

Both Sides of the Desk – the connections between work in a library and as a writer.

Introduction:

For those who don't know me. My name is Carolyn McCurdie. I have worked as a library assistant at Blueskin Bay library since 1999. I began writing seriously in 1991, beginning with adult short stories, and succeeding in getting some of these published and broadcast. But it was only while working in the library that I began to consider writing for children, and in 2006 my first children's novel 'The Unquiet' was published by Longacre Press. It is an adventure fantasy aimed at 10 to 14 year olds, and it's just been included on Storylines list of notable books for 2007.

The process of writing feels to me like any sort of growth process, whether a plant, the development of a person's life, or any other creative activity. If like a plant, it's more like a wild plant than one deliberately cultivated, no matter how deliberate and disciplined you are with your writing and no matter how hard you work to cultivate and develop your work. The precise beginnings are still unknowable. Seeds are sown in subterranean places. How many seeds, and when, can probably never be fully known.

It's as if some part of us exists in a dreaming time, the place where mythology begins, and here we do important work. I find useful the Jungian ideas of the unconscious and the collective unconscious, because as well as the gathering and planning that our dreaming minds do, I think we also connect with the dreaming of other people. We share in the collective mind of our own culture and also in the collective mind of humanity. This is one way that I use to try to explain the inexplicable magic of the writing process. I often feel that I'm drawing on the thoughts and experience of other people. It's from beyond the narrow confines of my own life. There are other metaphors of course, and each metaphor is useful. But the reality is simply that gathering, thinking, and planning happen in some hidden way. They are sometimes obvious when we look back and we see a pattern, even an intent, that we knew nothing about at the time.

Books are part of this dream time, and of the unconscious becoming conscious. I can't think of anything that represents the collective consciousness of a culture quite like a library. It's where that consciousness has been gathered in for the purpose of being shared out. And behind all of that consciousness, is the unconscious. When as readers we find a book that touches us at some deep place, we experience a profound link with that writer and with our common humanity. Allowing that link is part of what books do, and part of what libraries do.

'The Unquiet'

Much of the experience of writing 'The Unquiet' felt to me like this dreaming process, some of it accumulated over a long time, even my entire life, and some of it offered to me, almost on a daily basis by virtue of my working in Blueskin Bay Library.

We are privileged, working in libraries. We can have a particular, intimate relationship with books, so that our conversations with them have the time and space to develop. Probably many borrowers have the experience when the book that they need at a particular point in their life, is there, saying 'here I am'. This can happen to us more often when we work among the books. Shelving is great for this. While shelving books in the library, particular books gave me what I needed to write 'The Unquiet'.

The first book, encountered while shelving, was by the Tasmanian children's writer Sally Odgers. It was 'Storytrack, A Practical Guide to Writing for Children.' I flicked through it idly, convinced at the time that I could never write for children, because I had no children of my own. Sally Odgers disagrees with this assumption, and in my flicking I saw that she had a whole section dealing with it. I took the book out.

In her book she quotes her own experience and that of other writers. She does test her stories on her own children. The story most loved by one of her children has never been accepted by a publisher. Another story that he hated became a best seller. In the end, the judgement must be her own judgement, and she believes that the child she writes for is the child she used to be. Many, if not most children's writers, she says, write for this child.

I thought of the movie 'Shadowlands' about the writer C. S. Lewis. In it, someone accuses Lewis of knowing no children. 'I used to be a child,' he says. Well, me too. I seem to be the sort of person who needs to get permission to do things. Sally Odgers gave me permission to write for children.

Then, what to write about? I had no idea. The answer was given to me by Terry Pratchett. My entire plot, summarised, is contained in the title of his book (encountered again while shelving) 'Only You Can Save Mankind'. Every time I saw this title it made me laugh. I loved its outrageousness. But I had to look at it many times before its message finally got through. As a child this is exactly the sort of plot that I loved. Whether reading 'Superman' comics, or the Narnia books, I imagined myself, noble and brave, rescuing the world from some terrible fate. So this would be my story.

These two books gave me practical advice, and their approach to me was quite direct. The next important book came via the unconscious. It gave my story its soul and power, and so the unconscious was the only route. Long before I had considered writing for children I had seen 'Wahine Toa, Women of Maori Myth' by Patricia Grace and had so loved the illustrations by Robyn Kahukiwa, that after borrowing the book, I had gone out and bought a copy for myself. I had no idea that these illustrations had lodged themselves so deeply in my imagination, nor that they would have any part to play in my story, until I was well into writing the book. Then to a large extent those images, changed in my imagination to become my own, took over. It was as if the rational part of my mind had little to do with it. Characters from 'Wahine Toa', from the drawings of Maui and Muriranga-whenua, simply arrived. 'Here we are,' they said. 'This story is about us.' To accommodate such personalities I had to begin all over again and create a story that gave them the space they demanded. They were not my characters. We collaborated.

The library offered more help in the writing of the novel than just the opportunity to shelve books. I was lucky enough to go to a talk about boys and books with the Australian writer of young adult novels, James Maloney. From him I learned about structure. He told a story that stuck in my mind. He'd been trying to interest a bright student in reading and had found, he thought, the perfect book. 'Read this,' he said. 'You'll love it.' Two days later the book plonked back through the return slot. 'Why?' he asked the teenager. 'I tried it,' said the student. 'But I got to page 3, and nothing had happened.'

'After that,' said James Maloney, 'when I wrote my own books, I made sure something happened on the first page.'

So taking his advice, when I wrote 'The Unquiet' I made sure that something happened on the first line. 'Pluto has disappeared,' said Mrs Rex.

And thinking of James Maloney, I also made sure that my chapters were short, and that each one ended, if not on a cliff edge, at least with a teaser leading into the next chapter.

So many books teaching so many things. From Philip Pullman I learned about the possibilities of the imagination. After reading his dark material trilogy, I realised that the key was to be fearless. Let there be no rules.

Then there are the connections with people. A writer needs to be an appalling eavesdropper. Skulking around the shelves, standing quietly behind the desk, gives you every opportunity to listen to conversations, the patterns of speech, and train your ear to appreciate the music of dialogue.

At Blueskin Bay we run children's book clubs every fortnight. The children talk about the books they've been reading, and for me, listening, I have learned much that is invaluable about what they like and don't like, and about the personalities of the readers I hoped to speak to in my book. While I was writing it, I had a visual picture of two particular girls, one a serious, omnivorous reader, and the other energetic and impatient. I imagined I was writing for them. If I could gain the respect of one and hold the attention of the other, I thought that I would be achieving what I set out to do. I found this imagining of a very specific audience a great practical help.

Since publication of 'The Unquiet' I have had many reasons to be glad that I work in a library. Firstly, all my co-workers love books, and I have had overwhelming support from so many of them, especially Louise and the team at Blueskin Bay. This has meant a lot to me. Secondly, the constant sight of shelves and shelves of books gives me a valuable sense of proportion. My book is just one small part of a huge whole. I can't get too carried away by my own importance. And working in a library provides daily demonstrations of the fact that there is no book that is loved by all. One person's must-read is another's waste of shelf space. That helps when I read a negative review. I'm not too crushed to know that my book hasn't connected with that particular person.

One of the themes of 'The Unquiet' is the importance of the imagination. Through it, we connect with other cultures and life experiences, with nature, and it helps us to rise above our own limitations. I loved what Rachel said about this yesterday

morning. Without imagination, I believe we cannot be fully human. This links in with the whole ethos of libraries. In a library we try to gather the world's best works of the imagination, and we try to ensure that they are available to all, so that they can enrich and nurture everyone. There is much in social living that is just as important, but I believe there is nothing that's more important. It is to do with the human soul. In this, the work that I do on both sides of the library desk are essentially one. And both help me, as a human being, to thrive.