

## 2004/August LOUISE RENNISON - Publishing News

Five years ago the world was just waking up to the arrival of a new talent on the children's fiction scene with the publication of the first slice of a certain Georgia Nicholson's life, in the shape of *Angus, Thongs and Full-frontal Snogging*. Half a decade later the creator of this global publishing phenomenon is back at the ICA, the scene of one of her previous triumphs - a two-handed stage version, with music, of Fellini's *8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>* - and ensconced in the café, eager to talk about the life, the universe and all things Georgia.

"My brief [from then publisher Brenda Gardner] was to write for teenage girls, but I couldn't bear to do the research because they talk such rubbish - much like myself, actually. So I just wrote like I remember being a teenage girl, but it didn't come out quite like that because I'm a semi-grown up," says Rennison, who has a very good line in self-deprecating humour and is as good for a laugh in person as she is on the page. "It's different, I think, because I now know what a good joke is."

Discovered because, as she puts it, Gardner "had the gumption to phone up and make the connection" between how she was writing and what she could write, Rennison found herself thrown into authorship and she went for it. "I didn't know how to do it, I had grave suspicions I wouldn't be able to do it but I just got stuck in. I still feel a bit odd about calling myself a writer, but it's slightly better for me now because on my last passport, which I'd had for some time, it said 'Play Leader' - I had the youth of tomorrow in my hands! But it's very comfortable being an author because you have a product, a book, and, [unlike performance] you can leave people to make their own mind up about it."

Is she still performing at all? "I've just come back from a huge tour of America, where it really was like being some ludicrous pop star; they'd made T-shirts - and it is a bit unnerving to be faced with someone wearing you face - and they'd made me thongs. It's peculiar, like I'm not a grown up, I'm their mate; they tell me everything." She has, she says, been selling well in the US since *Angus*, and gets a lot of letters from the States, with an

interesting difference in the fan mail: the English girls - and she says this, she tells me, with some cultural pride - are so much funnier.

“They write like I do, so self-obsessed, like: ‘*Dear Louise, Hi, it’s me...*’- it’s me!” Rennison cracks up, then continues in a drear teen monotone, “‘*...I’m sitting in my room...oh god I’m so - hang on a minute, that’s the doorbell, back in a minute*’, and then, in a different colour pen, it goes ‘*oh god, I’m still so bored...*’. The American letters are usually some kind of transaction or deal - you write back to me and I’ll put your photograph up on the school noticeboard. But when you go there, the emotional thing is still the same.”

Rennison is, by her own admission, a difficult traveller who, because she won’t fly, takes a long time to get anywhere. This most recent tour, an epic requiring a six-day crossing of the Atlantic on the brand new Queen Mary 2, then became a road movie scenario with a combination of trains and automobiles to go from Canada to Chicago and on to Oklahoma and Tennessee. “I did actually think I’d never get out of Oklahoma alive; it was a nightmare of humped individuals wearing overalls, and then I went into a bar and asked for an ice cold beer, only to be told it was a dry county - nearest bar, 60 miles!” And having sacked their driver for unspecified reasons, this left Cyndi, Rennison’s HarperCollins general factotum, with both the tour management and driving duties. The things they never tell you when you join the Publicity Department.

Does Rennison ever stand back and wonder about what’s happened to her, what’s she’s achieved, the new words, like nunga-nungas, that she’s single-handedly introduced to teenage America? “It is weird, but I think it’s always about timing, life - it’s a bit of talent, a bit of luck and a bit of determination, there’s all kinds of things that have to come together. I think if it had been the wrong time, if other people hadn’t been there first, America wouldn’t have bought the book; they were just in the mood to look at English culture again.”

Rennison loves working with teenage girls and boys because, she says, no matter how much they might pretend otherwise, they aren’t cynical and are very open. “I always say, about the boys who come to see me, that it’s a

tribute to their families that they're quite confident, quite nice, not nerdy, and have realised that girls are bonkers and don't mind it. I think they read me because they suspect it's a bit more racy than it really is."

There is a sixth Georgia book coming, but what about life After Georgia? "It's so hard, it's such a lovely way to spend your life, making people laugh, and they do *love* Georgia. But I have an Arts Council/Indian Government fellowship in India, to go and soak up the culture. I have a cunning plan to go to Mumbai, by ship, from southern Italy. Hopefully, if they agree the dates, I'll be going from the middle of February to the middle of March, beginning of April next year. The idea I have in mind is a kind of spiritual journey for teenagers, really, but whether that'll be possible to do in an interesting, funny way we'll have to see. I'm a bit apprehensive, but my friend, who's a Sikh and is going to be out there, will meet me in Mumbai and we'll go on the Maharajah's express train to New Delhi...and he's promised me manservants!"