



Smiling at the Crocodile

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Mary Hoffman on the sequel to **Amazing Grace**.

The story of the sequel to **Amazing Grace**

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Writing a best-seller is easy - because you don't know you're doing it. Writing a sequel to a best-seller is a totally different matter. The day I wrote down the text for **Amazing Grace**, I wrote another story, since bottom-drawered, and the outline for a third, which became the modestly successful **Leon's Lucky Lunchbreak**. I had no idea then, or even later when I saw Caroline Binch's first wonderful picture of Grace and her grandmother, that I had written my breakthrough book.

I don't think that sank in till I went on holiday to the States last April and agreed to do a few signing sessions in bookshops while I was there. Americans take children's books and their writers a lot more seriously than the British do. **Amazing Grace** had a review to itself across three columns in **The New York Times**, from a journalist who found more in it than I had remembered putting there.

Queues of eager children who kept me in a Denver bookshop for several hours contrasted with the two or three who'd gathered in my local North London one a few months earlier. When I got back to England, my editor at Frances Lincoln, Janetta Otter-Barry, dropped the casual remark, 'It's a pity you don't want to do a sequel,' and I had to do some serious thinking.

I'm not keen on the modern desire to turn every good thing into a series. **Back to the Future** was a perfectly constructed film and, although the next two were mildly enjoyable, we didn't really need them. Sequels are what readers construct in their heads after putting a book down. Who wants 'Son of Heathcliff', 'Return to Bleak House' or 'Ulysses 2'? But there are one or two successful follow-ups, notably **The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole**. Could Caroline and I match Sue Townsend?

The desire to do so is understandable: the satisfaction for readers of more-of-the-same comfort, which can so easily lead to indistinguishable and undistinguished writing like the 'Babysitter Club' books; for publishers, writers and illustrators, the assurance of a ready-made market at least initially. Spin-off publishing and merchandising is where the big money is - just think of **The Snowman** or **Spot** - and sequels are the most basic spin-off of all.

Why resist? Well, is it going to be a *real* book? Is there a genuine second story to be told about this character or will you just apply the formula, take the money and run? The original book had some clear underlying messages: all stories are for all people, girls can be strong, being Black is something to be proud of, life is what you make it, don't let people put you down, go for it...

If you read the newspaper coverage, both quality and tabloid, of the recent PEN survey, you might think I wrote those

little slogans down on my cuff and consulted them every few minutes at my word-processor. Actually I was only wearing a towel, being in a women's health club at the time, and I just started to write 'Grace was a girl who loved stories', without knowing what was going to come next. Not quite as ultimately life-changing as 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit...'but almost as unplanned.

The sequel wasn't ever going to be that relaxed. The family who modelled for Caroline's pictures had moved back to The Gambia in West Africa. Grace was approaching nine years old and the difficulties seemed enormous. But Frances Lincoln is a very enterprising person as well as a company, and she and they all seemed inspired by the first book's message that we could do anything we wanted, if only we put our minds to it.

What clinched it was a story which suddenly started to nag at me to be told. Grace was now a role-model and heroine for thousands of children. She was from a warm and loving family, but in the original book there was no mention of her father. How would an imaginative, story-loving child like Grace react if she had an absent father? How would she feel if she went to visit him and met his second family? She could feel torn in two or she could come to feel like the link between the two halves of her family. If she could pull off that transformation, she could help and encourage many children who find themselves in that situation today.

'Write it, put down the phone and write it now. We need it!' said my Denver bookseller friend when I outlined the plot to her. Thus encouraged, I flew to The Gambia with Caroline one cold, grey morning last December. It was an overwhelming experience. I had never been to Africa, never met the people whose faces I had grown to know so well from Caroline's pictures, never spent more than an hour or two with Caroline herself, come to that.

We landed, three hours late, in brilliant afternoon sunshine and were met by drums and dancers and a terrifying figure called Mama Para. We were to see him a few times again in other entertainments. It is a Christmas character, basically benevolent, but must surely cause a few nightmares among Gambian children? Grace, whose real name is Salan, had gone to the airport to meet us at the right time, but because of the delay, was not there when we arrived. Her mother, Lorraine, was, and I searched her features for the Ma of the book as we drove the dusty road from Banjul airport to Bakau, where they live.

One of the well-intentioned ideas I had had for the second book was to show modern Africa - tall white buildings, thriving commerce, anything to get away from the mud-hut and famine images which is all that many British children, even Black ones, see of that continent. But The Gambia is not Kenya or Nigeria. Its only profitable trade is the tourist one and there is a big contrast between the hotels and the rest of the buildings. You see sheep and chickens wandering about the roads of the capital Banjul and only a few of those roads are metalled.

So that was one good intention out of the window! The Africa I saw was startling. To Western eyes, homes made up of odd bits and pieces, dirt roads and shoeless children make a strong first impression. It would be dishonest to pretend otherwise in my case. But very quickly your eye begins to take in other things. Palm trees, baobabs, casuarinas, hibiscus, vultures, batik butterflies, and above all colours.

Vivid blue skies, purple flowers trailing over our hut-style room at the hotel, cloth of every shade and pattern worn by men and women, particularly spectacular on the women with their matching headcloths twisted into elaborate and becoming styles, piles of pink papaya and red water-melon on our breakfast table... it was like living in a kaleidoscope.

Before I left, a colleague of my husband's, who'd recently come back from The Gambia, had said it was a dangerous place for Westerners and that there were armed guards on the hotels. What with that and the injections against yellow fever, cholera, hepatitis and meningitis and the course of anti-malaria pills I was taking, there had been moments when I wondered if this sequel idea had been such a good one.

All this had dispersed by the time we woke the next morning. We met Salan and she was just like her pictures. Fortunately she hadn't grown too much. She thought it was great fun that we had both come to see her, though she wondered why Caroline hadn't brought her son, Joe. Right outside our hut was a clear, turquoise swimming pool under a leaning palm tree and Caroline and I soon discovered that 'Gambian Time' always meant we had time for a swim

before any morning appointment, which might take place up to two and a half hours later than arranged.

There were certainly no armed guards on our hotel - it was entirely open-plan with no guardable outside door anyway. We never felt a moment's unease the whole time we were there. Of course we were taken around by Lorraine, who works on the local paper, and knows a lot of people. But even when we left the hotel on our own and were besieged by the young hustlers who want to sell you cheap cigarettes or be your guide for the day, we had no trouble explaining that we knew where we were going and what we were doing, accompanied by lots of smiles.

We had some memorable experiences. We met Lorraine's boss, the Liberian editor of the ambitiously named **Daily Observer**, which still only comes out three times a week. Kenneth Best and his wife had fled from their own war-ravaged country two years before and had made a new life for themselves. In their offices we met a young man who'd invented a bush telephone and made a prototype out of wood and bits of Walkman. Everybody joined in on testing it out, delightedly speaking to one another from room to room. Caroline and I were interviewed by a young reporter about the new book. The whole building was alive with enthusiasm and interest - no jaded Wapping hacks these.

We visited Salan's school and met her headmistress, Mrs Ndow, another impressive figure - a retired civil servant, who had started teaching poor children in the streets of Serrekunda, The Gambia's most populous town, and ended up starting three schools in Bakau. They have virtually no children's books in The Gambia and our slender gift of British paperbacks was well received.

We played in the warm Atlantic ocean outside our hotel with Salan and her friends and talked to Lorraine about her own experiences of coming back to The Gambia after a childhood in Britain. Caroline and I went on our own on a 'Roots' trip upriver to Juffure, supposedly the village of Alex Haley's ancestor, Kunta Kinte. And we wished we hadn't. The report in the **Sunday Times** in February this year that Haley had made most of his book up and plagiarised some of the rest, didn't surprise me at all. Self-appointed 'policemen' swatted children away from us with tree-branches and then expected to be tipped for it. Pre-arranged photo-sessions with a village Chieftain and an old woman descendant in Kinte Kunta (Kinte's compound) were designed to put money in the baskets of those individuals, not the villages. We got back on our pleasure boat to eat a lavish lunch and felt too sick to enjoy it.

The people of The Gambia aren't starving; they have enough food. But they are desperate for education, books, writing materials and for someone to take an interest in them. 'You will forget me,' said a girl of about 11 on the jetty at the fishing village of Albreda. I had nothing left to give her, but she has been with me ever since.

Happier trips were to the incredible wildlife reserve at Abuko, Serrekunda market and Lorraine's family compound in Banjul. We also spent some social time with Nana, a powerful figure in the books and as lovely off the page as on. By now Lorraine was a firm friend and Caroline and I were getting on famously. Apart from a terrible sleep problem over the last few days, caused by the multiple early-morning chorus of the Muezzin, churchbells, exotic birds and, even more maddening, British birdwatchers - 'Have you got the binoculars, Kevin?' - all before 6.30 am, we were having a great time.

On our last morning, we gave way to the importunities of two 'guides' who had been promising all week to take us to see the crocodiles. There is a sacred crocodile pit in Bakau, where women go to pray if they have fertility problems and where men take their business worries. We walked to it through back streets, far away from the world of the hotel and supermarket. Charles and Moses told us about a young girl of 18 who had just died in the village, days after giving birth to twins. Everyone was rallying round to look after the babies. Charles said he was himself a twin, one of several sets his mother had had. No crocodile pit for her.

When we got to the pit, we couldn't believe what we were seeing. There were no fences or barriers. 'Go on, touch them,' our guides encouraged us. There was one huge beast, known as Charlie, crossing the path ahead of us. He sank down on the edge of a very smelly canal. 'It's all right, this is a holy place,' said Charles, so I knelt down and touched the crocodile's sun-warmed scales and held his back leg. Caroline did it, too. If he had decided to turn his massive head and jaw round on us, there would have been only one kind of sequel. But he didn't. It was a tremendous last experience

of The Gambia.

Back in England, I wanted to squeeze all this into my book. The first draft was a bit like a travelogue. But I soon realised that, although The Gambia had been a wonderful bonus and Caroline's new pictures were going to give the second book added vitality and glamour, the story I was going to tell could just as easily have taken place in a wet week in Neasden. I would have to find other ways of raising awareness of the little girl in Albreda. It wasn't the job of Grace's new story.

It doesn't have an official title as yet, though I call it 'Grace Unlimited'. It's a family story and as much concerned with Grace's inner world as the first book, but is longer and for a slightly older readership. I've made a few changes at the suggestion of my American publishers. They want to know things like why isn't Grace at school? How come she can just go and visit her Dad in The Gambia? British readers take a lot more for granted, but these changes were easy to accommodate. Now all we're waiting for is Caroline's second trip to take the final photographs.

By Autumn next year we may know whether we've got another bestseller. But I know already we've got another *real* book and that's what counts. Favourable reviews would be nice, but I'll be convinced we've succeeded when we get the first letter from a child like the one I had this morning from a little girl in Michigan. Too bad I shan't ever get one from a little girl in Albreda. She has no pen or paper and, even if the book becomes available in The Gambia, there is no way she could ever afford a copy. A satisfactory sequel for her is a much harder undertaking than writing a book.

We thank Caroline Binch for the use of her pencil sketches which accompany this article.

Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman and illustrated by Caroline Binch, is published by Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 0670 8, £7.95; 0 7112 0699 6, £3.99 pbk. The book has received many commendations and has just been chosen as one of the two titles for young readers included in the Feminist Book Festival's Top 20. (If you'd like more details of this Festival which runs from 1st to 21st June, contact Judith Palmer at 5 Prince George Road, London N16 8DL, tel/fax: 071 254 0663.)

The sequel is provisionally scheduled for publication by Frances Lincoln in the Autumn of 1994.

If you want to help the spread of literacy, storytelling and In-Service education in The Gambia, please contact Sheila Freeman and Esther Munns at 8 The Avenue, Gravesend, Kent DA11 0NA (tel: 0474 365554). They are ex-teachers, who run a mobile bookshop, and they're taking two months' unpaid leave to take loads of children's books to The Gambia in January and February 1994, for which they're seeking sponsorship and donations.

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