

## 1997/March ANNE FINE - Publishing News

When I call her, Anne Fine has just returned from judging the *Teesdale Mercury's* Valentine's Day poem competition. Celebrity status does bring with it certain duties, and her star is shining even brighter now that she's won her second Whitbread Children's Award for *The Tulip Touch*. So just how did this much-fêted writer get started? "It was in the mid 70s, around the time of my first daughter, and we were living in Edinburgh," she says. "Basically I'm a reader, and I was housebound because of a snowstorm and couldn't get to the library, so I started writing."

The end result was *The Summerhouse Loon* ("The worst title I've ever thought of..."), which she duly sent off to a couple of publishers, one of whom didn't do children's books, the other returning it because they were in difficulties. She wasn't put off, though, and two years later entered it into the *Guardian/Kestrel* competition for unpublished writers, where she came second to Jan Mark. The book was subsequently picked up by Methuen, who published it in 1978. "Now, I always say 'go in for competitions', because so much is rubbish that anything really good really stands out," says Fine, "and judges do seem to try and help you get published."

Getting a book published and making writing your career are two very different things, but Fine knew from very early on where her future lay. "If I'm honest," she says, "it was probably by page three of the first book that I knew. It was like reading with me...I can't remember not being able to read. I didn't come from a family of writers, I never thought it could be a career, but I knew from the moment that I started that it was what I wanted to do." And she's never really wanted to do anything else since. "I sometimes look at my day and think it's a bit weird that it's all to do with print," she goes on. "I even read when I go out walking and totally miss what I'm supposed to be looking at."

Although she has written for adults - 1986's *Killjoy* ("...a quite unpleasant, dark piece about a sadomasochistic affair,") was a Booker submission and there are also two black comedies, *Taking the Devil's Advice*

and *In Cold Domain* - children have, for the most part been her audience. “I’ve absolutely *no* idea why,” she says. “I suppose because they’re there, they’re as real an audience as adult readers and they appreciate what I do. I read Richmal Crompton as a child and I know I absolutely appreciated everything about the books - I got so much out of them - and I’d be proud to think I have as vivid a vocabulary as Richmal Crompton, although I think I cover a wider spectrum of writing. I also learnt readability from Enid Blyton, and I think you’d find almost no adult writer of my generation who wouldn’t admit they hadn’t read her compulsively.”

Fine is one of a handful of authors, adult or children’s, who have seen their work adapted successfully for the screen. Successfully in financial terms, that is. The experience has obviously not been at all edifying in any other way as I get the feeling questions about *Goggle-Eyes* and *Mrs Doubtfire* aren’t that welcome. “I take no interest in screenplays,” Fine says, “They’re a waste of time, so much rewriting and revamping, I can’t be doing with it. I’m willing to waste my time if I want to do it, but not if someone’s wasting mine.”

She has a very realistic view about the whole book-to-film process, fully aware that the author only really gets to make one decision - whether to cash the cheque or not. “I would like to have written a classic that someone wants to take and absolutely mirror the book,” she says, “and that definitely wasn’t on the agenda with *Madame Doubtfire*. I’m not complaining, though, it paid off the mortgage!”

The tribulations of childhood - separated families, ‘new’ fathers and claustrophobic relationships - seem to be a recurring theme with her books, but this turns out to have nothing to do with her own childhood, and much more to do with how she sees a child of today would view the world. “I had a remarkably secure childhood,” says Fine. “I had four sisters, my parents stayed together, I loved my school and my Mum’s still in the house we grew up in. But I do have a worried, anxious personality and I’m not an optimist by nature - my family tell me my favourite words are ‘I said this would happen!’”

Her books are, Fine continues, evenly split up into the various categories that reflect the real world “...but what’s interesting is that it’s the break-up books that pick up all the publicity. Even *Flour Babies* was seen as being about single parent families when it was actually about my life and what an effort children are.”

There is, though, no way of misreading *The Tulip Touch*. It is a book that looks askance at childhood friendship, which I read at the same time as I read the reviews of Blake Morrison’s *As If*, and the parallels seemed inescapable. “I couldn’t argue that the Bulger case didn’t start me thinking,” admits Fine. “There were five or six cases that set it off, and I remember Marina Warner saying, in her Reith Lecture, that children live in the real world and can’t be kept away from everything. The information revolution has meant that children are less able to grow up feeling confident about the world they live in - in my day the news was boring, the newspapers unreadable and the horrors of the world passed us by. Now that the *Sun* has a reading age of eight and the news is there, in colour, on TV five times a day, it’s inescapable.

“I suspect,” she carries on, “that one of the things that can make a child so lacking in empathy is that they’ve seen too much and had to grow a shell to protect themselves. We probably have a generational problem with kids who have seen too much. I certainly think, as a society, we should face the fact that we have more and more kids who have no natural empathy.”

*The Tulip Touch* is a hard book to read, probably much more so for a parent who must be able to search his or her own conscience for those moments when they may have let a child down. “Society,” says Fine, “should be looking at itself - if you can send a man to the Moon you should be able to save children from falling through the net.”

Though also a tough book for her to write *The Tulip Touch* was, says Fine, by no means the hardest piece of work she’s produced. “*Step by Wicked Step* so upset me I only carried on because I thought it might be important for some readers. It was awful...some of the research was terrible and I’ve never been so glad to get rid of a book in my whole life,” she admits, with evident relief. “Somehow, *Tulip* was a more intellectual novel. It tries to

deal with the failures that happen when people drift through with no real family life - everyone too goddamn busy and with no time for their kids.”

Anne Fine is an impassioned writer, concerned, full of consternation and seemingly driven to write, whether it hurts or not. Intensity, zeal even, like this acts as a magnet to readers and her audience writes back. “If someone’s been upset by something you’ve written, because you’ve touched a nerve, they deserves more than a form letter,” she says. “You have a duty to reply and do what you can, but sometimes it can be difficult...you might not feel in the mood...but I try to do it as fast as possible because a week’s a long time in a child’s life.”

Such commitment has won her fans, plaudits, bouquets and enough awards to probably warrant the purchase of a new fire surround. But which one, of all of them, has meant the most? “The Carnegie,” Fine replies without hesitation, “the first one.” Why? “Clearly because I came from a family without the money to buy me books - I was a library child, and that award gave me the extraordinary sense of putting something back into the system that made me.”

Of all the things she’s fervent about the library system is up there near the top of the list; as we finish talking she finds a quote from a Parliamentary debate on library funding during which Ian Sproat said: “Is there still something sufficiently distinctive about reading as a recreation to justify its being made publicly available free of charge?” That the question was even asked makes her seethe. That there is someone like Anne Fine to voice protest, hopefully, might make a difference.





