



Authorgraph No.6 - Bernard Ashley

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Bernard Ashley interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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When Bernard Ashley found himself in financial difficulty one year, he took a summer job to supplement his income as a village school headmaster. 'I worked as a spot welder, and it was a very proud moment for me when the foreman came round and said "Bern, that's quite good... we're gonna put you on the top rate for the work." I was so pleased with that because I've always had ten thumbs when it comes to using my hands.'

You can almost hear the relish at a new challenge met and overcome, and the pleasure in accomplishing a new skill. It's a relish which marks out Bernard' Ashley, and it's one he demonstrates in fields other than spot welding. 'I love the word craft, and I'm proud of my craft both in teaching and writing.'

He was born in 1935 in Woolwich, and he says his background was very much of South London. 'I suppose you'd call it upper working class or lower middle class, but very much of the streets, and Sunday best, and a "front room". I had a very happy childhood.'

School too, was happy. He went to 'nine or ten' primary schools in London during the war, and to others when he, his brother and his mother were evacuated. His only unhappy school experience was in Preston, where he felt the evacuees were resented. 'That was the only place in the whole of my life where I was caned, It was there, too, that I experienced the feelings of fear you get when you're trying desperately to get in with an already established group, when you're an outsider.' This is probably the genesis of several situations in his books. But on using his own life as material for his books he is definite. It doesn't happen very often: 'I think a lot of what I say about kids and the problems they have in schools are projections.'

After the war he went on to the Roan School, Blackheath, and Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School, Rochester, and did two years' national service with the RAF. 'I enjoyed it. I was always a conformist. If I had to have my kit polished for the next day, I'd sit up all night to make sure it was spotless.' After national service, he trained as a teacher at Trent College of Education in Hertfordshire.

'I hadn't always wanted to teach. I wanted to act, but my father was a very cautious man, and although my mother - who was a very imaginative woman - said I should go to RADA, wise sense prevailed in the end.' He doesn't regret the decision. 'A lot of the desire to act is satisfied by being a teacher. It's a marvellous job. You can edit newspapers, perform, sing, tell stories, and you are acting a part out, a role.'

His early teaching was in Gravesend, Kent; his first headship at a village school in Hertfordshire. 'I really enjoyed my six years there. But I began to think that I'd only seen half of it, and that those years as a village head were a little bit protected from what was happening in the world.'

So, considering 'only himself', he brought his family back to live in South London and became the headmaster of a school in East Ham in search of 'fresh challenges', which he enjoyed. He is now the head of Charlton Manor Junior School not far from where he lives, and grew up.

The writing began in his early days as a teacher, with several books specially designed for children with special learning difficulties. There followed a couple of non-fiction books, as well as short stories and articles. His first novel, **The Trouble with Donovan Croft** - which won the Children's Rights Workshop Other Award in 1975 - was written while he was at East Ham.

'I needed something to do which would stop me worrying and being unhappy, so I decided to write a full-length story. I just sat down and wrote a story which had a background that was very real to me. There wasn't any question of writing a book to fill a gap in terms of being ?multi-racial?? And by the time I'd finished the story I was very happy in that place.'

Almost all the books are specifically rooted in one time - now --and one place - London. This is a conscious decision. 'I very much use the stuff that's around me. I don't think I'd have written anything that would have really excited me out of a rural background. But I don't go on teaching to get the material for my books. I have been asked that, and I find it rather an offensive question. The material is there, but I'm not in the job for that.'

In fact he has no intention of giving up teaching to write full time. 'It's death once you start dreaming about a small acreage in the South of France where you can write about London.' Indeed he's a very committed and caring teacher. 'I don't want to give the impression that I'm always having sleepless' nights, but there are times when, if you are awake at three in the morning, you do find yourself worrying about a child.'

The voices, attitudes, motives and all the paraphernalia of working class life in London come to life in his books. 'I'm recording things because they fascinate me, I'm not really making any point about it, But I do feel that the people with their own identity, whether it's the Liverpool working class or the people of a South Wales mining village, have a great sense of being *together* It's a feeling of community that's important, and when you look at the class structure, you see that the sense of community gets thinner and thinner as you get higher. But I'm not making a point. It's there, so I write about it.'

'I've been reading Graham Greene's autobiography. He says: "In every writer's heart there's a splinter of ice." That splinter of ice has different dimensions in different hearts, and I like to think that mine wouldn't be the coldly analytical splinter of ice which would mean I would stand by and observe without taking any sort of action, if so moved. I think I'd want to get involved. But having got involved, I wouldn't be displeased if afterwards there was something I could record in a book.'

When it comes to writing Bernard Ashley is something of a perfectionist. He writes the first draft of each novel out in longhand in a notebook, on every other line, every other page: 'So that there's plenty of room for fiddling about afterwards.' He types up each chapter as it's written, making corrections as he goes along. This is the second draft.

'I've learnt now to put the book aside at this stage for at least three weeks. I used to send it straight off to the publishers the morning after, and of course when the proofs came back I used to try and re-write it. Re-reading it after a gap means you look at it almost as an objective reader. Then I make a lot of corrections before it has its final posh type-up and gets sent off.'

He researches to get every detail right and worries about style. 'I really sweat on my books. You know, sometimes you can go into a sentence wrong, all back to front, and when you read a sentence like that you find yourself saying, "Hang on!", and you have to go back.'

'I like to feel that no one has ever gone back over a sentence of mine to find out what I was getting at. If I thought they had, I'd feel I would have failed as a writer. I'm trying to communicate, so it's got to be a smooth read. Not a bland read - shock them, give them something with impact, but make sure it's a read that you can take down without going back over.'

His concern for children as readers goes beyond his own writing. He does a lot of storytelling, and goes on 'author visits' whenever he can. He feels it's his duty. 'I'm interested in getting books to kids. I do what I can.'

'You haven't got a book unless you've got a problem, some conflict that has to be resolved.'

Bernard Ashley's novels are about a sense of community, what it is to be an outsider, people facing problems, people growing, changing, surviving. They also contain a deal of tension, excitement and drama.

The Trouble with Donovan Croft

When Donovan Croft's mother has to go back to the West Indies and he is fostered with the Chapman family he reacts by becoming an elective mute, refusing to communicate. Keith Chapman, his new foster brother, has to learn to live with the conflicts Donovan's arrival creates at home and in school.

'I'd seen some children very upset by a mother who'd gone home to the West Indies. This particular mother stayed away for eight weeks, by which time we could see these children deteriorating because they were worried she wouldn't come back. Now to say, as some people did, that you mustn't write about that because it doesn't happen to every black family is to say that you mustn't write about Ronnie Webster' the main character of **A Kind of Wild Justice** - 'because not all children have criminal fathers.'

A Kind of Wild Justice

Ronnie Webster's life is full of fear and anxiety as is Manjit's, an Asian girl. Both their fathers are mixed up with the menacing Bradshaw brothers whose gang runs the lives of everybody in the area. Ronnie's dad is an unwilling accomplice, Manjit's an immigrant trying to get an illegal entry. Ronnie is a survivor, for Manjit the ending is more ambiguous and unhappy.

Terry on the Fence

In his relationship with Les and his gang, Terry is venturing into foreign territory, less than a couple of miles from his home. 'Terry comes from one side of the common. Had he come from the other side where Les and his gang did, they wouldn't have taken any notice of him. But they knew where he came from, by all sorts of indications - the way he talked, his clothes, even his plimsolls. They wore boots. All that sort of thing, the interactions of people from different Communities, fascinates me.'

'I found **Terry on the Fence** probably one of the most satisfying of my books to write. It's got its problems - I think some of the vocabulary might be a bit difficult for kids - but I got a great deal of pleasure from it. In fact I'd like to think of it simply as a novel that children or adults can enjoy on their own level.'

All My Men

Paul Daines, newly moved from London, struggles to get accepted by the gang at his new school in Kent and break into the football team, controlled by Bill Richardson.

'A lot of **All My Men** comes from my experience when my father bought a small shop in Rainham in Kent. I felt all those things that Paul feels, but in retrospect it's probably my least favourite. In a sense I'm writing outside the area where I feel most at home, and that's probably why it's the least successful for me.'

Break in the Sun

The central character, Patsy, tries to return to a happier past by running away and gets a lift with a barge load of amateur actors; but in this story it is not only Patsy, the unhappy bedwetter, who learns something about herself. Eddie Green, her stepfather who pursues her, Patsy's mother, Kenny, Patsy's lonely fat friend, Joe, the barge owner, all emerge a little different because of what happens to them. Whether the change is permanent is for the reader to decide.

I was a long time getting started with **Break in the Sun**, but then, gradually, bits and pieces came together, and I sat down one Sunday afternoon and wrote the first three pages. I showed them to Iris, my wife, and she liked them. I don't know where the girl and the enuretic thing came from. I just realised that she had to be unhappy, and I thought about some of the unhappy kids, I'd known and the reasons for their unhappiness.?

These Bernard Ashley novels are published in hardback by the Oxford University Press and in paperback by Puffin.

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