



Authorgraph No 33 ? Nina Bawden

By *admin*

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Nina Bawden interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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Nina Bawden is one of the most popular authors writing for children today. She has over a dozen titles consistently in print and children not only read them but buy them for themselves. What makes her books so satisfying to children? What are the elements which make them so successful? Part of the answer is readily understood. They are exciting books. There is often a mystery which gradually unfolds, exposing the characters to dangerous situations. These characters are modern and real to a degree not often met in stories of adventure. Even adult reviewers, reading with pencil conscientiously poised, surface with a guilty start in chapter 3, realizing they have been drawn into the story. Never mind the notes, what is going to happen next?

Nina Bawden is clearly a very skilful and talented writer in terms of the way she writes. Her narrative skills recall that other professional, Roald Dahl. The emotional content of her stories, however, and the particular way she presents her characters, also seem important to her readers, and the way in which she describes her own childhood suggests she has never lost touch with what it felt like to be a child, and this has given her the power to present her stories genuinely from a child's point of view.

Nina Bawden was born in London, one of a family of three. She says she remembers being a child who had extremely strong feelings which she was not encouraged to express. During the war, she was evacuated to Wales, and under those circumstances, living among strangers, no one could be too free with their emotions. Her choice of childhood reading suggests that she responded to the strength of feeling in the books she read ? Baroness Orczy, Hugh Walpole, Dickens. She also enjoyed reading her grandmother's Sunday School prizes, those fountains of emotion underpinned with strong moral themes. In a much more subtle and controlled way, these elements are present in her own books. Interestingly, she hated fairy stories and found Andersen's tales cruel and frightening. The sort of stories she wrote for herself, she says, tended to be about wronged children in an ill-starred world. She became a writer first of books for adults but her enjoyment in writing about child characters in those books led in the early 1960s to writing a child's book, **The Secret Passage**.

This first book was the story of three children who find a secret passage leading to the richly furnished but unoccupied house next door. Here they find a mysterious orphan, lonely and passionate, but strangely unhungry despite her claim to be starving. When the grown-ups get involved, the truth is less glamorous but no less difficult. The seed of the story sounds like the 'wronged child' stories Nina Bawden used to make up as a child, now very much tempered by adult experience. The book was turned down at first. Publishers felt it was 'too modern'. When it was published in 1963, however, she began to receive letters from children. She had written about children with the same kind of strong feelings that she had experienced as a child and the readers liked it.

The titles which followed, written when her own children were small and running round together, usually involved a

group, a little gang. In **On the Run**, Ben makes friends with a lonely child over the garden wall. There is a good reason for this child's isolation. Thomas is the son of an African leader whose country is in a state of revolt. They begin to fear the adults who are meant to protect the boy and with the help of a small but resourceful girl, they stow away in a removal van and escape to the coast. The cosy cave syndrome, however, does not operate. They are cold, wet and hungry and little Lil, already undernourished, falls ill. **The Runaway Summer** has a similar theme, but the striking factor here is Mary's character. She is thoroughly unpleasant, rude to everyone, rejecting all kindly approaches and finally expressing her misery in a theft which is witnessed by some other children. Despite this, she is drawn into their happy family and when they discover a young illegal immigrant, they join forces to hide him from the authorities. They run into trouble of course and instead of being heroes have to be bailed out by the adults. Mary has nevertheless changed. In giving her attention to someone else she has become confident enough to come to terms with her parents' divorce and ends the book a little happier than she was at the beginning. In **A Handful of Thieves**, a gang of friends again take on too much. Gran has been robbed by her lodger and the children determine to right the wrong. As a result of their amateur detective work, they end up on the wrong side of the law themselves. The author seems to be saying 'this is how it really is'. On the other hand, her honesty and realism is tempered by reasonably happy endings. Perhaps the fantasies are not fulfilled but things can change for the better. We see an example of this in **Squib**. Kate, a lonely child, hopes that her mother will adopt the little boy they have rescued from an uncaring relative who mistreats him. That would be the story book ending, but her mother will not. Instead the large, friendly family over the road agree to foster him and Kate is happy.

The children in these stories are drawn into adventure – catching thieves, sheltering fugitives, hiding from adult authority. What makes the books different from other stories with these elements is the way in which the events affect the characters, the way they think and the complexity of the relationships between them. Nina Bawden's experience is that we do not always sufficiently recognise the strength of children's feelings or credit them with the degree of understanding they really have, and in her books, she redresses the balance.

Another striking feature of her books is the role adults play. Nina Bawden will have none of the hasty dismissal of parents on page one. She points out that adults are very powerful in the lives of children and there is no virtue in pretending that they are of no account. We see adults as authority figures as parents, policemen, but they are also exposed. In **The Robbers**, a story where a boy must choose between obeying his father and helping his less privileged friend although that leads him into danger, the father's lack of understanding is acknowledged. When Philip seems helpless under his father's authority, there is satisfaction in the grandmother's intervention:

'What's this about boarding school? A nine-year-old child? Oh I can see it might suit you. You're bored with him, so you want to be rid of him, pay someone else for the trouble.'

Philip is amazed to see his father blushing and looking guilty. Fathers do not often get their come-uppance in children's books. Parents in Nina Bawden's books, in fact, tend to be treated like real human beings, not stage props. They have variable personalities, they react to pressures. The mother in **The Finding**, Nina Bawden's latest novel, has problems with her own mother. Gran, in **A Handful of Thieves**, would rather lose her money than be exposed as a foolish, gullible old lady. The vulnerability of adults is shown strongly in **Kept in the Dark**. Three children are sent to stay with grandparents they hardly know. The hostility within the family is nothing compared with the tension which builds up with the arrival of David. He decides to stay and there is nothing the grandparents can do – especially when they discover David has a gun. The story has the elements of a mystery thriller but the suspense is as much attached to the relationships as the events. This maturity of approach to the depiction of both adults and children is perhaps related to the fact that Nina Bawden writes for adults as well as children. There is never any sense of writing down, rather she seems able to make complexities accessible to children so, in a sense, the readers get the best of both worlds.

It is children, however, that Nina Bawden finds most rewarding to write about, and the child with strong, angry feelings, aware of his or her wickedness, yet wanting to be fair and to do the right thing, is her recurrent theme. There is a fascinating development through the books. In the earlier ones, we see characters like Mary and Kate suffering an intensity of feeling. In **The Witch's Daughter**, the frustration has an added physical form in Janey's blindness. What

these characters feel on the inside is resolved by external events, usually of an exciting or dramatic nature. In two later books, the same process takes place but the children grow through the experience with the passage of time and increased understanding.

Like Nina Bawden herself, Carrie in **Carrie's War** is evacuated to Wales, and boarded with the mean, narrow-minded Mr Evans. Although he does not change, Carrie's perception of him does. She comes to understand something of what makes him as he is. We see the action through the children's eyes as they lead their partially aware, slightly separate lives. Carrie believes herself to be responsible for the fire because the story of the African skull has power over her childish imagination. What Nina Bawden has done, however, is to present the whole web of emotion and interdependence between the characters in a way which makes a higher level of understanding accessible to children.

The Guardian Award winner, **The Peppermint Pig**, shows the same maturity of approach put within a young reader's grasp. It has a particularly affectionate atmosphere perhaps because many of the incidents are based on stories about Nina Bawden's own family. Her grandmother lived in Norfolk and seems to have been both a teller and generator of tales. The famous opening paragraph delights children and shocks delicately-minded adults! The picture of Theo, swinging gently on the brass bedstead, his nightshirt hitched over the knob sounds authentic, as does the punishment naughty Poll receives:

"Her mother said, 'I've had enough my girl. Under the table!'"

And that is where she hears of the change in the family's fortunes. Father is to leave them for a year and they will go to live in Norfolk. In the new setting, life goes on but what makes all the difference to Poll is the arrival of Johnnie. Bought for a shilling, the little piglet joins the family circle. What she does not understand is that, by the nature of things, Johnnie's life must be a short one. When pig killing time comes round, she is devastated. We have seen Poll growing through the year in size and understanding, and although she needs a period of mourning for Johnnie, she grows through that too. When Father returns, Johnnie has gone like the whole long year but she knows that the past can still be part of her life and she will never forget him.

In both these rich, sympathetic novels, the viewpoint remains the child's – Carrie's childish guilt, the importance of a pig – but children are given the full weight of their importance. Their development as characters are respected. Nina Bawden gives them the opportunity to move out of their childlike egocentricity to a place in the adult world and we know they will go on growing.

This summer, there are two new books: a picture book called **Princess Alice**, about a little girl who discovers that her father is an African king, and a novel called **The Finding**. **The Finding** is very modern in feeling and the opening is truly gripping. Why should a child have been abandoned in the arms of the Sphinx on the Embankment? It has made Alex different. He has a finding day instead of a birthday. What connection can old Mrs Angel possibly have with him? There is a mystery here, but would it be better unsolved?

The characters are interesting, too. There is tension between the adults. Mum clashes with Gran, Mrs Angel's nephew resents her interest in Alex, with good reason, we discover. Laura, Alex's elder sister is also resentful and tries to manipulate her brother's behaviour. She is one of Nina Bawden's girl characters who are strong on emotion and full of potential if only they are taken seriously by the adults around them. Here is also an illustration of the way in which Nina Bawden deals with the complexity of life. When Mrs Angel leaves Alex a large sum of money, the experience is in fact unpleasant. He runs away from the mounting pressures and we are not sure if the old woman who shelters him is benign or not. It is left to Gran's friend, old Major Bumpus to find the solution. He does take Laura seriously and by acknowledging the real depth of feeling between her and her adopted brother, he makes it possible for her to find Alex and bring him home.

Leaving Nina Bawden's tall house, the visitor immediately crosses one of those green-fingered slivers of water which surface unexpectedly in London. It is clearly the setting for **The Robbers**. Most of her books have a solidly real physical framework. She points out that children do not have cars and so tend to be much more aware of the

complexities of the terrain. It is this kind of perception which make her a good writer for children. She makes use of real experience but as a good writer, for adults or children, the experiences are absorbed and transformed imaginatively. She says firmly that she does not believe in prescriptive writing but writes as honestly as she can and leaves the reader to take what he or she can from it. She believes that fiction functions best at a deep emotional and imaginative level. We are fortunate that Nina Bawden is a writer who can make this level accessible to children and that the resulting books are ones that children thoroughly enjoy.

The Books

Nina Bawden's books are published in hardback by Gollancz (0 575) and in paperback by Puffin (0 14 03.).

The Secret Passage, 00202 6, £5.95; 1166 1, £1.25

***On the Run**, 00634 X, £6.95; 0337 5, £1.50

The White Horse Gang, 00841 5, £5.95; 0508 4, £1.50

***The Witch's Daughter**, 00177 1, £6.95; 0407 X, £1.50

***A Handful of Thieves**, 00152 6, £6.95; 0472 X, £1.25

The Runaway Summer, 00337 5, £5.95; 0539 4, £1.25

Squib, 00665 X, £5.95; 0581 5, £1.25

***Carrie's War**, 01631 0, £6.95; 0689 7, £1.50

***Devil By the Sea**, 02141 1, £5.95

The Peppermint Pig, 01927 1, £5.95; 0944 6, £1.50

***Rebel on a Rock**, 02420 8, £5.95; 1123 8, £1.10

***The Robbers**, 02695 2, £6.95; 1317 6, £1.25

Kept in the Dark, 03113 1, £6.95; 1550 0, £1.25

The Finding, 03618 4, £6.95

Picture book: **Princess Alice**, ill. Phillida Gili, Deutsch, 0 233 97746 5, £4.95

*These titles are also in Heinemann's New Windmill series.

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