



May We Recommend... Theresa Tomlinson

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David Bennett on **Theresa Tomlinson**.

David Bennett on the Novels of **Theresa Tomlinson**

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Theresa Tomlinson has published five books with a sixth, **The Forestwife**, due this month. Readers might be forgiven for thinking that her first book was **The Water - Cat** which came out in 1988, but in fact a small publisher had produced **The Flither Pickers** in 1987, and that was later re-packaged by Walker.

Helen Cresswell and Lynne Reid Banks were leading an Arvon creative writing course when a very shy and diffident Theresa offered them a story to read. Both cried and both were highly impressed. Helen told me later that it was a story she wished she had written herself and felt so confident about it that she offered to bet £1,000 that **The Water Cat** would be accepted within the year. The novel was indeed published but I can't discover whether Theresa took Helen up on the bet.

The story is a fantasy that combines fact and fiction as ancient local lore imprints itself on a present, which is Coronation Year, 1953. As with all of Theresa's books the places are real and part of her own experience. Using real places, usually around Sheffield or the North Yorkshire coast, enables her to concentrate on the story and not worry too much about background. At the centre of **The Water Cat** is the legend of the merman, Catterstyn. His friendship with Enid, the girl who rescued him from death, and his role in the relief of a village famine when a ship full of carlins was washed up on the coast, are told in a story that ebbs and flows between the real world, the past world and the fantasy world. Underpinning all of this is the sense that what modern man's 'magic', i.e. steel-making, has created is at odds with the benign magics of the past, toxic more than potent.

Old magic featured in the next book, **The Secret Place**, a short novel where two friends playing in an abandoned bomb shelter discover that two little girls, Rose and Lily, played there before them and one was the seemingly strange old lady whom that they are now convinced is a witch. Circumstances forced the friends to assist Miss Lilly in a time of need and they discover that behind her strangeness is her inability to speak or hear and a great weight of guilt surrounding her own mother's death in a bombing raid. Their prejudices and fears about someone who is simply different melt away and they start to learn from her a closeness to the earth that we should respect and care for, not fill with rubbish and pollution.

"But did they have magic?" Susanna asked. "Only the magic that's all around us. The magic that brings the sun and fresh shoots each spring. I think that they saw each season as magical. We seem to take it all for granted now."

This is a modern version of the village wise woman. Reviled by many, yet talented and clever beyond the understanding of most. She is frightening and fascinating, shunned and yet vital to the community in which she lives.

This theme is picked up again in **The Forestwife**, which has Maid Marian as its heroine. Theresa Tomlinson seems concerned to look back and to see what strengths women had in the past and to afford them due acknowledgement in the present. There is perhaps a notion that, forgetting the likes of Nightingale and Curie, women, ordinary women, had a negative or passive share in events. In fact their lives are dominated by the very basic but absolutely vital events of birth, life and death and the all importance of love. This love is not reserved for the family alone but also for the community in which they live.

The Flither Pickers demonstrates this in a very compelling, unsentimental way as it leads us into the harrowingly harsh lives of North Yorkshire womenfolk who gathered their flithers to bait the lines of their menfolk. They were the ones who supported each other as each fought to stave off grinding poverty and waited with stoic patience for their husbands and sons to return from the sea, or not, depending on the vagaries of weather and tide. In 1901 a group of such women were the only ones who could launch a lifeboat off the beach at Runswick Bay when all their men were caught out at sea in a storm. Their lives were captured by Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, the Whitby photographer, whose photos accompany the text and inspired Theresa to write the novel. The juxtaposition of story and pictures makes up one of the best produced and affecting paperbacks I've come across in the twelve years I've been reviewing fiction for young people.

Scrupulous research goes into Theresa's work and undoubtedly enables her to write so vividly. She has come to a passion for History later on in life. She attends a local History Workshop one morning per week in Sheffield, where she lives, and often spends one other day a week in the Local Studies Library researching her novels. **The Rope Carrier** came out of her studies of the file cutters and ropemakers of the eighteenth century, who lived around Castleton, Derbyshire. The latter actually inhabited a subterranean village inside the Peak Cavern, visited by Queen Victoria in 1842, when she was entertained by three old women, the last residents. With increasing skill and maturity of style since the earlier books, Theresa has blended all of the historical detail into her story with striking compassion and has succeeded in not producing an historical novel laden down with the facts of the past. This one picks up the earlier themes and concerns and yet manages to be freshly up to date for modern readers. Minni Daykin is an ordinary/extraordinary girl, positive and resourceful whatever fate and man might try to do with her. In a male-orientated environment she determines to take control of her own destiny against the odds. We are relieved that she succeeds. Contemporary drawings accompany the text and make this an impressive companion to **The Flither Pickers**.

Riding the Waves saw a return to the north-east coast and earned a commendation for the Carnegie Medal. Research for this was closer at home. Of her three teenage children two are adopted. Together the family decided that a storybook was due about modern, ordinary kids who are adopted in relatively ordinary circumstances. **Anne of Green Gables**, **Pollyanna** and the like were Theresa's favourite reading when she was young but they don't have too much that is ordinary about them for today's readers. Matt's story emerges not without humour from the pen of an assured and confident writer. The important adoption theme is overlaid with the relationship of the young to the old. It was a school History project that brought Matt and Florrie together into a relationship that didn't start well but was to prove mutually beneficial. We have again the old woman with a secret guilt and she's a wise old bird, who can solve deep wounds as she advises her troubled friend from her own experience:

"You mustn't give up. You have to sort yourself out, get yourself together and start all over again."

As ever the characterisation and motivation are sure-footed and the dialogue convincing whilst the background and supporting detail is sketched in fully, though not heavy-handedly.

Theresa tells me that she writes remembering how she felt about books when she was young. She liked books that had action, were interesting, about the basic things in life and above all weren't too long to cope with. That memory has helped her to produce an impressive range and collection of work so far. The only way to find out is to go forth, read and see if you agree...

Theresa Tomlinson's books:

The Water Cat, Walker, 0 7445 1399 5, £2.99 pbk,

The Secret Place, Walker, 0 7445 1486 X, £2.99 pbk

The Flither Pickers, Walker, 0 86203 450 7, £8.95; 0 7445 2043 6, £3.99 pbk

The Rope Carrier, Julia MacRae, 1 85681 241 3, f8.99

Riding the Waves, Walker, 0 86203 476 0, £8.99; 0 7445 2312 5, £2.99 pbk

The Forestwife, Julia MacRae, 1 85681 193 X, £8.99

David Bennett is a regular **BfK** reviewer and feature writer, as well as a senior teacher responsible for English and Modern Languages at George Spencer School in Nottinghamshire. He's not to be confused with the publisher David Bennett mentioned on our News Pages.

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