

Antonia Forest - the interview

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Since *Folly* was first published (nearly five years ago now) we've had many suggestions from readers for articles that they'd like to see in the magazine; but if one counts up the requests, one writer is so far ahead that if authors were ranked like Association Football teams, she would be a Premier League all by herself. She is, of course, Antonia Forest.



I was lucky enough to be given the chance to meet Miss Forest. She had previously asked me to compile a list of questions which she would answer in writing; the interview below uses both her (very full) responses to the "questionnaire", and the additional details which emerged when we met. Clearly everyone who reads this article will feel frustrated that I didn't ask the Obvious Question about - well, each reader will have her or his own Obvious Question, and I can only apologise for missing it out. I hope that what is here will make up for it to some extent.

Antonia Forest is a small, lively lady who does not look her age. Her conversation is fascinating; the more, perhaps, because she clearly does not think that she is particularly interesting, and would far rather talk about the books she loves than her own writing or history. There was a constant undercurrent of slight wonderment that anyone could actually value her books as highly as they are valued, and that so many people could be interested in her. Nevertheless, she did reveal a great deal about herself and her background.

We always tend to feel (even though we know it's not logical) that if characters and places are believable and realistic, they must be based on the writer's own experiences. Did Antonia Forest's background resemble the Marlows in any particular? "Not really. My father was the son of a Russian-Jewish immigrant who had been sent out of Russia at the age of twelve, the age when Jewish boys were liable for conscription into the Russian army where they were not allowed to practise their religion. He was sent to relations in France, and when he was eighteen or thereabouts, he left France for Ireland and subsequently England. My mother was an Ulster Protestant, brought up in Dublin. Her father was the youngest of a large family, and by stages members of the family came to England and settled in Bournemouth, for no particular reason I could ever discover. I was born in Hampstead, London, NW3 a year after my parents' marriage."

Did she, like the Marlows, have a large number of brothers and sisters? "No; I was an only child. The family next door had six children, whom I played with, and there were seven or eight in my father's family - but none of that had anything to do with the large number of Marlows. That was simply because large families are good for fiction! But I had a very happy childhood. Absolutely no complaints."

I wondered whether her own experience of school and staff was reflected in Kingscote, which had always struck me as one of the more realistic of fictional boarding schools. "Up to a point. I went to South Hampstead High School at a time when we still had a staff room filled by genuine personalities, selected by a succession of headmistresses who hadn't been afraid to appoint people with minds of their own. During my time there, the Old Guard began to die and/or retire, and the incoming H.M. preferred biddable milk-and-water types. But some of the Kingscote

staff are based on my own schooldays - though I've mixed up their characteristics somewhat. "Miss Cromwell" had favourites, and girls she didn't like at all. It was another member of staff (the classics mistress) who hated prefects! And Miss Keith does to some extent resemble the headmistress who was in charge for most of my time at school. But Kingscote has been considerably adapted to accommodate the stories and the characters."

Was I correct in assuming that she'd been up at Oxford? After all, the Oxford sequence in *The Ready-Made Family* sounds as though it is based on experience. "No, I was never at Oxford University - I went to University College, London. However, I did visit Oxford a long time back, just sight-seeing, having read various Oxford novels, and then, when I was writing *Ready-Made Family*, I felt I'd better renew the acquaintance. So I did an overnight stop, and walked Oxford from end to side, getting it fixed in my mind."

Had she ever taught? Or perhaps she knew people in the profession? "No - I've no experience of teaching and no contacts with educational circles."

Having had all my preconceptions shattered, I asked about the books themselves. Had she had a series in mind from the beginning? "Well, it was rather like C.S. Forester. He wrote *The Happy Return* as a single book. Then he wanted to write about another bit of the same period, had Hornblower sculling around and thought, "Let's use him!" That's virtually what happened to me. *Autumn Term* was meant to be a one-off; after that, I would write a proper grown-up novel.



Then I thought it might be interesting to write about a traitor - and for the child characters one could use the younger Marlows, thus saving the trouble of inventing new characters. After *Traitor* I thought, "Why not a pony book?", these being popular, but Faber said, "Please not. There are so many already." So, as I knew a smidgen about falconry, I opted for that, and then thought, "Oh, *that* family!" By now I could see that the Marlows were likely to be around for some time, and that since the country has so many fictional advantages over the town, I'd better move them from London. And a good thing I did - the

changes that have taken place in London, even in NW3, would have been a great nuisance to have to cope with."

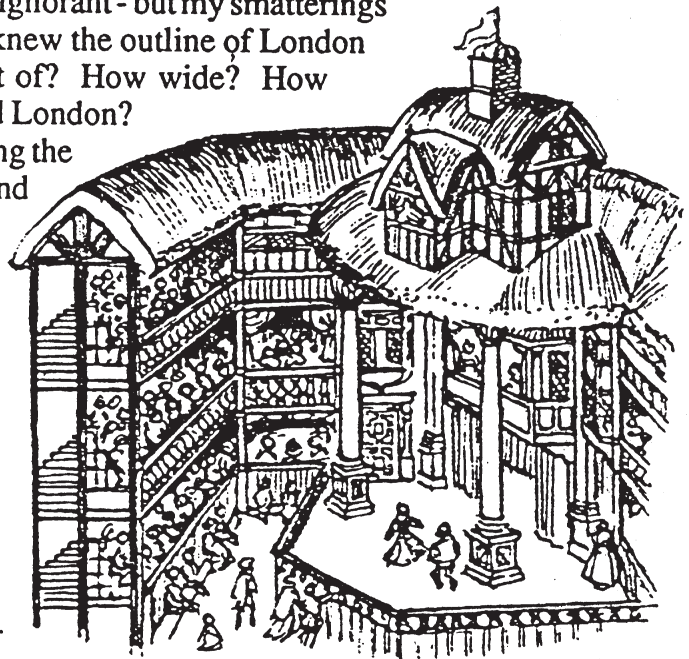
Many readers have wondered about the geographical background to the Marlow books. I've certainly spent many frustrating hours with a map of Dorset, trying to make distances fit the details in the novels. How localised were the books intended to be? "The background began, loosely speaking, as the south coast of England. Most of the places are basically real, but adapted to fictional requirements: moreover, they mayn't be in their actual geographical locations. This worked perfectly well (so far as I was concerned) until I came to write *The Player's Boy*, because then the characters were a mixture of real and fictional; and in the summer months Shakespeare and his company were known to have travelled to Bath and Bristol. Also, though in minor parts, Walter Raleigh and the third Earl of Southampton put in appearances. And how was I to arrange for Christopher Marlowe to call in at Trennels? As often happens in writing books, all fell quite neatly into place. Although Raleigh and Southampton were not friends, Christopher Marlowe had links with both: he could very easily be on his way from Sherborne to Titchfield, or vice versa, and stop off at Trennels. The only choice I had to make was between Hampshire and Dorset. I knew Hampshire pretty well, but Dorset hardly at all. So I took bus rides to and fro across Dorset, at that time even more unspoiled than now, and found that, by great good luck, there were plenty of places which fitted well enough with the landscape I'd contrived for present-day Trennels. But as I remind the occasional puzzled reader who can't find a particular

'Marlow' place on the official map, fiction applies to places as much as people if the author so chooses."

The subject of her two historical novels having been raised, I pursued the topic. Was I correct in assuming that *The Player's Boy* and *The Players and the Rebels* were really one book divided in half? "Yes, it was meant to be one book, but it would have been too expensive for a children's book; so it had to be two." I wondered how she came to write them in the first place - it was such a departure from her contemporary books. "I was corresponding about quite other matters with a friend who has had a lifelong passion for Shakespeare. It was quatercentenary year, and as a footnote to a letter I wrote something to the effect that as he might know I wrote children's fiction about a family called Marlow, and as it was Christopher Marlowe's quatercentenary too, when I finished the current book (*The Ready-Made Family*) I might very well write one about an ancestor who ran away from home and joined one of the Elizabethan theatre companies. I didn't really mean this - it was just by way of light conversation. But in the time it took to stamp the envelope, go to the post and come home - say, half-an-hour - the outline of the story was quite clear: it would begin with Marlowe's murder at Deptford and end with Essex's execution after the Rebellion. I'd 'done' Shakespeare at school; the history mistress I preferred had had a passion for the Elizabethans - I certainly knew more than enough to write a children's book about a runaway boy who joined a company of actors.

"So I thought I'd give myself a small treat: I'd stop writing *The Ready-Made Family* and write the first chapter of the so-far untitled book. Unfortunately, however, wherever I began, I immediately discovered I was - not *completely* ignorant - but my smatterings of knowledge would get me nowhere. Yes, I knew the outline of London Bridge - who doesn't? But what was it built of? How wide? How narrow? How tall - or small - the houses? And London? I knew the second storeys of the houses overhung the streets, and that their St Paul's was not ours, and there would be horses - and that was about it.

"So I returned to *The Ready-Made Family*, and started to read - well, anything and everything - about Elizabethan London, about the workings of the playhouses, the schools, and eventually about Shakespeare. I hadn't meant to attempt him at all or his Company, but the more I read, the more fascinating he became. What was more, I wouldn't have to invent plays for my characters to act. And eventually it occurred to me that in his own time he was far from being regarded reverently as The Greatest Playwright Who Ever Lived - people like Ben Jonson thought his plays quite dreadful - no proper classical unities - poor Will - a good fellow, but he'd never been to university and learned how it should be done. In fact, in his own time he'd been like the actor-playwrights of the thirties - Noel Coward and Emlyn Williams - and like them, he'd worked to be paid. And the Queen enjoyed his plays, so he and his Company did pretty well.



"After all that, about six months later, I felt in a fit state to write the story."

Had she ever been tempted to write another story of the same type? After all, there are surely the roots of a very good story in the Malise episode recounted in *Peter's Room*. "No, I never considered writing another historical novel - *The Player's Boy* was a freak. It had some fragile links with the present-day stories, but if it hadn't been for Christopher Marlowe I don't suppose

it would ever have occurred to me.”

Returning to those present-day stories, I wondered what problems she might have found in reconciling the fictional time-span of just over two years with the actual writing period of thirty-four years. And how did she keep the details consistent? “No problems, I’m afraid. I don’t feel the need to reconcile anything as regards the contemporary scene. It’s the characters and their doings which come first, and if the contemporary scene at the time of writing is useful, I use it. As far as details are concerned, I’ve tried from time to time to make a file, but I’ve invariably got bored and abandoned it in favour of relying on my memory (though I have slipped up once or twice that I know of) and referring to the books themselves if I’m not sure.”

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The books, of course, are remarkably consistent in both trivial and important matters; and at this point I ventured to ask about the area of religion in her books - a subject tackled by very few contemporary writers for children. Being Jewish myself by birth, I’d always felt that Antonia Forest had experienced Judaism from the inside (Miranda is utterly convincing and unстереotypical); and the Catholicism which is described in the novels also has the ring of truth, particularly in Patrick’s struggles with post-Vatican liberalism. What was her own background?

“I was brought up Reform Jewish, but it struck no roots. Later, when I opted for Christianity, I would have preferred to become an Anglican, except that it was still hung over with Red Deans and unbelieving Bishops, while the Roman Catholic church had apparently no doubts about its teaching. This, obviously, comes into the Little-Did-I-Know category. If I *had* known what lay ahead in the shape of Vatican II, I really can’t say what I might or might not have done. To be fair, Vatican II itself was not the destructive force. It was what came to be known as ‘The Spirit of Vatican II’, a phrase much used by clerics who wished to push through Protestantising ‘reforms’, and used the phrase to distort the original mild concessions of Vatican II itself into the devastation which has followed. Yes, indeed, Patrick’s views are mine.”

I mentioned that I’d always felt it to be a slight discrepancy that Patrick seems to be an Anglican in *Falconer’s Lure* (at least, he has a cousin who is a vicar), but emerges as a fully-blown Catholic, complete with aristocratic recusant ancestors, in *End of Term*. Was this because she had become a Catholic in between the two books? No - again, I’d failed to take the needs of an author into account. “I actually became a Catholic in 1947, considerably before either of those two books were written. I wasn’t thinking about Catholicism in *Falconer’s Lure* ; but in *End of Term*, the Christmas play needed to be described from the point of view of the audience. The trouble was, I didn’t know the proper Anglican vocabulary - so Patrick became a Catholic!”

Apart from the religious question, there is a strong literary flavour to the books - the characters read and talk about what they read, and *Peter’s Room* is one of the few children’s books to be based on the Gondal and Angria saga created by the Brontë children. I asked Miss Forest about her own reading. Which authors and books had influenced her writing?

“This is a difficult question to answer, because I think all the books one *enjoys* reading, especially when one is young and impressionable, influence one a little. I learned to read early, and as soon as I was fluent, my father started me on Kipling - *The Just So Stories*, *The Jungle Books*, *Puck of Pook’s Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies*. And eventually I arrived at *Captains Courageous*. This was the book which showed me how one could manipulate words. In the early days, I never found Kipling an easy read, but I was always one for re-reading and in the end I understood nearly all the stories, though it was a long time before I made sense of *The Butterfly That Stamped*. And there was a sentence in *Captains Courageous* which puzzled me for a long time. The *We’re Here* (the ‘hero’ fishing boat) encountered a rogue fishing boat with a drunken captain and a drunken crew and the boat itself ill-found. The two captains exchanged greetings and they sailed past one another. The boy, Hervey, watched the rogue boat go: ‘She sailed into a patch of

past one another. The boy, Hervey, watched the rogue boat go: 'She sailed into a patch of sunlight - and was not.' Was not *what*? I wondered for years, trying to light on the missing word. And then, at last, one day I understood. She had sunk, sailed under, she no longer existed. And Kipling had said it all in two short words: *was not*.

"The other book which had an influence, because it described how a writer's mind grinds up raw material for his own use, was John Livingstone Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*."

And, moving away from childhood, did she have any favourite books and authors now? "Dozens: as for instance: *Little Women*, *The Constant Nymph*, *Regiment of Women*, *Frost in May*, *The Ugly Dachshund*, Evelyn Waugh, Dick Francis, Dorothy L. Sayers, Winston S. Churchill, Ronald Knox, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Borrowers*, *Gone With the Wind*, Josephine Tey, Penelope Lively, T.H. White, *The Flight of the Heron*, *A Long Way to Go*, *Love in a Cold Climate*, Nicholas Montserrat, Alfred Duggan, Margaret Irwin, *My Brother Michael*, *Henry Esmond*, Jane Austen, *Villette*, *Wuthering Heights*, Nigel Balchin, *The Bell*, *The Red and the Green*, Pamela Frankau, *Middlemarch*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The End of the Affair*, *Hobberdy Dick*, Mary Renault, John Masters, *Peter Abelard*, *The Rector's Daughter*, *Rebecca*, *Jamaica Inn*, Rose Macaulay, *Legend*, *Simon*, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Lantern Bearers*, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, Patricia Miles, *The Wandering Scholars* and so forth and so on. At the present time, my favourite books, surpassing all others (!) are Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey novels."

What about her own books? Did she have any preferences among those? "*The Player's Boy* and *The Players and the Rebels* and *Peter's Room*." And - the sixty-four thousand dollar question - was there another book in the pipeline? I was fairly sure that if I failed to ask this, roughly two hundred Folly readers would promptly cancel their subscriptions. But then, presumably no fan had ever omitted this question? "There is another book in the pipe-line, partly written, and another after that. Yes, most people who write do say, 'I do hope you're going to write some more books about the Marlows,' and then it not infrequently becomes clear that they haven't read all those I've already written. Which seems strange, since there's usually a list of titles printed at the beginning, or they could look up a library catalogue. But I suppose they rely on whatever book(s) is/are on the shelves."

Of course, as everyone who collects Antonia Forest's books will know, it isn't always easy to find them; and when they do appear on a list or in a second-hand bookshop, they often command very high prices - I recently saw *Falconer's Lure* at a fair for £40, and *Run Away Home* was listed in a recent catalogue at £60. I mentioned this to her. "Yes, it does seem a lot to pay for me, when you think that there are Patrick O'Brians also going for £40!" Did she have any spare copies of these books? Alas, she will not be able to fund her retirement cottage in the Bahamas by selling off large numbers of *The Players and the Rebels* - she has no spare copies. "It's very irritating, isn't it!"

I'm afraid that I couldn't discover much about the book in train: it's set half at home and half at school, but I don't know whether Nicola will be reconciled with Esther, or what happens when Ginty meets Patrick again. Nor can I tell you whether Nicola is going to marry Patrick. As Miss Forest said (in an earlier letter): "I can only say I've no idea and that perhaps he won't marry either of them." All one can be certain of is that, whatever happens in any future book, we will all be completely and utterly involved in the fortunes of the characters Antonia Forest has created. There cannot be a greater tribute to any writer than that.

