

Books that influenced me

My earliest reading memory is looking at books under the slip of light under the door after I was meant to be asleep. I think it was *Winnie the Pooh* – I can remember an illustration of a bear who could walk and talk. A rabbit family is another lasting experience. And fairy stories of course.

My first novel was *The Folk of the Faraway Tree*. It was my 7th Christmas and both my big brother and sister helped to cut the cover, glue it on and varnish it. They were just as excited as me that I had a novel of my own at last. After that it was Enid Blyton's adventures and mysteries. I liked the secret tunnels and getting cut off by incoming tides. For a kid who saw the sea once a year it was fuel for the imagination. I ate up fairy stories, folktales and Uncle Arthur's Bible stories – all 12 volumes. Even Enid Blyton wrote palatable Bible stories.

My bed became a ship, the Swiss Family Robinson's canoe. Every Friday in the one teacher school that I attended in semi-outback Queensland we were allowed one book from the metre-wide and less-than-metre high bookcase which was called 'The Library'. I'd carry the book home, always aware of it in my bag and in the night take it into my bed. I learnt to read in the dark, under the covers, and in the early light of dawn. I was transported across the seas away from droughts or up high mountains riding the Silver Brumby & Flicker or calling for Lassie, or getting marooned in a Cornish sea cave. My parents thought I had to sleep in due to the 70 mile round bus trip I took every day, but by 10 o'clock I'd emerge, my book read already, yearning for the next adventure that wouldn't happen until next Friday night.

Then there were Mary Grant Bruce's stories. They made me cry because the big brothers were too perfect. My sister found me crying over one of them. 'What's wrong with you?' she said. 'Why isn't our brother like Norah's?' I wailed. 'Don't be stupid, brothers are only like that in books. No one has a nice brother,' she informed me.

I devoured my brother's superman comic when I had the chance and he was out in the paddock. It was the cause for a few smacks – but it never put me off reading or sneaking into places where I knew there was something to read.

By the time I was 10, I remember reading '*The Prince and the Pauper*' – though that was possibly Enid Blyton's version – she ruined kids for the classics in providing too easily accessible texts and not forcing kids like me to read the originals. *The Prince and the Pauper* totally captivated my imagination – how people could swap places – I loved the older male role model in Sir Miles. I knew by then I loved history and I wonder now if that wasn't the seed of the idea of Dev Eagle in *The Keeper*. It was one of the rare books I re-read – many times – out in the garden when I was supposed to be watering the rose bushes. I was brought up in a drought and was told to hold the hose at all times. I thought holding a hose without a book in my other hand was such a waste of time. My brother caught me wasting water on a few occasions when a book got too interesting. But my mother read and so did I. At least I wasn't alone.

Mum took me to a library 30 miles away in the holidays. In between times she brought me books home – that was when I ate my way through all the legends of the world. There was a series – Fairy Tales of Russia etc. Between library drops I sniffed out anything with paper and ink that had some remote mystery or story. My brother's Biggles books, Cherry Ames, Tarzan, the Bobbsey twins, Corrego in Borneo. *John Halifax, Gentleman*, an old book of my grandmother's. Sometimes I got desperate.

By mid high school I knew all the history of England according to Jean Plaidy. I loved *The Tale of Two Cities*. There was Thomas Hardy – I enjoyed him too. Books that made a huge impression on me were the Cornish ones – Daphne du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn*, *Rebecca*, and *My Cousin Rachel*. Once Mum brought those home I was immersed in the Cornish landscape – mysterious Fowey, and Bodmin Moor, solving smuggling mysteries at Frenchman's Creek. I don't think *Manderley* ever left me either.

As a young adult I discovered *Sara Dane* and *The Term of his Natural Life*. I found our own history was exciting too. After that it was MM Kaye and *The Far Pavillions* and CJ Cronin. I don't know how much of what I read affects what I write – whether it's my experiences that affect my work more, but it is an interesting thought. Did Dev Eagle in *The Keeper* come from Sir Miles? Did Joel Billings in *The Keeper* come from reading stories like King David – he'll fight his giant and win? Do parts of *Zenna Dare* have the

atmosphere of *Sara Dane*? Or *Sailmaker* the mystery and adventure of the famous five on holidays in Cornwall? Possibly the greatest influence on our writing is what we read, and certainly we'll improve more in our writing by reading.

The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading in order to write. A man will turn over half a library in order to write. Samuel Johnson

What do You like to Read?

It's a hard question to answer as it changes constantly. There are authors who I'll pick up immediately if I see they have a new book, and if I write a list, someone will be left out because there are so many that I admire, but here are a few. Eva Sallis, Gillian Rubenstein, Tim Winton, Michael Gerard Bauer (*Don't call me Ishmael* is one of the best children's/YA novels I've read), David Almond (*Skellig*), Catherine Bateson (*Rain May and Captain Daniel*), Linda Newbury (*Set in Stone*), Vikram Seth (*An unequal Music*), Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*).

I love the language in Martine Murray's *The slightly true story of Cedar B. Hartley* and especially that of Glenda Millard. Her new young adult novel is just as beautiful as the *Tishkin Silk* series. Janeen Brian's *Where does Thursday go* is a special picture book. Carol Wilkinson got me reading fantasy with *Dragonkeeper*. Sheryll Jordan *The Raging Tide* was unforgettable, as is Helen Dunmore's YA *Ingo* series set in Cornwall. Helen Dunmore manages to make you feel you are in Cornwall and uses local culture and language to support her well crafted stories. Her adult novel, *Zennor in Darkness* is another great novel.

I think the most unforgettable read of 2008 for me was Azhar Abidi's *Twilight*. This beautifully written story is set in Pakistan and explores the emotional journey of a family when the son marries an Australian girl and chooses to live in Australia. The effect of this on his widowed mother is explored with sensitivity and wisdom. Another book I'd recommend is Anita Amirrezvani's *The Blood of Flowers*, a novel about a young female carpetmaker in historical Iran.

I like to read novels set in Pakistan and Afghanistan or books written by authors from those places. I also collect Cornish books. I still like folktales, so I have collections of tales especially from Cornwall, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The books that stand out in the last year or so are *The Yield* by Tara June Winch, *Dark Emu* by Bruce Pasco and also the children's version *Young Dark Emu*, and *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens.

As soon as I post this, I'll remember another book I've loved.