted parent interviews through the language skills of the children being discussed, so I began this story with the central character, Kim, having to translate for her father at a school meeting, sitting alongside him in the hall and whispering to him only some of what she thought he hadn't understood.

The other main element in the story comes from my meeting an adult Vietnamese at the other end of the language scale: someone who had come to Britain in that terrifying exodus and had, against enormous odds and considerable prejudice - but also with a great deal of caring and with skilled help - qualified as a primary teacher. I interviewed her in her home, where much of the background to **Boat Girl** emerged: and I could never have invented so dramatic and moving a story. I introduced some common experiences of School Journeys - the bedroom groups anti the children who don't get letters from home: but most of it is Think's and her husband's and their children's. And I knew, as I typed the final draft, that it would be a story I would always feel privileged to have written.

So, put at its crudest, I had a strong lead story to the series, and now I needed a second to partner it, since Julia MacRae intended to publish in twos.

The Ghost of Dockside School

I can still remember the summer when I was eleven, the final year of primary school. It was hot, and we were allowed to take individual P.T. mats out to the playground to sunbathe on. (In the winter the caretaker used to hose the playground to make slides for the big boys, a most accommodating school!) But that summer we weren't really interested in a tan. Since Easter there had reared a sudden interest in the opposite sex, and Bernard Ashley would have settled for his mat being in the shade if it still put him next to Maureen Vickery. Part of the writing pleasure is that trance at the desk as the mind occupies territory where the body once was, and as I write I'm in the playground, smelling the sisal of those green and red swirled mats, feeling their hard ridges, and hearing myself agreeing with everything Maureen Vickery said. Love can hit young and surprisingly hard: so why not in a story for those who are as seriously struck as I was?

There are two other well-known ingredients in **The Ghost of Dockside School**, and no need for disguise. One is the ghost herself. Surely every school with an upstairs has a ghost, lurking in the furthest room. My previous job was in a 1902 three-decker with towers and turrets, and my wife and I know the room the ghost inhabited: it was mine. From our jobs before that, and the old village school log book, I know how the ghost in my story died. I needed only to change her name. The second ingredient is the school play. At my present school we build into our drama curriculum a 'theatre experience' in Year Six, with scripts and scenery and technical talk of 'stage right' and 'stage left'. It's the time when children play the men and women, and someone a boy has ignored for seven years can suddenly put on make-up and turn his stomach inside out. No-one is ever quite the same after the play. And thus, neither is Lee, who had both a softer and a braver heart than anyone had thought.

Size-ism

We fight a regular battle in school against racism and sexism. Our institutions are the most effective of any in society in

pursuing equal opportunities. Now a new word is creeping in, and perhaps it should always have been there. Sizeism. 'Fat and 'short' and their synonyms are arguably the first two words of contempt children employ, and two of the deepest causes of unhappiness in school. 'Fat' seems worse on the surface, but being short brings insidious insults often disguised as affection: again a common problem, which I used as the basis for **Getting In**, where a mix of created child and my real maternal grandparents performed for me in a 'step' story (one tactic being tried, then another, then another: a favourite structure in picture books but not used greatly in older fiction): in this case successive attempts to get into the gang.

The Caretaker's Cat

Finally, special needs. I wonder if there are any schools without a Miranda Finch from **The Caretaker's Cat**? She wasn't invented although she isn't anyone specific, she just is; and I know her and despair of her and love her. She's the one central character from the four books the publishers thought more stories should be focused upon: single-minded, unpredictable, disturbed in subtle ways, recognised by peers and teachers alike.

In this last book our school in Charlton comes the closest to being recognised. Elsie Lennox, the illustrator, suggested it might be appropriate to draw me as the headteacher, Mr Holt, and I vainly went along with the idea. But when Julia MacRae saw the jacket rough she vetoed it-and quite rightly-as ego-centric, so Elsie gave me some hair in thin disguise. She had also taken photographs of our caretaker and our secretary to base her pictures on, and they remain. But Miranda? She's certainly single-minded: Elsie Lennox herself, drawn younger.

There are writers who retire to folds in the Sussex Downs or to their second homes in France, some who go on to write maybe one or two valid novels about their London lives. But if they stick with contemporary fiction, before too long the books will need to be about Sussex and France if they're to leave the ring of truth: who ever wrote a contemporary, gritty Sheffield story after years in the Seychelles? When I leave teaching, my books won't be about school any more, I promise, they'll be about where I am. Meanwhile they'll go on reflecting my life like the most polished mirrors I can find. But that's not why I stay doing the job: *really*.

Bernard Ashley's **Dockside School Stories** are published by Julia MacRae, priced £3.95 each

Boat Girl, 0 86203 445 0

The Ghost of Dockside School, 0 86203 446 9

Getting In, 0 86203 463 9

The Caretaker's Cat, 0 86203 404

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