



## Authorgraph No.23: Philippa Pearce

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**Philippa Pearce** interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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Philippa Pearce's cottage stands opposite the Mill House where she spent her childhood. She recalls living there, the youngest of four children, as a very happy time.

'Oh it was lovely, it really was. Although there wasn't much cash we had lots of space. My father ran the mill and because he was the miller he had a narrow strip running up the river for about an eighth of a mile. We had a canoe, we swam, the river wasn't polluted at all in those days, my father fished (of course we girls didn't fish!) and in the mill was a wonderful workshop for carpentry and sack-mending and that sort of thing. On a Saturday afternoon my father went off to the Corn Exchange in Cambridge and my mother went with him to change her library book. We used to nip into the mill by a secret way we knew - we were never supposed to do this - and we used to play among the sacks and hide. It was a lovely time.'

Yet surrounded by family there was a sense of being separate, something, perhaps, which makes Philippa Pearce such an acute observer of people, places and feelings. 'I was a bit isolated. My sister was eight years older and the boys did everything together.' She was also ill for a long period. 'I didn't go to school until I was eight or nine. When I did go it was very leisurely. We didn't have afternoon school until I was about thirteen or fourteen. I used to come home at lunchtime and potter around up the river. I don't think it did me any harm.'

It didn't prevent her from getting a scholarship to Cambridge. Of her university career she says, 'I think I was a bit sort of asleep most of the time; and I worked terribly hard, quite unnecessarily hard. I woke up much more after Cambridge.' That was at the end of the war. Two false starts with the Civil Service led her to the BBC where she joined the Schools Broadcasting Department and stayed happily for thirteen years as script writer and producer. 'We did adaptations of books. I had to study techniques and structure and what you could do with a book. I began to think it wouldn't be impossible to try to do the same thing myself.' But she was kept fairly busy and it wasn't until 1953 when she got TB and had a long spell in hospital that she began. 'The hospital was in Cambridge; it was a hot summer and I was awfully fed up. I thought of my home and how lovely it would be to be there and to go in the canoe. I began to imagine exactly what it was like. I found I could recreate it in detail and even feel the texture of the twine that ties the canoe to the landing stage that my brother once made. And then I began to think of a story of two boys in a canoe. I wrote it with the absolute innocence of never having done it before. I just went straight ahead; it was lovely.'

Fit again and out of hospital Philippa Pearce tried to find a publisher for what had become **Minnow on the Say**. 'I offered it first of all to Faber who turned it down and I must say I was furious. I thought I had been so calm about it all, but when they turned it down I was furious.' Then John Bell at OUP read it. 'He wrote to me. I shall never forget it. I still have the letter. 'We shall be delighted to publish!' I had just had breakfast and I was drying up. I opened it and read it and was bowled over by it. I was putting things away ready to catch the bus to go to work and I couldn't think why I couldn't put the plate away. I had got this plate and I was trying to force it into the cutlery drawer.'

**Minnow on the Say** was published in 1955. I went round saying this was the only book I was ever going to write; it seemed far safer to say that. Three years later came **Tom's Midnight Garden**. Like the first book it is rooted in intense personal feelings. My father had to retire and they sold the Mill House. Suddenly my childhood was chopped off from me. As they were in the process of selling it I began thinking of writing stories based on the house and the garden and this feeling of things slipping away. It's a terrible feeling. I'm glad I have forgotten what it felt like. She had the theme, she needed a plot. Looking back now at **Minnow on the Say** I think the treasure hunt idea is corny. At the time I wasn't sophisticated enough to see how weak it was, but I did know it was a convention I was borrowing and I was very conscious that the plot was far too involved. I decided this new book would be just about children playing in the garden, nothing more than that. But of course it would have been shapeless. My elder brother and his friends were reading J W Dunne's **Experiment in Time**. I never really understood it properly but it was a sort of theoretical base for the book.

It fed the real impulse of the book, the feeling of time passing, people becoming old. Even though I wasn't old I could see that if you were old you hadn't been old forever.

The house and garden remain, largely unchanged and uncannily familiar to anyone who knows the book. Philippa Pearce is on good terms with the present owners and their children. Walking round the garden she recreates her childhood and the book. She points out the door in the wall which out-of-time Tom squeezes through like an inexperienced ghost. It's a nice door isn't it. On these walls there were the most marvellous plums. I've never seen them before or since. You could hold them up to the light and see through them... My father did actually walk along the top of this wall as a boy, and he also skated to Ely. All that in the book was based on what he told us. I imagine Hatty as being born about when my father was born, in 1876.

Two novels published, one a Carnegie winner. Was she beginning to think of herself as a children's writer? Well, at that point it was still something I did in my spare time. I wasn't sure whether I would go on writing or not. She did. **A Dog So Small**, about Ben who becomes increasingly locked into his fantasies about having a dog, was turned down by OUP and eventually published by Constable in 1962.

Scenery, places, are important in Philippa Pearce's stories. That often comes to me before anything else. When she married Martin Christie they went to live in Suffolk and she found a new landscape, one which has appeared in the short stories and now most dominantly in her latest book **The Way to Sattin Shore**.

Sattin Shore is a real place; it's a small estuary in Suffolk where we used to live. You approach it along a long road; it was always deserted because you weren't allowed to take a car along. The idea for the story has been lying around in my mind for 15 or 20 years. I wanted to do something with this feeling of going to meet somebody, going to meet somebody for a very important encounter, almost of going to meet your destiny, what you should be or what you were. I wanted that at the heart of it. I still come across boss shots at the beginning of that story dating years back. Kestrel wanted me to call it just Sattin Shore; but I wanted it to be **The Way to Sattin Shore** because it was the way into the past, as though the past were a place.

In the book *Kate*, the central character, makes several journeys to Sattin Shore to unravel the mystery that surrounds her father whom she believes is dead. There she meets her granny who belongs to the place, and the place which was so important, and in the end she meets her father. It is a moment of great intensity.

He had been swimming naked, as the place was very deserted: and so Kate saw her father as Eve saw Adam newly created in the Garden of Eden.

What I meant, if I meant anything was that she needed him so much she almost created him. I wanted him to be absolutely stark naked. At that moment he's the perfect man, the perfect father, the Michelangelo Adam. In some ways he was a weak man. But for Kate he was perfect.

This encounter becomes even more poignant when Philippa Pearce reveals that her husband died when their daughter

was only a few weeks old. But she insists firmly that the book has nothing to do with her daughter. 'It is something I have imagined.'

As a newly widowed single parent Philippa Pearce had to re-organise her life. She returned to London and became a freelance. 'I did part-time work with the BBC as a producer. At the same time I was part-time children's editor for Andre Deutsch. They had never had a children's list before. I have never worked so hard.'

She stayed with Deutsch for five years. 'I loved doing it, and I think I was really helpful to people... Once you get a good writer you don't want to interfere with them.'

About being edited herself she is less happy. 'I don't much like constructive criticism,' she smiles, 'so when I finally send it, it is as near perfect as I can make it. Of course there is constructive criticism you have to pay attention to but I dread it, it's drudgery. I think I'm just not good at plots. This latest one caused me lots of problems. I think it was because I was out of practice. I'd translated **Wings of Courage** but nothing very serious and sustained and completely my own for a long time. It took ages.'

Short stories are a different matter. 'I love doing short stories. I don't find them as difficult. I can get a complete idea for a short story whereas when I have written a long book I've never had a complete idea for the whole thing. I have a theme in my mind and one or two strong scenes and then I begin fumbling my way forward.' Like most writers she knows the despair of getting stuck, of not being able to make it work. 'You can go on writing, anyone can write a bad book, a book that doesn't take off, where the writing is dead.'

'I usually give up and go away and let it work in my mind. There is just one story, **At the River Gates**, when I got the whole story in my head between being asleep and being fully awake one morning. It was marvellous. I had never done anything like that before. I'm sure it was lying in wait for me really. It's a lovely feeling.'

Philippa Pearce's short stories demonstrate how well she understands children, their relationships with adults, the strength of their emotions. This quality is also present in **The Battle of Bubble and Squeak** which won the Whitbread Award in 1978. It was written after Philippa Pearce and her daughter had moved to the village to make it easier to keep the animals Sally loved.

Among the cats, dogs, goat, horse etc. that joined the household were two gerbils.

'It was a terrible time. I don't really take to gerbils but Sally had the chance of getting them and she was radiant at the opportunity; she was about nine. So we had them. Almost all the incidents in the book happened to us: they gnawed holes in the curtains, the cat caught one and we took it to the vet and the vet told us what to do and we saved his life. I invented the rest, but everything about the gerbils was absolutely true.'

'What I wanted to do with that book was make the opening pages deliberately gripping for say a junior child and yet be simple enough for perhaps a younger child, or a junior child who wasn't a very good reader.'

This clear sense of the reader comes very much from Philippa Pearce's years with Schools Broadcasting. 'I very often find myself referring back to that period of my life to get it right. And I have learned an awful lot from teachers and from children, of course. I like talking to children. I prefer talking to children than adults. Adults are so polite you never know when they are bored or not. Children always yawn if they are bored.'

There is a lot of the teacher and a fair bit of the actor in Philippa Pearce. 'I enjoy telling stories; it is lovely holding an audience. I don't usually use my own because although they read aloud alright (I hope), they don't tell well. **The Shadow Cage** I originally told in a school and another one, **The Great Sharp Scissors** will be in my new collection for 5-7s.'

She's working on that now. It's something she started while working on the BBC series Listening and Reading, and she's enjoying writing for a different age. 'I think it keeps you flexible, like gymnastics.' And after that? 'I don't

know. I am sure I will want to try, if life lasts out, another long book; but I haven't got one in mind yet. At least I don't think I have. You never know what is lying around in your mind.?

## **The Books**

**Minnow on the Say**, OUP, 0 19 277064 0, £2.25; Puffin, 0 14 03.1022 3, £1.10

**Tom's Midnight Garden**, OUP, 0 19 271128 8, £4.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.0893 8, 95p

**A Dog So Small**, Kestrel, 0 7226 5261 5, £3.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.0206 9, 90p

**Mrs Cockle's Cat**, ill. Antony Maitland, Kestrel, 0 7226 5260 7, £3.95

**What the Neighbours Did**, Kestrel, 0 7226 5262 3, £4.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.0710 9, 95p

**The Shadow Cage**, Kestrel, 0 7226 5243 7, £4.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.1073 8, 85p

**The Elm Street Lot**, Kestrel, 0 7226 5515 0, £3.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.1147 5, 90p

**The Battle of Bubble and Squeak**, Deutsch, 0 233 96986 1, £3.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.1183 1, 80p

**Wings of Courage** (translated and adapted from a story by George Sand), Kestrel, 0 7226 5770 6, £4.50

**The Way to Sattin Shore**, Kestrel, 0 7226 5882 6, £5.95

**The Squirrel Wife** (out of print in the Kestrel picture edition), collected in **The Faber Book of Modern Fairy Tales**, Corrin and Corrin (eds), Faber, 0 571 11768 6, £5.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.1546 2, £1.50

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