

## Dreams and Visions

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### 2004 Phoenix Award Recipient

Thank you all very much—first Diana for being such a friendly escort, and Angelica for being so supportive, emailing me almost weekly to assure me that, yes, I had won the Phoenix Award, and making sure that my publishers made copies of the book available for you all to look at. Thank you to everyone here for making my partner Alan Brown and me so welcome—it has been wonderful to meet again people whom I met in other conferences in other parts of the world and to make new contacts. I know the other visiting writers here will want to join me in thanking you for everything you do on our behalf.

I always tell children that the nicest thing that can happen to a writer is to meet the children that she writes for, but equally wonderful is the opportunity to meet people like yourselves, teachers and librarians, reviewers and book lovers, who bring our books to the notice of children. I don't know what we'd do without you. I have attended several sessions here and have been overwhelmingly impressed by your dedication and scholarship. Congratulations to those of you who have also been presented with awards tonight in acknowledgement of your research and studies of children's literature.

And thank you, also, to the Phoenix Committee for presenting me with this award. It was a huge surprise to me, twenty years after *White Peak Farm* was published, and it takes me back almost to the beginning of my writing career, and beyond that, to the little girl who dreamed of becoming a writer.

I cherished the dream, but it was my father who nourished it. He used to tell me bedtime stories every night, and very often we would make them up together, tossing the ideas backwards and forwards like a bright ball. Then he would drop the ball—"I've had enough now," he would say, "I'm going down for a cup of tea."

"But what about my story?" I would wail.

"Oh, you can finish that for yourself."

Well, I would go to sleep dreaming the end of the story, and it was a marvellous start for a writer. By the time I was five, I knew I wanted to be writer, and soon I started writing little stories and poems which Dad typed up for me and sent to the children's page of the local newspaper. The reward for publication in those days was a box of chocolates, and I thought this was how all writers were paid. Sheer greed drove me on!—But of course, it was a very special feeling to see my stories in print. Soon Dad taught me to type, and I was off!

So from my father I inherited dreams and storytelling, and from my mother I invented daydreams. She loved to daydream, and so do I. It's an essential part of writing. One of my best

memories is of running home from school on winter nights and sitting in the dark with her, just watching the firelight playing at shadows on the walls, 'til my father and sister came home from work.

My career with the local newspaper came to an abrupt end on my fourteenth birthday, when the editor told me I was too old to go on the children's page. I took early retirement and didn't start again for over twenty years when my three children had started to go to school.

*White Peak Farm* was my third book. It was my first "big" book in the sense that it was written for older readers, and in fact it originated as a commissioned radio series. I wrote it when I was living in Sheffield. As a child I dreamed of living on a farm. I was born in Liverpool, and from the age of four was brought up on a gossipy street in a little seaside town. I thought it would be wonderful to live on a farm; though I think my image of it was very romantic! When I was working on a schools radio feature about industry and farming, I visited farms out in rural Derbyshire, and I talked to teenagers living on farms. I realized how particular a childhood on a farm was—they would tell me that their nearest friend lived two miles away over the hills, and that they had to do work on the farm before they went to school and when they came home. So I wrote it as it is, how dependent on each member the family is for companionship and support, what a difficult, lonely life it can be. The White Peak is part of Derbyshire, by the way—geologically the Peak District it is divided into the white peak, which is limestone, and the dark peak, which is sandstone. It's a very beautiful part of the country.

You may wonder why I've changed the title of the novel. I was in a bookshop one day looking for a book of walks in Derbyshire and found my novel on the shelf among the maps and bed and breakfast and farmhouse guides—*White Peak Farm*, as if it were a book about somewhere to stay in the Peak District. So when Puffin decided to republish it, I thought it would be a good idea to have a character-related, rather than place-related, title. I wrote to my agent and said I would like to call it *Tessa of White Peak Farm*. That's nice, she wrote back, and conveyed my wishes to the publishers. That's nice, they wrote back. Then one night I sat up in bed with a start and said, "But there isn't a character called Tessa in that book! She's in one of my other books!" (*Children of Winter*. But I may even have been having subconscious aspirations towards emulating one of my favourite authors—Thomas Hardy!) Anyway, that's how *White Peak Farm* became *Jeannie of White Peak Farm* with its very attractive new cover. (The character is named after my sister, by the way, so I really ought to have remembered!)

One of the first reviewers described it as an autobiographical novel. Well, as I've revealed to you, my upbringing was very different from Jeannie's. But as it happens, I live there now. I live in the Derbyshire Peak District in a three hundred year-old cottage in a farmyard. I have the best of both worlds, actually, because the farm is going on all round me, and I don't have to do any of the work!

I'm aware that many of you are unfamiliar with the novel. This is how it opens—I'll read it to you because it will give you a sense of where I live.

*My home is on a farm in the soft folding hills of Derbyshire. Not far from us the dark peaks of the Pennines rise up into the ridge that is called the spine of England. We've always lived there; my father's family has owned the farm for generations. He never wants to let it go.*

*Nothing ever seemed to change there. The seasons printed their patterns on the fields, the sky cast its different lights across the moors, but our lives, I thought, would never change. Mum, Dad, Kathleen, Martin, Marion and I; Aunt Jessie and Gran. And yet about four years ago that change did come to us, casting its different light across the pattern of our lives. I suppose it all started with Gran.*

I'd like to read another short section, the only piece in the book that is autobiographical.

*One day when I was at Gran's cottage a Welsh gypsy came to the door and told her she should have been a writing lady, and Gran laughed and said that information was worth two yards of lace, provided there was no nylon in it; but when she came back in, her voice was scarcely steady enough to tell me that I must never listen to a Welsh gypsy, "They trap the particles of your soul."*

It's exactly what happened to me. I was living in Sheffield, and a Welsh gypsy came to the door selling lace. She said, "You should have been a writing lady." I was twenty eight years old, I had a baby under one arm and another baby under the other and the third was tugging at the hem of my skirt, and I thought, no, there's no chance of that. And I also thought, but how does she know that? She's never met me before, and yet she knows the dream that I nursed inside me when I was a little girl. And it did feel to me as if she'd looked into my very soul.

Gran is one of the most important characters in *Jeannie of White Peak Farm*. I'm always writing about grandmothers—in *Dear Nobody*, in *Holly Starcross*, in *Granny Was a Buffer Girl*, they are significant and strong characters. But I never had a grandmother myself. I never had any grandparents. Biologically I did, of course, but all four of them had died before I was born. I think that's a terrible deprivation. I have a diary that was written by my grandfather in 1896—it describes in his copperplate handwriting a journey he made to Australia. It's one of my most precious things. It's my only link with my distant past. I've re-created that grandfather in *The Sailing-Ship Tree*, which is a children's book based on my dad's childhood. I recreated my mother's parents in one of the chapters in *Granny Was a Buffer Girl*, (Bridie and Jack in that book were actually my parents, Peggy and Walter) but I didn't know them. I'm pleased to tell you that at this very moment my son's wife is having a baby—it might be born already. Soon I'll be a grandparent, and I can experience that bond for myself. Hopefully I'll be able to share story telling with my grandchild.

I was speaking the other day about stories, their nature, and their importance. The way we listen to stories is different from the way we listen to any other sound, except perhaps to music. When a child is being told a story, something very special is happening. And they listen to it in a very special way. It's not conversation, it's not instruction, it's not command. It appeals directly to a child's imagination, and I like to think of the imagination as the part of us that dreams.

I have a favourite poem, which I'm going to quote to you. I love it so much that I quoted it whole in my novel *Dear Nobody*—it's the love gift that Christ gives to Helen, when in his despair he thinks he's never going to see her again. It's by W. B. Yeats, and it's called "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven."

This is it:

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

It is a beautiful poem, but just now there's one line that I'd like to change, if you don't mind, Mr. Yeats. The line is *But I, being poor, have only my dreams.*

I'd like to change that to:

"But I, being rich, am a dreamer."