

recent school visits, a saucy, bright-eyed boy said to me, “How do you remember what happened so long ago? That stuff is history!”

Imagine my amazement when I found out that my past is now considered history. Oh, well ... c'est la vie!

Bernice Thurman Hunter won the *IODE* award for *That Scatterbrain Booky* and the *Vicky Metcalfe* award for a body of work. The sequel to Amy's *Promise* will appear shortly.

BALANCING PAST AND PRESENT

Kit Pearson

Résumé: L' auteur parle de son désir de montrer aux jeunes, dans ses romans historiques, les différences et les similitudes entre les mentalités du passé et celle du présent: et cela, afin de faire prendre conscience aux lecteurs des horreurs de la guerre et de leur insuffler l'idée que l'amour et le courage l'emporteront toujours sur les pulsions destructrices de l'Histoire.



Photo credit: Russell Kelly

Kit Pearson

The most interesting problem I have encountered writing historical fiction is that of *balance*: balance between the past and the present, between what is different and what is the same. Obviously, I am drawn to this genre because I have a strong interest in the time period of my novel. Children, however, live in the present. I have to assume, therefore, that my audience is not aware of, and probably does not share, my intense interest in and my knowledge of another time.

My young readers would agree with the famous first line of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” To children, my first two novels, *The Daring Game* (set in 1964-65) and *A Handful of Time* (partly set in 1949) are historical fiction, although they aren't to the author! Nylons, pin curls, Canada getting a new flag, girls being treated differently from boys: these are things readers have commented upon as being different from their experience. However, my World War II trilogy — *The Sky Is Falling*, *Looking At the Moon*, and *The Lights Go On Again* — was history to me as well as to my readers and I was much more aware in these books of the differences between then and now.

Differences are fascinating; and I tried to emphasize both the small and large contrasts between the 1940s and the present that children would find particularly interesting. Clothes (buttons instead of zippers, boys wearing short trousers or “brecks”) ... food (rationing, no bananas) ... listening to the radio instead of watching TV ... the attitude towards children: strictness about manners and behaviour both at home and in school, the way children were all treated the same

with little regard for their feelings, the shock of an ill-prepared adolescence ... the freedom of children, who could roam in their neighbourhood safely and who enjoyed their own games and rituals.... Of course, the biggest difference is that Norah and Gavin are living through a war, through a rapidly changing, tragic and also exciting time which directly affects them because they are shipped off to another country to be safe. All these differences, I think, are noticed by and evoke responses from my readers — they feel lucky, envious, superior, amused or horrified.

If I simply emphasized the differences between the past and the present in my books, however, I would end up with, not fiction, but a history lesson thinly disguised as fiction. I hated this type of historical fiction as a child, where the myriad details the author has accumulated are shoved down the reader's throat; partly through the author's enthusiasm for her time period but partly (I know this because I've done it myself) through a wish not to waste all the fascinating details one has researched so carefully. And maybe even to show off how much one knows! In this type of book the characters are simply pawns: wooden figures with no life of their own, moved through the plot to teach the reader about a different time.

Even more important than emphasizing the differences between the present and the past, therefore, is emphasizing the similarities. If I have a message, it is this: that the past and the present have more in common than they have in conflict. I am heartened when I get letters from readers saying they felt just like Norah when they moved to a new country and didn't know the language or customs. Like Norah and Gavin, modern children often have to grow up too fast, to make decisions they are too young for. Perhaps even more than Norah and Gavin, children worry about the state of the world they live in, about the uncertain future they will inherit from the grown-ups. Like Norah, they experience painful, unrequited young love; like Gavin they bottle up feelings of guilt and act out because of it. Like all children in all times, my characters are victims of adult society. They are also, I firmly believe, still separate from adults, despite the easier and more liberal communications with adults they enjoy. Children still want to be children, and that is why they respond so strongly to sections like the Hallowe'en scene in *Sky*, where the characters burn symbols of adult authority that oppress them.

The way I connect the similarities between the present and the past is through my characters. Because emotions never change, no matter what time period, if I emphasize my characters' inner lives my readers will identify with them, will become them while reading my books. Then they are immersed in another person's life and emotions, a life that just happens to take place in another time. Thus, the greatest compliment I receive from my readers is when they call my trilogy not, as adults do, the "World War II" books or the "Guests of War" series, but the "Norah and Gavin" books.

It is tricky to keep a balance between the differences and the similarities in historical fiction because modern kids know both more and less than do my characters. My responsibility is to interpret the past for my readers while keeping

it true to my characters and their time. This has led to several unexpected and difficult moral issues. In *Sky* I had to convey to modern readers that, although Norah thinks of the war as an exciting game, it is far more dangerous and evil. I tried to do this by gradually increasing the severity of the news from home. In *Moon*, I presented both sides of Andrew's dilemma of whether or not to sign up; to convey not only a modern, anti-war view but also, in his ultimate decision to fight, the view that would have been accurate for his times. In *Lights*, both the world and Gavin are losing innocence. To reflect how we now perceive World War II — that it was one of the worst, if not the worst, events in world history — I had to include the tragedy of his parents' death as well as awareness of the Holocaust. I tried to channel these horrors through the very limited viewpoint of a ten-year-old in 1945, well aware that a modern reader knows more, or can find out more, than Gavin.

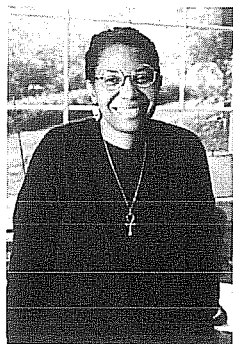
History is the story of humanity and inhumanity. Although I tried not to shrink from writing of the evil of war or the unfair treatment of children, I also believe in leaving readers with hope. What unites the past and the present are the qualities of love and courage. I hope that my readers, through identification with my characters, are left with the conviction that these qualities endure through the ages. Perhaps that is the greatest reward of reading — and writing — historical fiction.

Kit Pearson, who lives in Vancouver, is the author of six novels for children. She has received six national awards for her writing. Her newest book, *Awake and Dreaming*, is a ghost fantasy set in Victoria.

LOOKING FOR BLACK ANCESTORS

Marlene Nourbese Philip

Résumé: Dans cet essai, l'auteur compare l'héroïne de son roman *Harriet's Daughter* à son modèle historique, Harriet Tubman. Elle fait remarquer que son personnage découvre son identité en s'attachant à la mémoire de Tubman le guérillero et que cette pratique du culte des ancêtres est une composante de la spiritualité africaine.



Marlene Nourbese Philip

Photo credit: Joanna Eldredge Morrissey

Some books begin with a title; others may not have a title until completed, and still again there are some that have a working title to carry them through to completion. Whatever the case, once the book is done, the writer is faced at the end with finding the best title for it. It may be the one you started out with, or as often happens, a completely different one.

I don't recall if I had a working title for the manuscript that eventually became *Harriet's Daughter*, but I do know that when I was finished I spent several weeks trying to come up with a title. I knew that the title had to bear some reference to the