



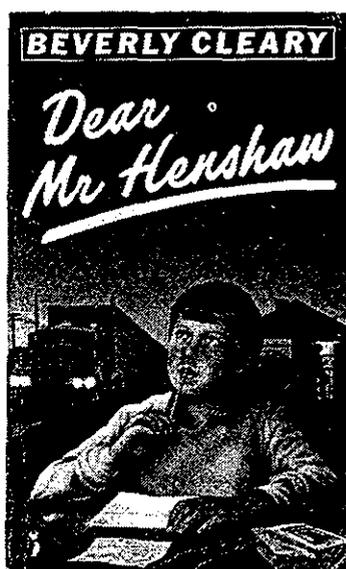
## The Writer in the Book: Four Narratives on Writing

Kordula Dunscombe

Leigh Botts asks it of Mr. Henshaw, Jane Gardam cannot cope with [it]', Aidan Chambers believes it is 'the subject that engages [readers'] curiosity most of all' (Cleary 1983, p.7, Chambers 1985, p.105). It is the question - by author consensus the most often asked by readers - of where an author gets his or her ideas.

Why do people ask this question? Leigh Botts asks Mr. Henshaw because he is interested in the author as a practitioner, because he enjoys Henshaw's books enormously and wants to 'get to be a famous author and write books exactly like you' (Cleary 1983, p.7). For Gardam, the question is a kind of trespass into private territory - an 'investigation' of the author as a person. Chambers suggests that it probes the author as the source of a text's meaning in an attempt to apprehend the supposed 'true' meaning or significance of a particular text ('the message of the Author-God' [Barthes 1985, p.94]). But whatever the motivation, the question reveals a curiosity about how creativity operates. As Meindert DeJong points out:

*Of course, no one asks concerning [the author's] creativity per se. The question, much more blunt and direct, is, 'Where do you get your ideas?' ... [and] ... it always contains an element of earnest searching into a mystery, into the whence and where of the original*



*germ idea, and into the how and why of the creative process that the original idea generates. The questioner wants to be led into the mystery of creation. The question probes the process of creation.* (DeJong 1973, p.162)

Barthes' declaration that 'the birth of the reader is at the cost of the death of the author' (which informs some recent theoretical writing on children's literature) liberates the reader from the concept/presence of an ultimate authority on meaning and validates the individual reading: it enables the reader to 'make the text his own' as Chambers puts it. But the cost that Barthes mentions would seem to be that in 'killing off' the author, the reader's fascination with the book as evidence of the act of creating is denied. For those

who ask the question, the book is not only a text - 'a finished event; the person who wrote them is no more' (Chambers 1985, p.92). It is also an example or manifestation of the ability to make; and an awareness and consideration of the fact that the book was written/made/created by *someone* is present in the reader's appreciation of it. Perhaps it is even the possibility of oneself writing that underlies this kind of interest in a literary work? After all, the first question Alicia Whitley (visiting author in *Book of the Banshee*) is asked is 'Can anyone be a writer?' (Fine 1991, p.20).

Despite the fact that inquiring into the motivations of creating is a risky business (for example, there is the danger of trying to explain the unexplainable on the one hand, and a sense of destroying a mystery or marvel on the other; or of either mysticising or being formulaic), authors, as well as readers, do investigate 'the how and the why of the creative process'. Often this is in the form not of direct analysis, but of indirectly exploring through a narrative their own views of writing. I would like to look at four novels that concern themselves (although not exclusively) with the activity of writing. In all four novels, the narrator or 'second self' that the author adopts is a child/adolescent character who is the fictional writer of the novel, and the novel adopts the form of the child's writings: *A Long Way From*

Verona is Jessica Vye's recounting of a crucial period in her life, *Dear Mr. Henshaw* is in the form of Leigh's letters and diary, *Book of the Banshee* is Will Flowers' journal, *Breaktime* is Ditto's 'curious document'. Each book attempts in some way to answer the reader's and author's own interest in/inquiry into creativity - to represent, explore, impart an understanding of, and possibly foster in the reader the act of writing.

Rothenberg and Hausman define creativity as consisting of 'the capacity for, or state of, bringing something into being. And bringing something into being involves at least three separable components: an agent, a process and a product', or, the creative person, creative process and created object. (Rothenberg and Hausman 1976, p.6) The novels under discussion are each centred around one of these components; each author approaches the subject with a different focus: Gardam concentrates on the person of the author, Cleary and Fine on the reader becoming writer, and Chambers on the text as an examination of representation. (It is interesting that their reactions to being asked about the source of their ideas echo the focus adopted in their novels.)

*A Long Way From Verona* deals with the question of what it is like to be a writer on a personal level - of 'living with the disease' so to

speak. Gardam represents writing as a function of life, and being a writer as a state of being. Jessica Vye's precocious and half-agonized awareness of being a writer dominates the atmosphere of the novel. For her, the realisation and acceptance, at the age of nine, of her compulsion to write is a 'violent experience' which changed her 'utterly, like Heaven, "in the twinkling of an eye"' and has left her 'not quite normal'.

A distinction is often made between two kinds of writers: those who write something and those who write; those for whom writing is an activity and those for whom it is a function (Chambers 1985, p.110); the 'writing hack' and the 'creative writer' (DeJong 1973, p.163); writers and authors (Chambers 1985, p.109); - to mention some different ways of putting it. 'Writers exercise choice. Authors submit to a dedication which can also be called a neurotic obsession. Writers may, but authors *must* write.' (Chambers 1985, p.110). Jessica Vye is a portrait of the kind of writer who is driven to write. Although she "had for a considerable number of years written things" ('I can't really remember a time when I didn't pick pencils up and write on [paper]'), the confirmation of her predisposition by author Arnold Hanger - who tells her she is a 'WRITER BEYOND ALL POSSIBLE DOUBT!' - clinches a path of commitment for her which, through the progress of the novel,

she comes to terms with. This 'coming to terms' involves the realisation that being 'a writer beyond all possible doubt' is no guarantee of ability or quality, but of being compelled to write, as other authors testify: '... the agony and ecstasy of the creative process may have little bearing on the end product' (DeJong 1973, p.163). 'Some written books transcend their writers, and some authored books fail miserably to be other than routine.' (Chambers 1985, p.110). Arnold Hanger himself brings about this realisation for Jessica:

*I read on and slowly realized I was reading the most awful, dreadful, ghastly book I had ever read in my life, worse even than Mrs. Hope-Merton, worse than The Cloister and the Hearth . . . I turned over the book to see who'd written it.*

*It was by Arnold Hanger ...*

*I wished with all my heart that nobody had ever put it into my head that I was a writer. Because it wasn't so. Obviously it wasn't so. If he thought the pastel sunset was good and the lonely cry of the curlew and also thought I was good, then it meant that I was like the pastel sunset and the lonely cry of the curlew. Miss Dobbs was right.*

This shattering realization is ameliorated when Jessica wins *The Times* poetry competition. The combination of the two events brings about a more mature

approach, a shedding of some of her precocious self-assurance and arrogance, and the novel ends on a note of acceptance and tolerance. Arnold Hanger's congratulatory telegram arrives and Jessica 'just felt filled with love, knowing that good things take place.'

Jessica is a difficult and not always likeable character - there is something deliberately remote about her, as if she is consciously holding back from being 'part of life'. The list she makes of her character traits early in the novel sets this out:

1. *I am not quite normal*
2. *I am not very popular*
3. *I am able to tell what people are thinking.*  
*And I might add*
4. *I am terribly bad at keeping quiet when I have something on my mind because*
5. **I ABSOLUTELY ALWAYS AND INVARIABLY TELL THE TRUTH.**

This list could also be a generalized personality description, or an identification of the personal qualities which seem to be characteristic of the writer. The sense of apartness ('The creative writer has to walk alone' (DeJong 1973, p.20) and element of loneliness in writing are suggested by her being not quite normal or very popular. The writer's insight into people is there in the ability to tell what people are thinking (if not actually to *know*, at

least to be able to put oneself in their shoes). The compulsion to express herself - the inability to keep quiet when there is something on her mind - which drives her to write is evident throughout the book. The honesty needed to write - the 'baring of self' and the clarity of vision achieved by dropping any pretence or affectation and writing 'truthfully' - and the courage not to shy away from what needs or wants to be said, are, as the capital letters indicate, crucial for the writer. Comments from the other novels being discussed shed further light on this last point:

*You know at once when something's written right. Something inside you says: 'Yes! That's exactly how it must have been. That's how it would have felt..' (Fine 1991, p.20)*

*I happen to like A Day on Dad's Rig because it was written by a boy who wrote honestly about something he knew and had strong feelings about. You made me feel what it was like to ride down a steep grade with tons of grapes behind me ... [It] was splendid work for a boy your age. You wrote like you, and you did not try to imitate someone else. This is one mark of a good writer. (Cleary 1983, p.120)*

*Midgely says literature offers us images to think with. That its unreality has nothing to do with untruth. (Chambers 1978, p.8)*

#### **A Long Way From Verona**

enables the reader to experience on an emotional level what a dedication to writing can be like - to identify with and 'live' one version of 'being an author' through the character of Jessica Vye.

**Dear Mr. Henshaw** and **Book of the Banshee** approach the question of writing with a focus on the activity. It is a process which begins with 'getting your bum on your seat' as Will's English teacher advises, or 'applying the seat of my pants to a chair' as Mr. Henshaw and Leigh's mother suggest. For both protagonists, the impetus to write comes from their intense admiration of a particular author; it develops from their original engagement with literature as readers. The texts that both produce are partly a kind of dialogue with 'their' author. In **Dear Mr. Henshaw** the dialogue with the author is foregrounded by the fact that part of the novel is addressed to Mr. Henshaw (Leigh actually writes letters *to* him, and initially also structures his diary as letters to him). Author and reader switch roles. In **Book of the Banshee** Will's obsession with **The Longest Summer** involves such a strong identification with the author that he has the sense that their thoughts are linked (the relationship between reader and author transcends words on a page - a sense that one's thinking is connected with the author's, that one *knows* the author, that the

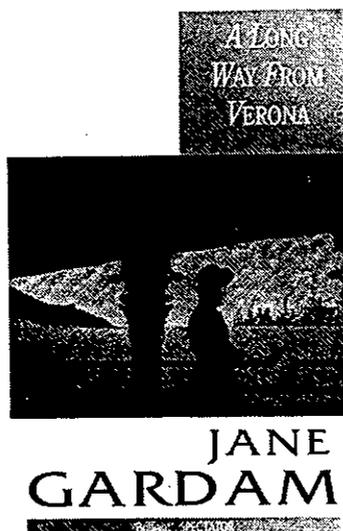
book/author is speaking to one personally - is a common experience when there is a strong identification with a book), and his journal is begun with William Scott Saffery in mind as the reader:

*Somehow I couldn't imagine him squatting in all that mud and blood and rain, reading about my life.*

*But then again, why not? I would. If I were in his place I would have given the world to read myself out of it whenever I could . . .*

*Battles at home and abroad. All good to read about. The more I thought about it, the surer I was that William Scott Saffery would be just as riveted by my tale as I am by his.*

In the process of writing his journal Will explores the book he so admires: imitating, borrowing from, quoting, drawing parallels with it ('like everyone else in the family over the last few months, Dad has become quite wary of Estelle. Like William Saffery, he keeps his head down, and hopes the explosions happen somewhere else.'). using it as a springboard. He relates the experiences of Saffery to his own apparently unrelated ones - a major source of the book's humour lies in the exaggeration this comparison entails - and in the process discovers underlying relationships and meanings. These underlying similarities which writing his journal brings out, help Will to



realize, and illustrates for the reader, that a plot is a framework, 'a net whereby to catch something else' (Hunt 1991) and that 'plots more often conceal meaning than reveal it', as Mr. Midgely says in *Breaktime*. Ultimately Will comes to a deeper understanding not only of writing, but of both *The Longest Summer* and what he is writing about (his home situation).

*Suddenly it all became clear. I realized why, for months, I've been obsessed with William Saffery's book, reading it over and over every night, reading nothing else. I realized why I've let my sister treat this house like a battlefield, and barely said a word when I've fetched up with no help with my homework and stale carrot sandwiches for lunch day after day. I realized why, until today,*

*I'd never once stood up for what I want: peace, order, and a quiet life.*

*I am like William Saffery. I'm a coward.*

*There. Now it's said. I've got it out at last. What is so brave about going along with things you don't even believe in? It takes no courage to daydream about what you'd tell the Big Brass when you show them round the battlefield. You know it's not going to happen. Anyone can dream. And there's no guts in going over the top, just like a sheep, because other people are watching. Some of them might be people like Estelle, despising you for your weakness. I am beginning to agree with her. If you don't think that what you're doing is not only right, but also sensible, you shouldn't be doing it at all. That is true valour.*

*The longer I sat there thinking about William Saffery, the less impressed I was. Having those doubts didn't take much daring, did it? He claimed to be the very eyes and ears of the war. He wrote it down, Impeccable War Reporter. He wasn't daft. He saw the whole of it for what it was - a stupid, wasteful mess. And he did nothing.*

Reading and writing are interconnected - one enlightening the other. As visiting author, Alicia Whitley, whose talk inspires Will to start writing, puts it:

'You're writing for the reader in yourself.' Aidan Chambers articulates the interconnection as:

*for me, all reading is an act of contemplation. Writing is simply a part of that ritual activity. I write that I may read, and so contemplate that which I have written.*

(Chambers 1985, p.114)

The connection between reading and writing in these novels reinforces the point made earlier that the reader's appreciation of a book is not necessarily restricted to the text in isolation, but also involves a fascination with the activity of writing; reading and writing are complementary and interconnected.

These two novels in particular acknowledge the component of reader interest in, and identification with, the activity of authoring on a practical level. The activity is examined through a child protagonist/author at a level relevant to, and able to be comprehended by, the intended reader, and comments and 'tips' about writing are built into the narrative. Leigh and Will are not driven by the 'innate gift' that sets Jessica apart, but (much more attainably) are interested in trying their hand at writing. In the end Leigh finds it a meaningful and compelling activity which he will keep up, while Will decides to 'get back to reading other people's books now'.

Letters, diaries, journals, all refer to areas of the reader's own experience as writer. (They are also a credible form for the child-author to adopt). They suggest a starting point for writing, and give the message that any personal experience is creative raw material: 'All fiction starts from something', as Ditto says. Being so clearly intended for a reader, the letter format foregrounds writing as a form of communication and exchange, while the diary and journal formats highlight writing as self expression/analysis/discovery; and all three formats emphasise the 'processing of lived experiences' aspect of writing. They are also intimate forms of expression with the inherent interest of voyeurism or being party to a secret (reading other people's letters, diary); attracting the reader, luring him/her into the book and into an alliance with the author. The reader is being let into secrets: restricted information about the author-character, and 'secrets' of writing. The use of various formats makes the point that all sorts of writing can be literature, illustrating different modes of expression and their appropriateness and adaptability to different purposes. (Breaktime also explores this. Ditto experiments with, and constructs his 'document' from, a wide range of expressive modes and materials. Part of the book's appeal is the accumulated collage-like variety of familiar material, like a box of mementoes and ephemera.)

Dear Mr. Henshaw deals with the development of Leigh as a 'writer', beginning with his first rather inept correspondence with Boyd Henshaw where his aim in writing is to communicate on the simplest level, progressing to his reluctant answering of Henshaw's questions, developing to a stage where writing becomes an outlet for him - both pleasurable and necessary ('I think I feel better when I write in my diary'); from needing a specific purpose and 'receiver' to writing for himself ('I don't have to pretend to write to Mr. Henshaw anymore. I have learned to say what I think on a piece of paper.') and finally to writing seriously and creatively, for *Young Writers*. The reader witnesses Leigh's progress in the increasing sophistication of the actual text and is made aware of Leigh's growth through the questions, problems and solutions concerning writing that are woven into his letters and diary entries:

*When I started to write in it, I didn't know how to begin. I felt as if I should write, 'Dear Composition Book', but that sounds dumb. So does 'Dear Piece of Paper'. The first stage still looks the way I feel. Blank. I don't think I can keep a diary. I don't want to be a nuisance to you, but I wish you could tell me how. I am stuck.*

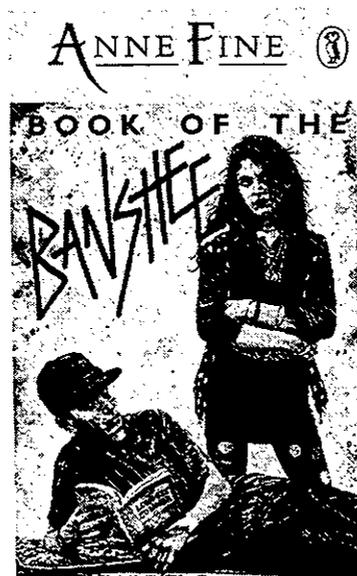
*... maybe I'll do what you said and pretend my diary is a letter to somebody... Maybe I'll pretend I'm writing to you because when I answered all your questions, I got*

the habit of beginning. 'Dear Mr. Henshaw  
(Cleary 1983, p.37-8)

*Every time I try to think up a story, it turns out to be like something someone else has written, usually you. I want to do what you said in your tips and write like me, not like somebody else.*  
(Cleary 1983, p.61)

*I was surprised that you had trouble writing stories when you were my age. I think you are right. Maybe I'm not ready to write a story. I understand what you mean. A character in a story should solve a problem or change in some way. I can see that a wax man who melts until he's a puddle wouldn't be there to solve anything and melting isn't the sort of change you mean.*  
(Cleary 1991, p.91)

Advice, 'tips', rules, principles of writing are incorporated into all four novels through adult 'authorities' on writing - they enlighten the process of writing and provide information which enhances reading and making meaning of texts. The passage quoted above, where Mr. Henshaw advises that a character should 'develop', provides the writer with a guideline for structuring a plot and also articulates a narrative convention for the reader, bringing him/her to an awareness of it. Mr. Midgely's advice (eg. 'Plots more often conceal meaning than they reveal it') serves a similar purpose in enlightening literature for both the



reader and the writer. Henshaw's advice to the intending writer is to 'read, look, listen, think and write' Alicia Whitley suggests that to write you need to be a good reader and have something to tell: 'It doesn't matter what it is, but it does help a bit if it's something that matters'. A Long Way From Verona incorporates a number of different opinions on literature: the passion of Arnold Hanger ('To hell with school. English is what matters. ENGLISH IS LIFE. '); the strange inhibited views of Miss Dobbs who tells her class to destroy anything they write and are pleased with; Miss Philemon's insights which counteract Miss Dodd's views and encourage a courageous approach:

*Poets on the whole are not much given to shame. Poets on the whole don't slink. They burn and*

*suffer and get torn to bits - they drink and grow fat and quarrel and die. They cut themselves to pieces and destroy their relations. They are bitter and mad and sad and heavy of heart. It's not a soft way, Jessica; but at least they're not ashamed.*

Again the emphasis in this novel is on the creative individualism of the writer.

The novels all assume an interest in writing on the part of the reader. In all four novels the use of first-person narrative through a child narrator/author reinforces the intended reader's identification with the child-author, an identification that is important because it draws the reader into the writing process. The reader identifies with the 'author' both as the person who is the chief 'actor' in the story and as a person who tells stories, who is involved in a certain activity or function. For example, we participate in Jessica Vye's strange experience in the cake shop by seeing it through her eyes on two levels - on one level, as if we are reliving her experience, on the other as experiencing an account, her story of it. It is never made clear whether this account of the event is the essay she was humiliated for, but the possibility that this is so reinforces the 'authored' level.

Because it foregrounds 'telling', the use of first-person narrative in the novels is central to this second

'authored' level of reading, which is further reinforced by the author-narrators' reflections on their accounts of events:

*I have described the outing to Elsie Meeney's [the cake shop] very carefully and in the fullest detail as it has a good deal of bearing on what happened next, though you might not think so at first. (Gardam 1971, p.27)*

*It might seem strange to you, reading this, that these thoughts should strike me at that moment. It seems strange to me now too, writing them down. But they did, though as a flash of insight rather than in the linear logic of printed words in neat procession across a page. (Gardam 1971, pp.95-6)*

*... now I've decided to write a whole book, I worry she might be right, and I'm not saying enough about how I feel when 27 Beechcroft Avenue gets turned upside down by my ferocious sister rattling her cage bars. But it's not easy. Often I don't know. (Gardam 1971, p.38)*

*I read over the letter you wrote that time answering my questions and thought about your tips on how to write a book. One of the tips was listen. I guess you meant to listen and write down the way people talk, sort of like a play. This is what Mom and I said at supper ... (Gardam 1971, p.51)*

Questions of representation or expression are articulated and



shared. The reader becomes a participating witness to the act of writing, an observer who takes part in the text as the listener constructed by the first-person narrative.

Aidan Chambers takes this a step further in *Breaktime* for an older and more experienced intended reader and brings out the complexity in narrative voice by switching between first and third person narrative, raising the issue of the relationship between actual author, narrator, and reader. In the other novels, the author 'hides behind' the child-narrator - the child-narrator's point of view is sustained and the fact that he/she is not the actual author is avoided. In *Breaktime* it is not always clear who is narrating or who the author is: is it always Ditto, experimenting with ways of representing by switching between first and third person narrative; or

is the third person voice of Chambers taking over every now and then from his 'second self', problematizing or playing with the relationship between narrator and author?

This playfulness extends to the novel's form. *Breaktime* focuses on the created object or product of writing: on the text itself as a representation of the activity of representing, rather than on Ditto as author personally engaged with 'being a writer', or on his development as a writer. The focus on the text is highlighted by its 'self-conscious' form, its composition of a wide variety of different modes of expression (letter, document, 'diary', quotations, cartoons etc.) and graphematic presentation (range of typefaces, handwriting etc.) which 'leads the reader to witness the writing itself, to be aware of it and attend to it for its own sake.' (Chambers 1985, p.104).

Because the connection between writer and what is written is not as close as in the other novels, the relationship of author as real person to text becomes a prominent question. How much of the author as a real person is in his work? Does it matter? Does it make any difference to the meaning the reader makes of it? The book ends on this note, with the question of how much of Ditto's work is fiction and the realization that knowing this is not necessary for an understanding or

appreciation of the work:

'... It is a record of what happened to you last week.'

'That's what you said. I only asked if it convinced you in that respect. You said yes.'

'Are you playing games?'

'Do you mean, have I written fiction?'

'Declare!'

'Could be. How do you know I didn't sit in my room at home all week making the stuff up?'

'I don't believe you.'

'Thank you. That's the best compliment you could pay me' ...

'I'm in the thing . . . Are you saying I'm just a character in a story?'

'Aren't we all?' said Ditto and laughed.

Morgan represents the reader who wants to locate the 'reality' in the text. Ditto demonstrates that this is not important or even relevant to what meaning the reader makes of a book.

While the novel portrays writing as an opportunity to examine the self, to explore one's life, experiences and imagination, what ultimately counts for Chambers is what the reader makes of the end product, the created object. Questions of how much is true and who wrote the book are so mixed up and unanswerable that they must be abandoned.

However, in discarding the reality

of the text's production does he misunderstand the interest in keeping a sense of the author, of 'raw material', of the reality behind the text? And thereby does he frustrate one of the other fascinations in reading, the apprehension of creation?

Because perhaps, to paraphrase Alicia Whitley, we also read for the writer, however unrealized, in ourselves.

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#### Biographical Note

Kordula Dunscombe has a Bachelor of Arts majoring in visual arts and English, and has completed her Master of Arts preliminary studies. She is currently doing a Graduate Diploma in Children's Literature and is working as a research assistant on a project investigating nineteenth century children's literature.

