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Maggie

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Joan Lingard talks about putting her books on the TV screen.

Next month BBC TV starts a new series, **Maggie**, based on the first two of Joan Lingard's quartet of books about Sixteen-year-old Maggie McKinley.

JOAN LINGARD writes about her books and about re-creating them for television.

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When my children were small we used to spend holidays in a house in a glen in Inverness-shire. Once it had been a school and schoolhouse, in the days when the glen had had a thriving population; when the numbers dropped to three or four it was sold and became a holiday house. Across the road was a forester's cottage, an old black timbered building with a red corrugated iron roof. An old lady in her eighties, the widow of a forester, lived there, and she wore a wrap-around flowered overall and men's laced-up boots. Or did she? Now I'm not sure for, you see, she became intertwined with my own granny who *did* wear such an overall and boots, and the two, blended together, were transposed into Maggie's granny.

So I had Granny and the glen before I had Maggie. Granny needed a granddaughter, a suitable one, a chip off the old block, if you like. I named her Margaret after her, also naming her after her-great-great-granny, Margaret Ross of Greenyards, who had been evicted during the time of the Highland Clearances. I took the theme of being cleared, that is uprooted from one's own home against one's will by some force or another, and wove it through the quartet. Each time a clearance takes place the people caught up in it have to resettle, to come to terms with their new environment, and in so doing they often have to face up to aspects of themselves which they have not had to before. Background is important to me: my characters grow out of it and react as they do because of it.

Another factor which influenced me in my creation of Maggie was the character of Sadie in my Ulster books. Sadie - for whom, I must say, I have a great affection - although a rebel in some areas, follows the traditional path of a woman, taking up the role expected of her by marrying and having a child. (Though not of course by marrying a catholic boy!) I wanted Maggie to take a different path, to reject the role her family expected her to play, and so she has ambitions to go to university and become an anthropologist. She may or may not marry but marriage for her will not be an end in itself. The only one in her family who fully understands and sympathises is her granny who, if things had been different in her young days, would have liked to have been a forester herself.

Now that I had Granny and Maggie installed in the forestry cottage I had to fill the holiday one across the way. Since Maggie was a Glaswegian, I decided the Frasers should be from Edinburgh, and that they should be solidly middle-class, to provide another contrast. They have the problem of their daughter's future turned the other way round: they

expect her to stay on at school and go to university; she wants to leave, become a hairdresser and marry young. The son James, who intends to become a doctor, causes no ripples until he shows signs of becoming too attached to Maggie. And so these threads are taken too and interwoven with the others through the books.

Maggie's family, although not understanding her, do not in any way reject her, as Sadie's family did when she married Kevin; the McKinleys are a close, united family.

In fact, it is because they are so united that it is more difficult for Maggie to break free to go her own way. It was for this reason that I sent her to Canada in **The Reunion**, so that she would have to stand on her own feet without her family to fall back on. And her family also has to manage without falling back on her.

When Anna Home of the BBC put the idea of a television series based on Maggie to me I was immediately interested, as most writers would be but especially because I could write the scripts myself. (I had already written a considerable number of scripts for television.) The phrase 'based on' is important here, as the series is not a straight adaptation of the books in chronological order. The characters are the same, except for one new Glasgow one, the threads that I mentioned earlier are the same, as are the main events. What is different is the sequence of the events, and there is a reason for this. During preliminary discussions we decided that the McKinley family should provide the central focus and Glasgow the main setting, and that therefore the opening episodes had to be in Glasgow and should establish Maggie and the McKinleys. And then in episode three we go to Edinburgh to meet the Frasers. It is not until episode five that we go to the glen and meet Granny, though we do hear about her before then! It would have been difficult to have opened in the glen and followed closely to the lines of **The Clearance** since quite a lot of that book is taken up with Maggie's thoughts. I am not keen on television drama with a voice over - sometimes it works - but I did not want to use it here. I wanted each character to speak out directly for herself or himself. And I felt that basically the Glasgow background would provide more material for the kind of television drama we wanted to make.

Scenes that will work in a book will not necessarily work on television. One must, in a way, clear one's mind of the prose and begin listening more to the characters. I did not reread the books before starting to write the television version - I hate rereading my books anyway! - because I wanted to think about the characters operating in a different medium.

The television series opens then with the demolishing of the McKinleys' tenement, and Maggie watching it coming down, just as she did in **The Resettling**. So the McKinleys are cleared before Granny. Her clearance does not take place in the first nine episodes at all - there was not enough space - but it will happen in the second of the next nine episodes which I am writing at present and are scheduled for production in the autumn. In spite of this, I would still recommend that the books be read in the correct sequence, beginning with **The Clearance**, even by those who come first to Maggie through television.

Because I was both the author of the books and the script writer I had much greater freedom than an adaptor of someone else's work has. I could not have allowed another writer to change my books around in the same way; I needed to make the artistic decision myself as to what was valid and what was not. And I think it is good that I had this freedom as it makes - or should make - for better television. What matters most is that the spirit of the quartet should be preserved. And I believe it is.

This is due, aside from the part I played in it, to the sympathetic treatment of the producer Anna Home and director Renny Rye, and to the cast itself. Obviously the characters are not going to *look* exactly like the ones I had imagined, or like what anyone else will have imagined for that matter - they could not - but they are true to the characters of the people.

Kirsty Miller, who plays Maggie, told me, when I first met her, that as she read the books she kept thinking how alike she and Maggie were, and how often she had had similar thoughts and feelings. I always hope my books will strike chords of recognition in readers, and not just in the ones who are going to play the parts!

The young actors are all aged between 17 and 20, and they are all acting professionally for the first time. Watching

them, I felt they became 'professional' very quickly. They have also become, for me, Maggie and James and Jean and Sandy, and now, working on the following episodes, it is *their* voices that I hear in my ear as I write.

It has been a most interesting experience for me to watch my characters being transposed from the page to the television screen, and to see them achieve a kind of 'reality' other than that which exists inside my own head.

Joan Lingard

Joan Lingard, brought up in Belfast, now lives in Edinburgh where she was born. Her best known books to date are probably the 'Kevin and Sadie' sequence. Kevin (a Catholic) and Sadie (a Protestant) meet as children in a divided Belfast (**The Twelfth Day of July**), fall in love (**Across the Barricades**), marry and 'escape' to London (**Into Exile**) and, now with a baby, finally find a home in Cheshire (**A Proper Place**)

The 'Maggie' books have a Scottish background. In **The Clearance**, Maggie, staying the summer with Granny in a highland glen, meets the Fraser family from the holiday house across the road. **The Resettling** finds the McKinley family, forced to move from their Glasgow tenement into high rise flats which they hate, making a new start (prodded by Maggie) with a plumbing business and a move to a flat over the shop. Maggie's relationship with James develops and in **The Pilgrimage** they go youth hostelling in search of Greenyards (where Maggie's great-great-granny, Margaret Ross, was evicted during the mid-nineteenth-century clearances) and meet two Canadian boys, one, Phil Ross, also in search of his ancestors. The holiday turns out not quite as James and Maggie imagined. In **The Reunion** Maggie goes to Canada to work for the summer before university.

Joan Lingard also writes for adults. In her latest historical novel, **Greenyards**, which will be published by Hamish Hamilton in March, she follows the thread of the Greenyards clearance back to its source.

The books mentioned here are published in hardback by Hamish Hamilton. The 'Kevin and Sadie' books are in paperback from Puffin. All four 'Maggie' titles are published in paperback by Beaver on 5th February at 95p each.

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