

2005/April SALLY GARDNER - Publishing News

Sally Gardner trained at Central St Martins in theatre design, where she got a 1st Class Honours degree and, she says, learnt all about character. “In theatre, character is king. Everything revolves around character and there is no play without it. It’s the essence of theatre,” she says. “What I learnt there was an unbelievably good training for what I am now.”

What she’s known for is being an illustrator who also writes. She’s done picture books, she’s done chapter books and, with her latest project, *I, Coriander*, she has become a novelist - supplying just the words, and not one single picture, to the work. It is a great piece of storytelling, at the centre of which is the voice of Coriander, a girl with one silver shoe in 1650’s London and the other in the fairy world.

But before any of that she’d done a lot of other things. “I never thought this was the way it would happen,” says Gardner. “I wanted to go on to the Royal College to be an illustrator, but I was asked by Mr John Napier, of *Cats* fame, to be his assistant and it seemed churlish not to accept. Then I won an enormous Arts Council scholarship to be a designer in residence in Newcastle. I was 21 when my second show transferred to the West End.”

Gardner left the stage behind for new pastures after she’d had her twins, now 22 years old. “Up until that point I’d had some sympathy with actresses throwing themselves on the floor, kicking their legs, screaming and having tantrums. But then I began to realize I didn’t any more, that I didn’t care, and I knew it was time to go.” She went at the top of her game, exiting with some panache from an Alan Ayckbourn production of *Tis a Pity She’s a Whore*, starring Rupert Graves.

The phone stopped ringing, nothing happened and Gardner was suddenly painfully aware that she was going to have to start again. From the bottom. But she’d faced, and survived, harder times. “I’ve always been hugely dyslexic, all my life it’s followed me like a tin can and hit round every corner in my career. It was a total pain,” she says, describing how she changed her name from Sarah to Sally at the age of 11 because she found

she could spell the latter, but not the former, “and I only learnt to read when I was 14. The first book I ever read was *Wuthering Heights*.”

After being expelled from every other school she’d been to, Gardner ended up being sent to a boarding school in East Grinstead for maladjusted children. It was run by a “nice but terrifying woman” called Dr Bullen, who was of the opinion that none of the children should be in her care and it was their parents who should be locked up. “After that place, nothing phased me,” comments Gardner. It was at her next school that she began to use her talent for making up complex stories in her head (something you don’t have to be able to read or write to do); at night she would tell ghost stories, designed specifically to terrify the girls who were bullying her. The ploy worked.

The road from school to art school to the theatre, and then wondering what to do next, eventually led to Hamish Hamilton, where Gardner told then-editor Jane Nissen that if they didn’t publish her they’d regret it for ever and ever and ever. She was given a Cartwheel Book to illustrate, just to shut her up, she says. Thrilled to be working as an illustrator, she soon realised she wanted more. “I then made a dummy of one of my stories called *The Little Nut Tree*, which found its way to Judith Elliott, who’d just started Orion, and it became the first book on her launch list. It said ‘author’ on the contract and I was terribly chuffed by that.” Thus began a collaboration that’s lasted well over a decade and produced numerous bestsellers.

But for Gardner to even think about tackling a novel - something that can daunt the most lettered of people - must have been like setting herself a task of epic proportions; why did she do it? “I have to set myself challenges, and this was the ultimate challenge. One thing I learnt in the theatre is that you’ve *got* to stay hungry and put yourself on the edge. If you aren’t hungry, forget it, pack up, go home, grow onions, don’t bother. Now I’ve done *I, Coriander* I feel like I have wings and I just love it up there.”

With the publication of the book she will now have two careers, one as an author/illustrator, and one as just a writer, and she likes the way that sounds, can hardly believe it’s happened. What must also be quite hard to

take in is the reaction there's been to her first novel. Within days of the *I, Coriander* manuscript being sent to the US it was the subject of a frantic bidding war.

“I was told we wouldn't hear anything for weeks, and when I rang Judith after about a week she told me to be patient. Then she rang back and said she'd had authorisation to tell me what was really going on, which was that there'd been an offer on the first day and the offers had been rising ever since! And then it just got silly, totally unreal. It was an amazing weekend and the final offer came in on my birthday. I lay on the sofa with my son, the two of us just laughing.”

Dial got *I, Coriander* for \$500,000, a fairytale story in itself if ever there was one. “It is a good story,” says Garner, “and an important one for people, big or small, with dyslexia...that you can do it. I'm proud of my dyslexia, and proud that all three of my kids are dyslexic, too. I wouldn't change it for all the tea in China.”