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The Life and Fiction of Antonia Forest

In this article, the life and writings of Antonia Forest, who died in 2003, are considered. An attempt is made to put her books into their literary, cultural and religious contexts, and to examine possible reasons for the critical reception of her books during the last 30 years of the twentieth century; from neglect and even disapproval to unstinting praise.

KEY WORDS: Antonia Forest; series fiction; genre subversion; Catholicism; school stories.

In December 2003, five of the major newspapers in the UK (the Times, the Telegraph, the Guardian, the Independent and the Daily Express) ran lengthy obituaries on a children’s writer who had published only 13 books between 1948 and 1982, and nothing since; who had been compared to Jane Austen by one critic, and castigated or ignored by others; and about whom very little was known, not even her real name, by the people who read her stories. That writer is the subject of this article, which is intended to clarify the mystery for those who already admire her, and persuade those who do not know her books to acquaint themselves with, to quote Victor Watson, “one of the best writers for children in English” (Watson, 2000).

“Antonia Forest” was the pseudonym of Patricia Rubinstein, only child of Ernest Rubinstein and Anna Madeleine Caulfield Campbell. Ernest Rubinstein was the oldest of the eight surviving children of Bernard Rubinstein, a Lithuanian Jewish emigrant who at the age of 12 (with his brother Samuel) had been smuggled out of Russian-ruled Lithuania to avoid conscription into the Russian Army. He and
his brother Arthur established an import business in exotic materials, furs and trimmings, wholesalers to dressmaking and millinery businesses. Forest’s mother was the only child of Hammersley Campbell, youngest son of a Belfast Protestant family of eight, orphaned when the oldest daughter was only 18. Three of Hammersley’s sisters had trained as milliners and dressmakers, and opened a dress shop in Westover Road, Bournemouth, during the 1870s, when Bournemouth was at its most fashionable. It was while making a routine sales visit to Madame Campbell’s in Westover Road that Ernest met Anna Madeleine (always known as “Madge”); she had left Ireland to join the family firm as an apprentice dressmaker and continued to work at the shop. Despite the age discrepancy (Ernest was in his mid-forties and Madge 16 years younger) and the difference in religion (the Campbells were Church of Ireland, and attended Anglican churches in England), they fell in love, and were married. Madge and Ernest settled in Hampstead, and it was there, on 26th May 1915, that Patricia Giulia Caulfield Kate was born.

She was educated at South Hampstead High School, where she never regarded herself as “one of the really clever girls” (conversation with author): she shone at English and History, but was “a complete dud” (ibid) at Latin and French, and abominated mathematics. She passed the School Certificate, but did not manage Matriculation, so put the thought of a university degree out of her head. However, University College, London, established a two-year diploma course in journalism in 1934, which she enjoyed thoroughly, though she never wanted in the least to become a journalist: her ambition was to write novels. The journalism course was a means to that end.

On graduation, she worked at the Times Library for a couple of years. Moving in 1939 to Bournemouth, where one of the dressmaking great-aunts invited the family to share her house, she worked in the Army pay office for Dorset and Hampshire during the war: but as soon as war was over, embarked on a writing career. She wrote two adult novels which found no publisher, so decided to break into the market with a school story and then move across to adult fiction. Faber accepted that first book, and the adult fiction never did arrive: instead, she carved for herself a niche in children’s literature.

This school story, Autumn Term, is interesting not only for its own sake, but because it indicated the direction which her work would take for the next 40 years. It is superficially a conventional school story about identical twins, Nicola and Lawrie Marlow, and their adventures as they follow their four older sisters to Kingscote, a traditional girls’ boarding school. There are personal and form rivalries, treachery and deceit, failure and final triumph—a plot summary