

LORRAINE ORMAN INTERVIEW

February 10, 2006

I am driving through Lorraine Orman's **A Long Way from Home** territory – 'chugging' over the hill, past the view of Whangateau Harbour and along the cause-way to Omaha Bay. The view has changed since Lillian Glenmore, the protagonist from **A Long Way from Home**, spent a year in Whangateau in 1943.



Point Wells is just over the nearest channel, and the big sandspit lies beyond that again, with its tip of brilliant white sand reaching towards Ti Point on the other side.

Now houses dot the peninsular and there is a causeway connecting Point Wells to Omaha Bay. And coming out of her gate, one street back from that brilliant white sandy beach on the sandspit, comes Lorraine Orman, a new rising star in children's literature.

We sit in the lounge of her cosy bach and she tells me how she has been writing for 25 years but only very recently enjoyed book publishing success. Lorraine says her luck changed in 2003 when she was accepted into the New Zealand Society of Authors' mentorship programme. She was granted 20 hours mentoring time with children's writer Tessa Duder and the result was a novel for teenagers called **Cross Tides**.

Then Lorraine had another stroke of luck. She was accepted as a client by the Richards Literary Agency. They sent **Cross Tides** to various publishers and eventually Longacre Press published it in 2004. In 2005 she won the New Zealand Post Book Awards Best First Book Award for **Cross Tides**.

Lorraine also had four more books published in 2005: the first three were **Ratso**, **Kev and Borax**, and **Furze the Fixer**. The fourth book came from an idea planted by her agent, Ray Richards. Knowing that she holidayed regularly in the Warkworth area; he told her that American soldiers had camped there during World War II and added, "Someone should write a story about it." She researched, wrote an outline, applied for a Creative New Zealand grant and her agent approached Scholastic New Zealand. She was awarded a grant and **A Long Way from Home: The Diary of Lillian Glenmore, Warkworth, 1943** was published in the 'My Story' series.

What makes her recent rise more impressive is that she has successfully written books that appeal to three different reading age groups. She has captivated young adults who like the supernatural and historical with **Cross Tides**. Early teens like her historical story **A Long Way from Home** and 7-9 year olds have read her Kiwi and Aussie Bite books in their thousands.

Lorraine says her stories for primary-aged children are completely different to her writing for teenagers. Three of the 'bite-size' books, **Furze the Fixer**, **Kev and Borax** and **Fish Tale** are quirky quasi-fantasy books and **Ratso** is a humorous family tale.

I find I can write humour for younger children but not for the older age groups. Writing books for older readers is much more like writing adult books – they need a dramatic theme, strong characters, and a more complicated plot. The younger books don't take so long to write but the most important part is getting the plot right. I start off with an outline and I always know how the book will end. I scribble down some notes and then I extend them to create the skeleton of a plot.

I am also thinking the whole time about the characters. For longer novels I develop the main characters in their own right, creating a personality summary for each character. If I have done an analysis of each of my characters I know how they will react when the plot is more advanced. I know

my characters have come to life when I can hear their voices talking in my head.

As well as getting to know her characters inside out Lorraine often draws upon her own personal experiences.

In **Cross Tides**, the main protagonist, Bel is sent to the Marlborough Sounds because her parents are in the 'throes of divorce'. Whilst taking time-out with her turbulent thoughts on a deserted beach she connects with a ghost, sixteen year old Lizzie who lives in the early 1830s. Lizzie shares her tragic story of being married to a notorious whaler and finding salvation when she falls in love with a young Maori preacher. Coincidentally, Bel also falls for a young Maori boy, whose family have set up a protest camp on the same beach. During the high point in the story Bel realises Lizzie wants her to right an ancient wrong.

Lorraine used her own experience of parents separating to create the emotions Bel feels. Because Bel is much older, Lorraine makes her character angrier and more defiant than she was herself as an eight year old child of divorcing parents.

A reoccurring theme of separation appears again in **A Long Way from Home**. The fourteen year old character, Lillian Glenmore, is sent away from Auckland to live with her grandparents in Warkworth during the Second World War because she has a spot on her lungs. Lorraine, also an only child, was sometimes sent away in the school holidays to stay with friends who owned a farm. She also had a spot on her lungs. She drew on that feeling of being shuffled off somewhere to convey Lillian's sense of dislocation.

Lorraine builds character depths by digging into personal memories, experiences and feelings.

Ratso, was based on a childhood experience with her family – though she jumped into the van to rescue a cat, not a rat! The main character Steven

needs to buy a present for his father, whose birthday is in just a couple of days. When Ryan turns up at school with a pet rat for sale Steven thinks it's the perfect present only his mother doesn't think so. Ratso is smuggled on board their van for a birthday outing at the beach that nearly turns to disaster.

My stories are often based on my own experiences, but events usually have to be changed to create a truly dramatic story.

Her experience of being a child of divorced parents started her reading books to escape a difficult reality. Brought up in Auckland, Lorraine always enjoyed school, finding it was an environment where she had some degree of control.

Even when life was tough I knew that academically, I was doing well.

Lorraine went on to do a Bachelor of Arts at Auckland University and then a post-graduate diploma of librarianship with the Library School in Wellington.

I was totally addicted to reading books from an early age but I didn't start my library career with children's books. That came later.

She began her career as a librarian at the General Assembly Library and the National Library. It was not until she had spent ten years at home with her own children Mark and Scott that she returned to work in a school library. She was always interested in what books the pupils were reading and decided the best way to become an expert was to read the books herself. She also developed a taste for fantasy fiction. Her current favourite authors are: Terry Pratchett, Garth Nix, Geraldine McCaughrean, Diana Wynne Jones, Susan Price, and Peter Dickinson.

When asked if she has a fantasy novel in the pipeline she pauses and searches her mental bank of books on the 'boiler'. She says she has not yet come up with any ideas that are firm enough to do something with. A few of her books, however, have a strong supernatural element strung through them.

For **Furze the Fixer** Lorraine borrowed the idea of a modern day boggart from reading Susan Cooper's books. The main character Dougal discovers a boggart, a magical little Scottish man, in an old suitcase under the stairs. The boggart helps Dougal do his chores in magical time on the promise that Dougal will get him back to his homeland.

For her favourite junior book **Kev and Borax** she was walking through a park and thinking about writing an upside down fairytale. She thought of a classical icon - the fairy godmother and changed it to a fairy godfather. Then she turned that character upside down and presented him as a punk – a very unlikely godfather. In Cinderella the fairy godmother helps Cinderella against her bully stepsisters. In **Kev and Borax** David gets Kev the punk fairy god father to help him with the bullies at school.

For her latest book **Fish Tale**, due out May 2006, Lorraine was inspired by one of the people she interviewed for 'A Long Way from Home'. It is the story of a girl who wants to cheer up her depressed great-grandfather. A garden gnome comes to life and tells her that if she obtains some fish for him, he'll tell her how to cheer her great-great-grandfather up. She embarks on a wild and funny quest to do what the gnome is demanding of her.

At the moment Lorraine is completing a young adult novel in a similar vein of **Cross Tides**. She says she deliberately set out to write for the same audience. The new book, **Hideout**, is a blend of adventure, social realism, romance and the supernatural. It's about two sisters who run away from an abusive situation at home.

Lorraine has the ability to turn family experiences, twist old tales and utilise historical events to produce entertaining reads that children enjoy. Her determination to write what the audience and publishers want, has also helped her success.

Discovering what publishers want and have recently published is one of the tips Lorraine gives on her website: <http://www.story-go-round.net.nz>. She

also recommends beginning writers join Storylines: the Children's Literature Foundation of New Zealand as she says you can often pick up inside information. Also, their quarterly newsletter lists all the latest children's books published in New Zealand.

Lorraine has been involved with the Storylines Foundation for many years and is on two sub-committees. She has recently teamed up with Tessa Duder to put together an anthology of short stories on behalf of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) and the Storylines Foundation to celebrate International Children's Book Day in April 2007. Lorraine and Tessa have asked selected authors to write stories which will reflect the Pakeha, Maori and Pasifika cultures of New Zealand.

Because of her involvement in many aspects of children's literature she was invited to be a judge for the 2004 New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults, which rewards excellence in children and young adults' literature every year. The Storylines Foundation (along with other interested groups) often recommends suitable people as judges. At that time Lorraine was writing a lot of book reviews and her previous experience as a librarian made her a suitable candidate.

I realised a long time ago that I might never get a children's book published. I decided it was necessary to enjoy the process of trying to get published. I got involved with peripheral activities so if no book was published at the end I would still have achieved something positive. My name first got into print with short stories in the School Journal and various anthologies. Then I went on to write reviews and articles for magazines. I hoped all this would have the effect that one day a publisher would pick up my manuscript and say, 'I know her'.

It worked and her recent success is testament to this. She says she has also met some marvellous people on the journey to publication.

It looks like Lorraine's luck is still in as she has three books submitted for this year's New Zealand Post Book Awards and she will find out in February if any are short listed. She wonders if she's simply flavour of the month at the moment but she intends to enjoy it while it lasts and to keep writing as long as she can.

Lorraine gets plenty of inspiration while walking on a brilliant white sandy beach so expect to hear plenty more from her.

The following article was published in Magpie Magazine, 2006 edition.

Check out Lorraine Orman's website: www.story-go-round.net.nz

