



# Authorgraph No 42 ? Helen Cresswell

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**Helen Cresswell** interviewed by **David Bennett**.

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Grandma Bagthorpe and Henry Bagthorpe *are* Helen Cresswell. Her two daughters combined inspired Daisy Parker, and Stella Bright/Laura Bagthorpe is modelled on her creator's late mother. If you visited Helen Cresswell and her husband Brian (Uncle Parker?) at their home in North Nottinghamshire you might be met by some fierce barking from Boris, known as Boz, the life image of the time gypsy dog in **The Secret World of Polly Flint**. The calm, ordered, utterly un-Bagthorpien environment of Old Church Farm is filled with the treasured possessions and collections which, as much as the people in her life, inspired this most prolific and fascinating author.

Helen Cresswell creates stories from what surrounds her. ?Everything that I collect is a symbol of something in my interior world... Everything is to reinforce and help me keep a grip on things.? Conversation is frequently punctuated by a sudden ferret through a drawer to produce a photo that inspired; Lewis Bear, hero of a forthcoming set of picture books, sits on a chair not far from the Polly Flint doll, and books that are from both Helen's childhood and her mother's are drawn from the shelves to verify a reference or show an early childhood manuscript.

The house, its contents and people are only part of the inspiration. Helen's timeless rural fantasies, like **The Piemaker**, **The Signposters**, **The Bongleweed**, are set in the landscapes where Helen walks Boz near her home; **The Secret World of Polly Flint** lies in nearby Rufford Country Park. Here also she finds echoes which spark her imagination. Helen Cresswell is very receptive to these echoes and to the coincidences that seem to over-run her life. She tells of a visit to a Leicestershire school where she spoke to the children about her varied life ? ?I could pick up the phone and find it's Walt Disney asking me to write a film? ? and about how she avoids the Nottingham Ring Road, because ?no-one seems to know what they're doing on roundabouts?. Driving back she passed two very recent accidents on each of the two motorway roundabouts that she had to cross and, reaching home, received a call, *not* from Walt Disney but suggesting a film script project, which led to a visit to Australia and to **The Haunted School**, which should reach our television screens before long.

The recent writing of **Moondial**, a ghostly fantasy centred on another real location, Belton House near Newark, has had its elements of slightly more than mere coincidence, A photograph of the gnarled, sculptured Belton House sundial which started the story in motion sits on Helen's desk for inspiration. Putting it into a story seems at times to have had almost the quality of a psychic experience.

Like **Polly Flint**, and **Lizzie Dripping** ten years ago, **Moondial** was a double task; the TV version and the novel were written more or less simultaneously. But the **Moondial** project is a source of pride since Helen set up the whole thing herself. She hopes that it will be filmed at the exact location and do for Belton House what **Polly Flint** has done for Rufford Country Park, where a ?Polly Flint Tour? seems to have been instituted by local schools. **Lizzie Dripping** was also filmed close to home ? in the garden of Old Church Farm, with the loan of a neighbour's particularly attractive

pond for a few special shots.

Visiting schools and taking part in the 'Polly Flint Tours' delight Helen. She tries hard not to say no to school visits? 'If you didn't do it you'd lose all touch with reality... When you go into a school it reminds you that that's where the world is.' Her mission is to encourage the children to appreciate their gift of imagination; boring adults get like that when their imaginations dry up. 'Imagination' is one of Helen's oft-used words. She says of her work that she is 'trying to pass on to children a dimension that I feel is there; I'm partly doing it for myself because it's real to me... the world of Polly Flint is more real than what's going on in Nottingham at this moment... it's the truth of the imagination. To me that's what really counts. The rest of it doesn't matter very much... The only way to involve children is through the imagination.'

Her activities on the 'Polly Flint Tour' certainly live up to that. Given enough notice by enthusiastic local teachers she manages to get Boz to sit forlornly by his namesake's grave in Rufford Park, recreating the scene in the book when Polly comes upon Boz the time gypsy dog. As the visiting children round the corner Helen slips into the shrubbery. The spectacle of what they have seen in imagination become reality delights the children; but when a tall blonde-haired lady appears and calls the dog by name delight becomes amazement. The whole scenario gives its creator immense satisfaction.

Helen is emphatic that she doesn't have any specific children in mind when she writes. However, like many writers for children, she has a strong remembrance of her own childhood, and in her published work she can point in retrospect to aspects of stories, plays and poems she wrote as a child and which are readily to hand. She identifies strongly with children, diagnosing herself as a case of arrested development? 'I just think I've got a childish streak in me. I adore writing books like **Polly Flint** and **The Piemakers**. I love it. I absolutely live them... When I'm writing those books I am completely lost in them and that is my world and I actually prefer it to my daily life.'

One of her stories, something of a 'maverick' book in what Helen was once amused to overhear described as 'The Cresswell Canon' has produced a flood of moving letters from children. **Dear Shrink**, the story of three children thrown most unexpectedly into foster care, was a painful one for Helen to write and owes some of its origins to the experience of fostering a young girl one summer many years ago. But as a child Helen too suffered a similar experience? the kitchen reeking of rotting vegetables and ironing, where a mangy budgie moped, was once her lot.

The pain for the characters themselves is all the more emphasised by the suddenness of their predicament and the difficulty for three middle-class children of coming to terms with a drastic change of environment and values. Helen contends that this isn't a book that she intended for a teenage audience; for her it is just a book like her others, for real kids who 'still have a schoolbag stuffed with felt-tip pens, usually fluorescent colours with the lids off, and who still half believe in werewolves.'

'Time' is another of Helen's words. She writes with sepia brown ink on cream paper which 'has a timeless feel'. She confesses the ability to breathe the kiss of death into watches, which is a standing joke amongst her friends. She's convinced that watches know that she doesn't really believe in them. She has twenty or so that 'go sometimes and not others' and seldom bothers to wind the two clocks in the house, which she bought only for their aesthetic qualities anyway. She firmly contends that she'll become an eccentric old lady like Aunt Lucy in the Bagthorpes, who disregards time utterly. As a child she never had any sense of there being a future? 'I never ever saw myself as an adult. I foresaw no future for myself whatsoever?' and supposes that her love of de la Mare's poetry is because he too seems to expound that 'what we know as linear time is really not very relevant'. **Moondial** measures Moontime, 'which is the *real* time of hearts and lives.'

She was made very conscious of this timeless quality in her fantasies, during the filming of *Polly Flint*, when the costume department couldn't find a period in the text from which to work. They settled eventually on a white socks and sandals timelessness as a way of resolving their difficulties, just as had happened earlier with **Lizzie Dripping**.

On the walls at Old Church Farm hang paintings, bought over several years. Since writing **Polly Flint** Helen Cresswell

has realised that in one way or another they all contain arches, semi-circular shapes, bending trees within which the space recedes to invisible depths. For the time tunnel in **Polly Flint** she chose the arch of the bridge on Rufford Lake but subconsciously it seems she had been collecting time tunnels for a long time.

Their echoes have entered the books of a writer who believes firmly that 'a children's book isn't a watered-down adult book. It's generically different.' A difference which can make children call 'Hello, Aunt Em' to the owner of the cottage in Wellow with the tiny eaves window which they *know* is Polly Flint's. The same children who put their ears to the grass and 'definitely' hear the bells of Grimstone, timeless sounds from a story that has penetrated deep into their imaginations. So powerfully does the Cresswell magic work that one seven-year-old 'heard children counting down below'. Polly Flint's world had become a part of her own experience; she had been transported through the time tunnel, out of the web of time. Which is just as Helen Cresswell would have it.

## **The Books**

(published in hardback by Faber and in paperback by Puffin)

**Dear Shrink**, 0 571 11912 3, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1613 2, £1.50 pbk

**Bagthorpes Unlimited**, 0 571 11245 5, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1178 5, £1.75 pbk

**Bagthorpes Abroad**, 0 571 13350 9, £6.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1972 7, £1.95 pbk

**Bagthorpes Haunted**, 0 571 13585 4, £7.95 hbk

**Bagthorpes v The World**, 0 14 03.1324 9, £1.95 pbk

**Ordinary Jack**, 0 14 03.1176 9, £1.95 pbk

**Absolute Zero**, 0 14 03.1177 7, £1.95 pbk

**The Bongleweed**, 0 571 10374 X, £4.25 hbk; 0 14 03.1272 2, £1.95 pbk

**The Beachcombers**, 0 14 03.1026 6, £1.75 pbk

**A Gift from Winklesea**, 0 14 03.0493 2, £1.25 pbk

**Lizzie Dripping**, 0 14 03.1751 1, £1.25 pbk

**The Piemakers**, 0 14 03.0868 7, £1.75 pbk

**The Secret World of Polly Flint**, 0 571 11939 5, £6.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1542 X, £1.95 pbk

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