

Literacy Time

PLUS

Author Profile



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Kate Element
talks to

BERLIE DOHERTY

Interesting facts:

Berlie was born in Liverpool in 1943 (just before the end of the Second World War).

After leaving school she went to Durham University to study English Literature.

Her first job was as a social worker but she later trained to be a teacher, before eventually becoming an author and scriptwriter.

Her first book for young people was called *How Green You Are*, published in 1982.

She has been awarded the Carnegie Medal twice, for *Granny was a Buffer Girl* in 1987 and *Dear Nobody* in 1994.

She has written more than 35 children's books, two adult novels, theatre plays, radio plays and three television series – phew!

Street Child is based on true stories of children in Victorian Britain. Berlie found out about them by researching Dr Barnado and the charity he set up for children, now known as Barnado's.

Popping into the local bookshop for the latest book by your favourite author was not an option for many children growing up in Britain just after the end of the Second World War. Choice of books was limited (there weren't many authors writing specifically for children) and money was tight. ►

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Berlie Doherty's family life was similar to that of many other working class families at the time. But there was one difference. Her father, a railwayman, was an avid writer. He loved writing poetry, which was published in the local newspaper. *So, we asked Berlie, is writing in the genes?*

"I don't know about it being in the genes but Dad just loved writing, it was his hobby. He made it seem such a natural thing to do, so I grew up without any sense of mystery about writing. I never had the feeling that you have to be different in any way to be a writer, you don't have to be posh or anything."

As well as being a great role model for writing, Berlie's Dad also encouraged her love of reading by taking her to the local library every week. She tells us: *"I used to love the weekly trip to the library, there is such a wealth of books you can find at a library, and to this day I enjoy the welcome and the space a library offers. I love being able to browse through books and I'll give you a good tip – I never read the blurb on the back of a book. Instead I read the first page and if I get to the end and want to read the second page then I know I'm in for a good book!"*

Extraordinary passion

If Berlie wasn't engrossed in a good story (she was always embarrassed when her mother told everyone 'Berlie's a terrible reader' – which didn't mean she couldn't read, but that she was a terror for always

having her nose in a book!) she'd have a pen in hand, writing away at every opportunity.

She recalls, *"From a young age I always carried a notebook with me, I wrote in it on the bus, or wherever I was. I slowly realised that other children didn't do the same."* It dawned on Berlie that her passion for writing was extraordinary and this was confirmed by her teacher. *"When I was about nine my teacher told me, 'You'll be a writer one day', and I started to believe it."*

Berlie's writing career started very early. Spurred on by her teacher's words and her Dad's encouragement, she submitted poems and stories to the local newspaper, which they published on the weekly children's page. *"It was great to get published, you got money or a box of chocolates,"* she remembers, *"but it all came to a sad end at the age of 14 when I was told I was too old to be on the children's page any more – I was forced into early retirement! It didn't stop me writing in my notebooks but I did miss the payment!"*

University days

After finishing school, Berlie went to university to study English Literature.

"I had been writing fervently all through my childhood but I stopped at university: I think it was because I was reading all the great literature and classics and I thought I could never be an author like that. Although it put me off writing I absorbed the literature of centuries. The course gave me the key ►

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to great works of literature and a deep appreciation of good writing."

BERLIE'S TOP TIPS FOR YOUNG WRITERS

1 Finding the best ideas

Having the initial idea is the exciting bit. Ideas come from all over the place and you have to learn to reject a lot of them. You may overhear a conversation or hear something on the news that sparks an idea, but it's the ones that stick with you that become the stories. These ideas take you beyond curiosity, they become an obsession. If you look for ideas they often don't come! It's often the things that are under your own nose that are the best things to write about. I really like knowing that I'm going to be working on a novel for a year or so, I look forward to meeting lots of imaginary characters on the way.

2 Writing and editing

I spend weeks or months thinking through my initial idea and then I buy myself a big notebook (it always has to be a hardback with a nice cover!) and get down to the business of writing. The stage of building up the story and making it perfect is equally as important.

3 Reaping the rewards

After all the hard work come the biggest thrills – first of all opening up the parcel of brand new books from the publisher, and then receiving letters from your readers (especially from children who have just read your book for pleasure rather than having to read it in school!)

It took nearly another 20 years before Berlie finally came back to her first love and became a published author herself. In the meantime she was a social worker, brought up three children and was a teacher!

When we asked her why she came back to writing – and why she thinks stories are so important – Berlie answered: *"I just can't imagine a world without stories. We have to create stories to make sense of what's going on in our world. Everyone loves stories, not only those in a book, but also those in good films. Children at play are making up stories all the time and I like to tell children that their imagination is just as important as their physical body, they need to feed their imagination by reading stories and nourish it through their creative play and their dreams (both daydreams and night dreams)."*

The January 2009 issue of **Literacy Time PLUS Ages 9 to 11** (No 58) features extracts from Berlie's novel and playscript versions of *Street Child*, based on true stories of children in Victorian Britain. Berlie's poems have appeared in several issues of **Literacy Time PLUS**, including the November 2008 issue for Ages 5 to 7 (No 39), where her poem 'The Sky is Black Tonight' appeared in a collection of poems on a Colour theme. For more information about Berlie and her work, visit her website at www.berliedoherty.com

