

2001/Sept SONYA HARTNETT - Publishing News

“Stubborn, overbearing, inquisitive...and becoming more and more reclusive.” As an autobiographical description, this does little to endear you to the person you’re about to talk to, so it was something of a surprise when Sonya Hartnett - author of this slightly acerbic self-portrait - turned out to be somewhat different .

She’s known, at least in Australia, as an award-winning writer who prefers the dark to the light and airy, in terms of subject matter, and is famous for having her first novel - *Trouble All the Way* - published when she was 15 years old.

Hartnett, for all that she’s written 11 novels, is unknown here in the UK, a situation that the folk at Walker Books are determined will be corrected when her latest book, *Thursday’s Child*, is published here in January. It is, according to some Australian reviews, an easier, more accessible read than her previous work. “I wrote *Thursday’s Child* at the age of 32, and it’s a book for 32 year olds,” she tells me, her voice clear and warm, all the way down the line from Melbourne.

And it is true that this story of a dirt-poor family, literally scratching a living on the badlands of a soldier settlement on the eve of the Great Depression, could sit just as well on the adult shelves of your local bookshop as it will on the children’s. “It’s on both sides of the shop in Australia,” Hartnett tells me, “and I think my biggest audience is academics...unfortunately, they’re not a *mass* market.”

Possibly the first thing that sets *Thursday’s Child* apart, drawing you into the story and the characters and the sheer desperation of it all, is the language. The book is narrated by Harper Flute, now 21, but seven years old when the story starts, and she has such a voice, such a spirit, that you can’t help but be entranced. The way she describes the Flute family is at once grown up and seen through the eyes of a child.

Hartnett, who is well past the point where her books are based on her own experiences, says that Harper is definitely *not* her. “No, she couldn’t be like me because she’s robust and able to take the knocks in the story,”

she says. “And she couldn’t be a moaner, everyone hates a moaner.” To begin with Hartnett, who says she’s not very at ease around children, found herself quite nervous of her fictional creation, though in the end quite liked her for her ability to get on with life.

“Harper’s voice is that of a 21-year-old looking back, so there has to be an element of precociousness.” Hartnett says. “And I made up some of her words myself...words like ‘heroitude’, which *should* be a word...I’ve done this before, but more so in this book because Harper could be allowed to be creative with her language.

“I chose to narrate the story through a child because people like them, they *want* to like them. Harper is the reason you get sucked into the characters,” she goes on. “Even I, who like to distance myself from my characters, felt protective of her.” And Harper tells us a fantastic tale of poverty, disappointment, love and strangeness, because, admits the author, what she has written is a fantasy, but one with factual details.

“Harper’s brother Tin, especially, is a fairytale character,” she continues, “he’s hyper reality, crossed with a fairy story. He’s not bad, but has overtones of bad - you know his personality even though he never says a word.” Where, I wondered, did these names, like Court, Harper’s dad, and Caffy, her newborn brother, come from? “It’s a part of my tradition to call my characters odd names - such as Kitten, Latch and Indigo - although I don’t *actively* go looking for them, I just don’t like ordinary ones,” says Hartnett. “I found Thora when I saw Thora Hird in Alan Bennett’s *Talking Heads* - it’s a very unusual name here.”

The story of *Thursday’s Child* is set as the Depression is about to hit a world still reeling from the Great War. Hartnett chose the time because, she says, children weren’t mollycoddled then like they are now. “Round the time I was filling in the details of the story - and I always think of the first draft as bringing the tree into the house and the second as putting on the decorations - it was Anzac Day and a lot of books had been published to celebrate, and they included information about the Depression.”

As she was putting her plot together, she discovered the story of the soldier settlements, an ill-fated government policy to reward returning war

heroes with tracts of land. “A lot of it was dead land,” say Hartnett, “which was a godsend of a plot device, but for the actual people must have been hell.” And as plot devices go, it makes for a hell of a good read.

Far from overbearing or reclusive in person, Hartnett, it turns out, is the exact opposite. And her book, once you’ve read it, is one you’ll find yourself telling anyone who’ll listen they have to read.