

# Nina Bawden: Dignity, Tenacity, Charm

“I don't *usually* leave it about the place,” Nina Bawden emphasised, with a look of embarrassed concern that she might be thought immodest. She was referring to the copy of her autobiography, *In My Own Time*, that was on top of a small pile of books on a table in her study, a comfortable upstairs room at the back of her elegant terrace house in Islington. “I'm writing a piece for a *festschrift* for a friend” – she nodded towards the text-filled screen of her laptop – “and had to check something.”

Matters settled to her satisfaction, she carefully logged off, then manoeuvred her chair so as to allow herself an unimpeded window-view: trees, sunshine; below, the bright, tidy garden; beyond, a shady, placid stretch of the Regent's Canal. “It *is* a lovely house,” she agreed. “We were wise to buy it. Couldn't afford it,” she added with a quick smile. The view was something she resorted to again and again, brief, fleeting glances as though to stimulate and clarify her thoughts, as she spoke about her years of experience as a writer.

Nina had been an established and successful novelist for ten years before she began writing children's books. The first of them, *The Secret Passage*, published in 1963, had all the outward trappings of the conventional adventure story; but it was also concerned with the emotional landscape, the inner lives of the characters – a hallmark of Nina's writing, one which particularly appealed to the young readers: yes, they must have felt, she's on *our* side. Writing *The Secret Passage* initiated a pattern of working – “an adult book one year, a novel for children the next” – which she has adhered to ever after.

She considers all her work a part of what she calls “a coded autobiography”. Themes, events, settings launch reflections of each other across the whole age/reader range. So, to give just one instance, the near-drowning of an elderly person off a Greek beach related in *Granny the Pag* (1995), very nearly mirrors the actual drowning of an elderly person in similar circumstances in *A Nice Change*, an adult novel published two years later.



As anyone who reads both her autobiography and novels discovers, events and incidents from her own life often have fictional counterparts. Real-life scenes, moods and characters – recalled either from direct experience or from the wealth of family lore – reappear, distilled and woven into the fictional fabric of books like (to speak only of children's titles) *The Peppermint Pig*, *Carrie's War*, *Keeping Henry*. The potency of her girlhood experiences in Norfolk and Wales still leaves its imprint (in the harvesting sequence) in her most recent children's book, the grimly futuristic fantasy *Off the Road*; a book which, incidentally, entirely wrong-foots the reader and exacts a complete perceptual U-turn.

At one point in her autobiography she records herself declaring, a trifle acidly one suspects: ‘*At least it's not about rabbits wearing funny clothes.*’ It was both a riposte – aimed at detractors who questioned her wisdom in writing a children's book, or who doubted its acceptability by its intended readership – and a declaration of intent: no bunnies for *me*. “I remember my childhood, and my grandmother's Victorian books ... about prisons. I liked them much better than bunnies.”

Nina has said that she has, “no theories about writing for children.” Once the writing has started, her sole concern is to do the best that is possible for that particular story. When it was suggested to her that she write a children's book, her reaction back all those years had been, she related, “*I can't*. I can't write for

children. I'd written *about* children, in *Devil by the Sea*, but that, surely, wasn't the same.” She went on: reconciled to the notion “I decided to write it as I'd write an adult book – but as *I* felt as a child. And with a child's concerns. I was thirteen when the War began: so there was a natural demarcation which meant I could clearly remember what it was *like* to be thirteen.”

There's a keen sense of the no-nonsense about Nina. Her whole bearing, the way she conducts herself, the way she speaks, her aversion to humbuggery of any kind (*'Humbuggery is what people talk without thinking,'* says Ma Potter in *Humbug*), supports the impression of a person of great integrity, even-handedness and tenacity of spirit. Of someone who favours fact over fancy, the real over the whimsical (no rabbits wearing funny clothes), honesty over speciousness, and has absolutely no truck with the vainglorious. It's an attitude akin to Annie's realism in *The Peppermint Pig*, when she says: ‘*I don't like it when our pig gets killed, either ... But there's always plenty to eat, pig-killing time.*’

Age has done little to diminish Nina's indisputable good looks; the eyes retain their sparkle; quick, bright smiles cross her features, like darting kingfishers. Slight, neat in her navy blue trouser suit, she is indefatigable in her yen to impart information, recall episodes and instances, and to reply to questions with short, direct, succinct answers, often just yes or no; full stop; smile.

“I did do some picture books years ago. *Princess Alice* ...” she replied to a query, leaving her chair, crossing to one of the bookshelves and extracting the book in question. “I expect it didn't sell well enough,” she remarked, thoughtfully but distracted by what she was looking at. For someone who'd stated that she doesn't much go in for re-reading her own books, the text of this – until that moment out-of-mind – picture book hooked her. She turned the pages, smiling with pleasure and surprise, before closing it again, quietly declaring, “Oh, I wish they would re-publish it.”

Over to her desk by the window; “D'you know, I've been awarded the Golden Pen

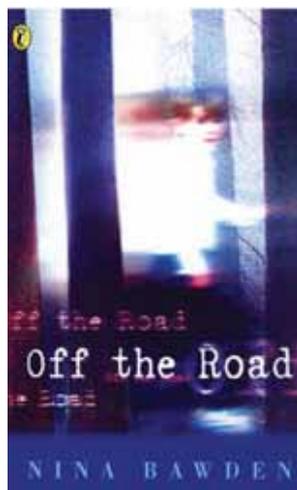
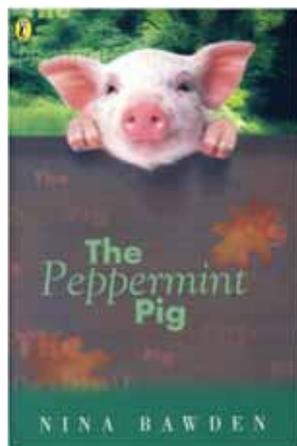
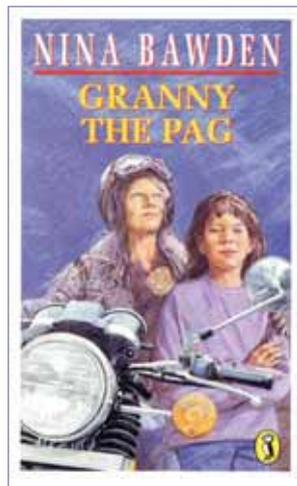
Award.” Her voice and eyes registered her delight. “I’ve only just heard.” She proffered the notification: ‘*Nina Bawden ... the S.T.Dupont Golden Pen Award ... a Lifetime’s Contribution to Literature*’ ... joining the ranks of previous winners, the likes of Michael Frayn, Doris Lessing, Harold Pinter. “The actual award will take place on International Writers’ Day [in May],” she said.

Just across the road from Nina’s house, a green plaque bears witness to the fact that Joe Orton lived – and died, murdered by his lover Kenneth Halliwell – in the top flat opposite. “Of course, it was before we came to live here,” Nina said, and recalled how she’d been taken aback, years later, when she’d learnt that they’d both, she and Orton, written works with the same title. *The Ruffian on the Stair* was his first play, her most recent novel. “I didn’t know about the play until I’d finished the novel.” Later, over lunch, served downstairs by her daughter Perdita, Nina returned to the subject. “It’s a wonderful poem ... W.E.Henley,” she declared and – pausing in the midst of eating – proceeded to recite the first stanza:

*Madame Life’s a piece in bloom  
Death goes dogging everywhere:  
She’s the tenant of the room,  
He’s the ruffian on the stair.*

Whereas the Orton deaths, squalid and tragic though they were, and unfair though it may be to suggest, had a certain – undeniably *Ortonesque* – theatricality about them, the major tragedies that have inflicted Nina and her family have been wholly unprovoked, below-the-belt assaults.

Nina’s first child, her son Nicholas (‘Niki’) died in the early Eighties. He had suffered from mental health problems in adolescence, struggled to overcome them, went to university, worked in various jobs, and had a child, a daughter. Later, after trouble with the police for drug offences and a period in jail, Niki went



missing. Eventually, the family learnt that, months earlier, his body had been found in the Thames.

In her autobiography, published a decade later, Nina writes about the harrowing events surrounding Niki’s death with dignity, clear-eyed honesty and a controlled, directed anger – at the downright failure of all the agencies who’d ‘*promised so much but were unable to deliver the help that [Niki] needed.*’ Her children’s novel *The Finding* is dedicated to her son’s memory, and her Booker prize-shortlisted novel *Circles of Defeat* (1987) includes a character – ‘my gentle schizophrenic’ – based on Niki (though ‘*I couldn’t bear to let him die in a book*’).

On May 10, 2002, Austen Kark, Nina’s husband of 48 years, was one of the seven people killed in the Potters Bar rail crash. Nina, travelling with him, was badly injured and spent months in hospital. “I don’t remember anything about the crash,” she said, matter-of-factly. “The psychiatrist told me that that’s the best way – you have plenty of self-protecting defence mechanisms.”

Now, and understandably frailer, she has to cope with a defective memory, amnesia caused by the crash, and an ankle that “is still very painful” – she reached down as if to demonstrate. “The bones were all crushed, but I was unwilling to undergo surgery.” Another unwelcome legacy is her dislike of staying alone in the house at night, something she admitted to with frustrated

annoyance at her assumed feebleness. Her daughter Perdita, for years a stage manager at various theatres around the country (Nina: “I liked it best when you were at the National Theatre.” Perdita, with mock, good-natured impatience: “I *knew* you’d say that. That’s because you’re a snob ...”), now travels daily from her home in Bow to be with her mother.

“I never saw Austen die, and I never saw him dead”; again, a simple, direct, straightforward statement. She spoke of others who had been injured or bereaved by the accident, “families – devastated.” And of her continuing anger at what she considers the abject failure, by government as well as Jarvis and Railtrack, to accept responsibility. (After years of devoted and active service, she has resigned from membership of the Labour Party in protest at the government’s handling of the railways; the fact that she’s had no reply or communication of any kind from them, deepens her sadness.)

With tenacity and guts, consummate dignity and an utterly disarming charm, Nina continues to pursue those responsible for the crash. Her stance – she “won’t let them get away with it” – won her the *Oldie* magazine’s campaigner of the year award earlier this year. Her words are the final words spoken (by the actress Kika Markham) in *The Permanent Way*, David Hare’s play about the railways, which concludes with the Potters Bar disaster. And she is writing a book about her experiences.

“It’s called *Dear Austen*. I’m writing to tell Austen all about the terrible things that have happened. How awful Jarvis have been. It’s not just a rant,” she added with a smile. “Some funny things that have happened, as well. I’ve shown my publishers what I’ve written so far [about half] and they’re pleased with it.”

There’s a sense of the old routine – an adult book, followed by a children’s book – returning. “The children’s book I had started before the crash ...” Nina began. “I’m beginning to think that I may be able to go back to it. Once Austen’s book is finished.”

Chris Stephenson

*Carrie’s War* Penguin £ 4.99  
ISBN: 0-14-030689-7

*Granny the Pag* Penguin £ 4.99  
ISBN: 0-14-038061-2

*The Peppermint Pig* Penguin £ 4.99  
ISBN: 0-14-030944-6

*Off The Road* Penguin £ 4.99  
ISBN: 0-14-130221-6