Pat Thomson introduces Nina Beachcroft.

A new series featuring writers and books we think you might like to know better.

Pat Thomson invites you to meet Nina Beachcroft

Should you go down a lane in one of Nina Beachcroft's stories something magical is bound to happen at its end. It seems appropriate that if you wish to meet her you must go down a winding lane, the trees meeting overhead in parts, to emerge on a village green. There you will find the cottage where she lives with her family and a friendly dog. This is how many of her books start, in normal, cheerful family surroundings which provide the solidly realistic base from which fantastic and magical events blossom. With a new book out this year and six more appearing in paperback, new readers as well as old friends can look forward to a real treat.

Nina Beachcroft has always been interested in fantasy and all her books are of this type, but all are different. She shows a remarkable versatility within the single genre. Usually, the children in the story are drawn into a fantastic situation where they enjoy the magical happenings but also have to take a certain responsibility for what occurs. Sometimes they gain insight into the lives of others or are brought to a character-testing situation. The decisions, however, are personal and domestic rather than cosmic, and although there are moments of real fear and tension, this author exercises discipline over the events, never exploiting her young readers. She is perfectly clear about the fact that she writes for children and feels a responsibility for them. She would never, for this reason, manipulate aspects of the occult for easy effects. In her books, you will find instead a great variety of imaginative experiment, requiring magical interventions, written in a crisp, humorous style, but always gentle when the feelings are strongest.

Readers might well start with her first book, Well Met by Witchlight, which has a delightful, unstereotyped witch as the central character. She is Padraic Colum's "Old Woman of the Roads", content and with special powers. The children in the story are allowed to participate in her magic and join with her to defeat a less benign witch who threatens them all.

The Wishing People follows a traditional theme in that the young hero and heroine are granted ten wishes. These bring the traditional mixture of great fun and awful disaster. The wish which one set of nine year old readers found exceptionally intriguing was the one where the children change bodies with their pets and revel in new and powerful senses, not least the sense of smell! Nina Beachcroft often uses this book when she goes to talk to schools as its subject and structure lends itself to discussion with the children about the craft of writing.

The book which has the most local connotation for her is A Spell of Sleep. The woods and lanes are part of the Hertfordshire countryside around her home. An archaeological dig nearby provoked thoughts about the way in which the past is sometimes part of the present. In the story, two obnoxious characters are awakened from a sleep many centuries long and move into the house next door to the Turner family. Their unpleasantness daily becomes more
sinister until they threaten the happiness of the whole family, and Peter realises that he must summon aid from the past if the frightening pair are to be returned to their place in time. To do this, Nina Beachcroft invented a character called Robert the Hermit who appears in the nick of time and returns the couple to their great sleep. After the book had been written, she learned that the dig had not uncovered a twelfth century manor, as had been thought, but a chapel of the same period, and there had indeed been a real hermit stalking the lanes of Hertfordshire.

Nina Beachcroft also writes about friendship, a major preoccupation of the age group she writes for. In *A Visit to Folly Castle*, Emma Jones finds a note in a bottle - on a footpath. It is a note from Cassandra, living in a grand and impressive house, but desperate for a friend. This imaginative method of attracting attention is the least of the surprises she can provide. Statues move, the view from the window changes according to mood, and her aunt walks on water. The fascinating house and complicated garden attract Emma at first, but when Cassandra's parents show an excessive interest in Emma's young brother, she becomes anxious and suspicious. Her fears are justified, for the family are not ordinary humans. As a child at the end of the war, Nina Beachcroft lived in Wimbledon surrounded by many such large, empty houses which she daringly explored, and the excitement of being on strange and forbidden territory is recreated in the book.

She has also written a genuine ghost story, *Cold Christmas*. She explains that she wrote this book "back to front". She came across the place name and the story grew from that. In this story it is the emotions of the past which persist to the present, affecting the Christmas guests gathered for the holiday. Josephine, uncomfortable among strangers, notices another girl whom no one else can see. She realises that the ghost child is trying to reach her, even invading her dreams. The party treasure hunt is replaced by a hunt for real evidence about what had taken place in the house many years ago, something so significant that its effects remain. In resolving the mystery of the ghost, Josephine is able to resolve some of her own anxieties.

The newest book, *The Genie and her Bottle*, is a lighthearted account of the Arabian Nights let loose in the suburbs. An urban setting is unusual for this author, but there is no doubt that releasing a strong-willed genie in London gives scope for many awkward encounters. Alex and Robin soon wish that they had not released the imperious Leila from her bottle. She complains that there are no swans' tongues in the frig. and although they do get a trip on a magic carpet it hardly compensates for the affair of the giant roc in the garden. The problems come to a head when she wishes to attend the Queen's Garden Party.

One of the advantages of schools and school bookshops is that it is possible to know the readers, so who is likely to enjoy Nina Beachcroft's books? They will be invaluable in the junior and middle schools, especially for children who enjoy traditional and fairy tales. They come between these and the large-scale, demanding fantasies such as those by Ursula LeGuin and Tolkien. They are for readers who like to flex the muscles of their imaginations a little, and although they are not difficult to read, there is always something in them worth thinking about.

Nina Beachcroft's next book is already taking shape and once again there will be a change of direction within the fantasy genre. She is thinking of UFOs and other worlds, a new dimension to the subject which has always interested her the most. That is probably one reason why she writes about it so well.

**Book Information**

*The Genie and her Bottle*, Heinemann, 0 434 92856 9, £5.95

*Under the Enchanter*, Granada Dragon, 0 583 30609 8, £1.25

*A Visit to Folly Castle*, Granada Dragon, 0 583 30610 1, £1.25

*The Wishing People*, Granada Dragon, 0 583 30607 1, £1.25

*Well Met by Witchlight*, Granada Dragon, 0 583 30606 3, £1.25.
Cold Christmas and A Spell of Sleep will appear in paperback (Granada Dragon) in January 1984.

Pat Thompson is a librarian and past chairman of the Federation of Children's Book Groups. She has recently collaborated with Jan Ormerod on an anthology for the youngest, Rhymes Around the Day (Kestrel. 0 7226 5808 7. £4.50).

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