



Authorgraph No.126: Geraldine McCaughrean

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Geraldine McCaughrean interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**.

Geraldine McCaughrean interviewed by Stephanie Nettell

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Geraldine McCaughrean is a puzzle. She is a spontaneously hugging sort of person, easily provoked to peals of laughter. She is the adventurous and prolific author of not only an extraordinary range of classic retellings and witty little stories for new readers but of seven older novels, no two alike, that rank among our finest. She'll dive into any form of writing - history, drama and verse as well as fiction for children and adults - for the sheer fun of discovering if she can do it. (She always can.) She is universally acclaimed, and has won almost every children's book award. Geraldine McCaughrean is one of the most spectacularly talented and enjoyable writers around.

Yet inside this exemplar of success and merriment there lurks the child who felt overshadowed by her older and infinitely more clever brother and sister, and who still finds it difficult not being clever. People, she says, expect authors to be intellectual. They *do!* I belong to this internet chatroom, and everyone else is Studying Children's Literature - they're all busy deconstructing and so on, and I don't understand a thing they say! I don't contemplate the imponderable - I only took to writing because I was so inarticulate and couldn't cope with the outside world.

She was, and says she still is, a poor reader, always oppressed by expectations and time, a late developer whose school felt she was taking too few A-levels to be worth teaching. *Writing* I associate entirely with pleasure, but not reading. So, from the earliest age, it was to writing she turned for escape.

The Whitbread Prize for her first novel, **A Little Lower than the Angels**, changed her life. Awards not only help sales, but change the perception of yourself. If people take you seriously as a writer, you begin to think, 'Well, maybe I am???' But uncertainty always worms its way back, gnawing at her confidence and rearing its head throughout our conversation. Wistful about ten-year-old Ailsa's lack of interest in her mother's books, devouring Potter and Redwall instead, she laughs at herself: 'I *wish* I were one of those authors counted as 'well-loved' - I get 'well-respected', 'prize-winning' and so on, but I never get 'well-loved'!'

She was born in Enfield, north London, the daughter of a fireman and a teacher. Practically booted out of school, she was a secretary at Thames Television in the early seventies when a senior colleague urged her to 'better things' and an education degree. Her mother tried to warn her. 'I knew as soon as I walked into a classroom that she was right. I could stimulate the children, but I couldn't then do anything with it. They took me to pieces. The day the Head walked past the room and I found myself, fist raised, growling 'I can knock you through that wall, my girl?' - no, this job's not for me! And these were junior school children -'

Now, as an author, she relishes school visits, whether she's talking about writing, telling stories (few could know more) or bringing her own plays alive. But when I first met her, after she won the Guardian Award for **A Pack of Lies** in 1989, she still bore those scars. 'I became shy and gauche with children,' she said then, viewing them as

?unpredictable?. She had none of her own, and had become reconciled to that: ?A miscarriage made the craving fade, once the grief had gone. I wrote an infertility novel as therapy, and it's better now. My books are my children.?

Some weeks later she memorably transformed the award lunch. Finishing an acceptance speech to an audience who just that morning had read those remarks in the paper, and who included her unaware husband, she joyously announced that she was pregnant. A gasp, and all eyes turned to John: he, in total shock, flung his napkin over his head. Cheers, a toast, and not a dry eye in the house. Ailsa had made her dramatic entry. Some may think she had already appeared in **A Pack of Lies**, but that was her predecessor. Geraldine wrote this Russian doll of a book, a paean to the power of fiction, while she was getting over the loss of the first Ailsa ? a creative act that perhaps gave life to the second, very real and therefore precious, Ailsa.

Between being a teacher and a published author there had been jobs of varying oddity. She wrote for a packager (?There's nothing so humiliating for a writer as *pre-reading* books, Chuck the Duck bathroom stuff!); she was an editor and staff writer on Marshall Cavendish's Storyteller series; she was editor of **The Banbury Post** for a year, ?because the talented girl who ran it single-handedly was a union member and the owner refused to call her the editor ? I was much too shy to do court reporting, so it was only a matter of filling in gaps between the ads?; and she was ?literary assistant? to the ex-world director of Rothmans, ?an appalling old megalomaniac waiting to make his comeback and writing his autobiography, which then became a history of tobacco and on my arrival a history of tobacco advertising ? my ?literary? work, day and night at all hours, was photocopying and pasting in cigarette ads.?

But Fate relented, for John (an ex-Navy man ? their loo is lined with Patrick O'Brians) was then manager of the estate and training college, and provided a shoulder to cry on ? Throughout it all she was writing, even on the daily train to London. Finding acceptance has only made her more prolific. ?I don't *think* of myself as prolific: I lose the equivalent of a working day a week through migraines and sinusitis ? heaven knows what I could do without all that! The sinusitis is recent but I've always had migraines. My mother had them, and like all children I wasn't too sympathetic, although I often wondered, ?Is it my fault she has a headache again???

The Arabian Nights brought her to the OUP (who had once, glorious to recall, contemptuously dismissed her job application), and today her collections of world-wide legends, retold classics and Bible stories pour from Oxford, Orion and Orchard. Aghast at the commission to find 101 stories from around the world ? ?there *are* only seven, aren't there?? ? she discovered it was like feeding the five thousand: ?At the end I had as many left over as I'd used.? She digs among old anthropology books, often with just a one-sentence summary of a legend, forcing her to round it out herself. Purists are offended, but it produces great stories.

She has turned her episodes from British history, **Britannia**, into ten-minute plays, ideal for schools and pageants (?everyone gets a chance, with the king in one becoming a tree in another?), pioneered in Ailsa's school in Newbury and bravely published by Orion's Judith Elliott (?bless her, she was really petrified?). Although the theatre has always been her passion, her first play was for radio, and now Philip Pullman has written the screenplay of **Forever X**, a touching novel about belief and family relationships with moments of black comedy. ?Surely with him it stands a chance! Funnily enough, I'd seen it as TV material, whereas my adult novel, **The Ideal Wife**, an obvious film I'd thought, sold TV rights.? Fired by all this, she is herself tackling screenwriting in evening classes.

A Pack of Lies, comprising miniatures of the heady brews she would later concoct, displayed the abundance of Geraldine McCaughrean's invention, the poetic ability of her imagery to surprise with unexpected aptness. She can juggle several retellings or reading-series books while researching her novels, but *writing* a novel eliminates everything else. Their sheer diversity, the impressive details of atmosphere, languages and background, seem evidence of a world traveller. **Gold Dust** describes a has-been Brazilian mining town's battle with insane greed (with a superb Tyke Tilerish twist); **Plundering Paradise** combines red-blooded adventure with soul-searching, as children defeat pirates in 18th-century Madagascar; **The Stones are Hatching**, set in First World War rural England, takes an uncharacteristically grim view of our folklore in an idiosyncratic fantasy.

?World traveller? I never go anywhere but Wantage library! I never bothered to research my adult novels, but now I

have card indexes that kill me. Children want a *story*, and I'm sinking into a mire of facts, because you get into this mindset where you have to include all the stuff in your file. Yet you must establish an alien setting, the weather, the animals, what it's really *like*?

She sometimes loses faith halfway through a novel, and only Oxford's out-of-house readers can recharge her confidence to continue, but the reaction to **Stones** mirrored her own. ??Hope she never does any more like this! Don't understand what's going on at all ?? I took it apart so many times, it was like that blouse you make in school that you hate the sight of. I thought it had done for me, that I'd never again enjoy writing.? **The Kite Rider** rescued her. ?Pure fun! It's led me on to the next, **Stop the Train** , and it's been just like the good old days.?

Full of thrills and villains and triumphs, **The Kite Rider** is the story of a young boy's odyssey in the China of Kublai Khan and Xanadu, of ?barbarian? Mongols and Tartars. ?Marco Polo saw someone lashed to a cargo hatch and flown aloft. I thought it had possibilities ? although sometimes, trying to get to grips with Chinese names, I doubted the wisdom of it. Ron [Heapy, her long-time friend and editor at Oxford] has a Chinese secretary, and she helped me a lot.? Fun to write and fun to read: she has achieved her goal of a novel for younger readers. ?I can manage it with other books, so each time I vow to make the next novel simpler in style, but somehow it's always gravitated to the over-twelves.?

Like all her work, **The Kite Rider** extols tolerance. ?Some children once said to me that all my novels were about religion. I'd never thought about that, but perhaps they are! ? It seems to me that, although a Christian, her recurring theme is that what works for *you* is what matters, rather than orthodox Christianity, whether it means trusting in the spirits of the Amazon forest, the bones of your ancestors, Father Christmas or the fairy at the top of the tree. ?That's definitely what **Plundering Paradise** is about, and there was even a lot of bigotry in **A Pilgrim's Progress** that was well worth getting rid of ? Bunyan will belabour me when I get to the Gates of Heaven! ? And this tolerance extends beyond faith to embrace other ways of thinking, other habits and appearances.

Yes, Geraldine McCaughrean is a warm expansive soul, quick to reach out and hug the world. It's unfathomable she should still wonder if the world wants to hug her back.

Photograph courtesy of Geraldine McCaughrean.

Stephanie Nettell is a critic, author and journalist on children's books.

The Books

A Little Lower than the Angels , Oxford, 0 19 271780 4, £5.99 hbk

A Pack of Lies , Oxford, 0 19 271788 X, £5.99 hbk, 0 19 275016 X, £3.99 pbk

Forever X , Oxford, 0 19 271748 0, £5.99 pbk

Gold Dust , Oxford, 0 19 271721 9, £9.99 hbk, 0 19 271851 7, £6.99 pbk

Plundering Paradise , Oxford, 0 19 271547 X, £5.99 pbk

The Stones are Hatching , Oxford, 0 19 271797 9, £5.99 pbk, 0 19 275091 7, £4.99 pbk

Stop the Train , Oxford, 0 19 271881 9, £6.99 pbk (January 2001)

The Kite Rider , Oxford, 0 19 271860 6, £6.99 pbk (March 2001)

Britannia: 100 Great Stories from British History , ill. Richard Brassey, Orion, 1 85881 680 7, £20.00 hbk, 1 85881 876 1, £9.99 pbk

A Pilgrim's Progress , Hodder, 0 340 69340 1, £14.99 hbk, 0 340 72754 3, £8.99 pbk

plus many others, including collections of myths, legends, tales etc available mainly from Orchard and Orion.



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