

Berlie Doherty:

Finding Out What Happens

This is our story. Our adventure. Let's find out what happens next,' says Holly's father, in Berlie Doherty's *Holly Starcross*, when he and his daughter are forced to abandon his broken-down car. As well as being completely in character, Dad's words express what Berlie herself does in her stories. "I kind of wander through a book," she said. "I never plan – plays yes, but not books. I set off on an adventure, which is eventually shared with the reader." It's this exhaustive and inclusive pursuit to discover what happens next, plus a broad imaginative and emotional reach, perceptive characterisation and supple, vibrant prose – the kind referred to as 'luminous' – that makes the personal journeys her characters undergo so compelling.

The learning curve that teenagers Helen and Chris experience in *Dear Nobody*, in respect of themselves – whether it's to be together or apart – and their baby, for example. Or the adopted James' quest in *The Snake-stone* to make sense of his past and learn the truth about his birth. Or blind Laura's excursion into the realm of the Wild Ones, in *Spellhorn*, and her discovery that 'I was blind till the unicorn came . . . Now I can see everything.' Or Madelaine's twisting path to reconciliation with herself after the death of her twin sister, in *Deep Secret*. Or, most recently, in *Abela: The Girl Who Saw Lions*, the challenges faced by the young heroine, an illegal immigrant following her displacement from her HIV/AIDS stricken African village, to establish a new home in England.

Berlie Doherty is a regional writer in the truest sense of the word; her work concentrates on a specific geographic location, a neatly balanced mix of the urban and the rural. The area stretches from Sheffield across the distinctly more rural land to the west, including the Hope Valley in the Peak District National Park, where she lives with her partner, the writer Alan Brown, amid green carpeted peaks and ambient sheep relentlessly cropping the grass. "James, in his search for his real mother [in *The Snake-stone*], comes to this valley," she confirmed contentedly. Apart from *Street Child*, firmly set in Victorian London, the majority of her books are tied to this region, if not to this particular valley. Even *Abela* ("the result of a visit I made to a friend who was doing work for VSO in Tanzania, fourteen years ago") has a vital plot line rooted in Sheffield.

Landscape and locality and their combined influence on human affairs are as instinctively important to Berlie as they were to Thomas Hardy, her favourite writer, whose novels she is currently – and



Photo: Steve Reeves

systematically – re-reading. The view over farmland to the Kinder Plateau from the window in her writing room ("I refuse to call it an office"), far from being distracting, is, she explained, decidedly beneficial. "When I'm searching for that elusive phrase or image, I might stand up here, gazing into space. Mind you," she added, "the farmer, if he's passing in that field, must look up and think: she does no work at all."

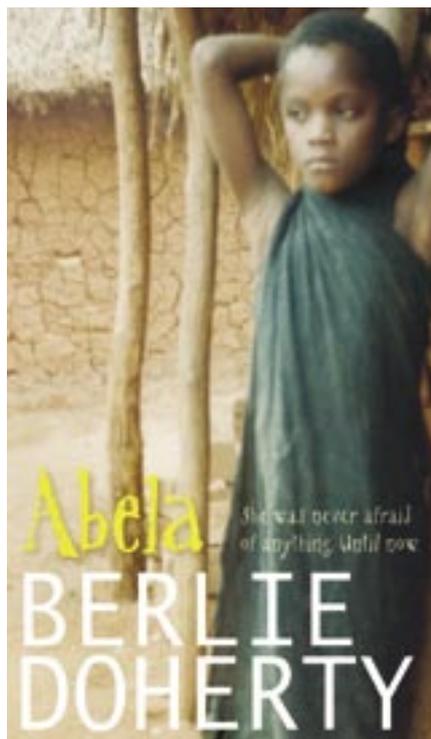
Because her first drafts are in longhand (it has to do with the intimacy of the page and the sound of pen on paper) she can write "all around the house – the dining room, the sitting room, the conservatory, which is nice and warm with the sun on it. And when I go on my gigs – I call them gigs – my notebook goes with me." (She was off on a gig the next day, as guest writer at the Arvon Centre at Lumb Bank.) She becomes site-specific when it's time to transfer her work to the computer.

"Then it's up there, to my writing room," where the computer is kept.

Bright spring weather made the conservatory the ideal spot for a sit and a chat, and it was there that Berlie, softly spoken, composed, frank and unfussy, reminisced about getting started as a writer. "I was born in Knotty Ash, Liverpool. I always wanted to be a writer and I was always reading, carrying books around with me. Ours wasn't a bookish household, but Dad [a railwayman] wrote. Avidly. Just as a hobby, but he did get a few things published – poems – in the local press. So there was always the sound of a cranky old typewriter clacking away in the background. A writing ambience," she happily acknowledged.

"When I started to write, he really encouraged me. I used to send things to the children's page of the *Liverpool Echo*. If you were lucky you could win ten shillings, or a box of paints or chocolates. But the real thrill was seeing my writing in print. Dad really did encourage me – because it's what he wanted. But, at fourteen, I became too old to be considered for the children's pages. So I took early retirement. I became a secret writer, scribbling away." She paused briefly, as though reassessing her time of covert activity. "But I was always nursing the hope that I would actually be a writer." She took an English degree at Durham University. "I thought that's what you had to do to be a writer. But, d'you know, I couldn't write there. It just didn't work. I put it down to the fact that I was studying literature as an academic subject, and when I considered all that sheer weight and mass of writing over the years . . . it was inhibiting."

She trained as a social worker in Liverpool; married; had three children, two girls and a boy, and became a full-time mum. "I loved watching my children grow," she said. "They must always come first, whatever." When the youngest started school Berlie went back to university, Sheffield this time, to train to be a teacher. Once there, she started writing again. "A teacher on my Post Grad. Certificate of Education course made us all write. His point was that, as teachers, we'd all be asking children to write stories and poems – so we should do the same. I wrote something, a short story, and showed it to him. I was really nervous because I wanted to be a writer and here was a real test." "You could sell this," the teacher told her. She sent the story to Radio Sheffield; they bought it ("for £10") and commissioned her to write scripts for a series for schools. Writing for radio, that delicate melding of sound and silence, had, she considers, a profound influence on her writing. "It gave me an awareness of the musicality of the individual lines."

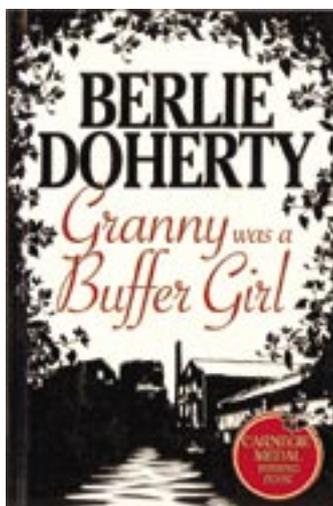


We have copies of this book for the first ten readers who submit their names and addresses to Carousel

After two years teaching and another two working for schools radio, and a year after her first book, *How Green You Are!* ("Long out of print"), was published in 1982, "I took the plunge and became a full-time writer." It *had* to work: her marriage had broken up and she had three children to support. Once she started, "it came pouring out of me. The cork popped out of the bottle and out it all came. During all those years of *not* writing I'd had a sense of my other self, waiting in the wings. And now it all took on a feeling of natural progression; nothing forced, just a constant flow."

As it happens, *Abela: The Girl Who Saw Lions*, is Berlie's fiftieth book in what – her 25th year as a published author – is shaping up to be a bumper twelve months. As well as *Abela*, two of her earliest books, *Children of Winter*, her taut and moving novel set in 17th century Derbyshire during the Plague, and *Granny was a Buffer Girl*, one of her two Carnegie winners (the second was *Dear Nobody*) have been reissued. (Why they were allowed to go out of print in the first place remains a mystery.)

Granny was a Buffer Girl, constructed like a montage of deep-focus family photographs, exhibiting the interconnectedness of the generations and culminating in Jess's departure for France, represents the depth of Berlie's imaginative and emotional commitment at its most thorough. Although a rich cluster of characters – from Granny Dorothy the buffer girl to pathetic old Davey behaving infelicitously to Jess on the canal tow-



a libretto, I sing all the way through. I obviously don't know at that stage what the music will actually sound like because it hasn't yet been written, but I know where all the arias and recitatives, etc, come. When it finally goes to the composer . . . well, there may be a *bit* of bargaining."

As regards the actual business of writing, "I'm better in the mornings. But, all depending on how it's going, what stage I'm at, I might return to it in the afternoon. The closer I am to the end, the more time I spend on it. I don't want to put it down when all the strands are coming together." But on the other hand, "planting potatoes and doing the accounts – it's all part of being a writer. Office work, etc, is all a part of the working day. It all adds to the mesh of what it means to be a writer."

"Writing plays for radio or stage – and I like to think I write a play every year – is so different to writing novels: you write them and then hand them over to others. I love being a part of the creative team. I like working across the media and across the age-range," from books for adults to stories like *Tilly Mint Tales* and *The Starbuster* for younger children. "I have itchy feet. It's an exciting thought that as you're coming to the end of one project there's another waiting."

Chris Stephenson

The three most recent publications:
Abela: The Girl Who Saw Lions Andersen Press
 £10.99 ISBN: 978-1842706893
Granny was a Buffer Girl Catnip £5.99 ISBN: 978-1846470240
Children of Winter Catnip £5.99 ISBN: 978-1846470261