

## **Berlie Doherty's *Granny Was a Buffer Girl*: Remembering the Past for the Future**

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I am pleased to be here as a member of the Phoenix Award Committee session to honor Berlie Doherty. Winner of the Carnegie Medal in 1986, and a *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Honor Award, 1988, *Granny Was a Buffer Girl* was dramatized for BBC Radio 4 in 1990. The setting of the novel is Sheffield, which, in England, is synonymous with steel and with stainless steel cutlery. Here, Granny Dorothy, one of the main characters in Doherty's novel, had worked as a "buffer girl." However, from a glance at the hardcopy cover of the 1986 edition of *Granny Was a Buffer Girl*, it would be difficult to guess that the fashionably dressed grandmother figure depicted on the cover had anything to do with the cutlery industry.

In her essay, "Over the Stile and Into the Past: *Children of Winter* and Other Historical Fiction," Doherty explains that in order to write about the girls whose job it was to attend to the buffing wheels that buffed, or polished, steel cutlery until it gleamed, she contacted and interviewed "retired buffer girls through Radio Sheffield and talked to them about their working conditions in the buffing shops in the 1930s" (92). These young women did not dress fashionably for work. In *Granny Was a Buffer Girl*, Jess's grandmother, Dorothy, and her sister, Louie, are described as covering themselves in newspapers to protect themselves from the "sand dust" that streamed from the buffing wheels and emerging, at the end of the day, with their "newspaper arms and legs, faces, hands, calico head-squares, all as black as soot" (38).

In "Interpreting the Past," Joan Aiken ponders the fact that, despite all the modern techniques for studying history, we are separated from the past more than ever—even as that "landscape of the past" is ever-increasing (70). Aiken worries that children, particularly, may be disconnected from this historical landscape by not seeing and understanding the markers of the past in their environment or by not being reminded of the past by family ceremonies and rituals (68). In *Granny Was a Buffer Girl*, Doherty makes those associations between place and history that Aiken thought so important and constructs a family's relationship to the past through the shared memories of Jess, her parents, and grandparents at a family gathering.

The gradual decline of the Sheffield steel industry serves as the historical time-frame against which Doherty sets her stories about three generations of Jess's family. The setting of Sheffield, writes Doherty in "Over the Stile," allowed her to mark and describe specific locations "such as Cutlers' Hall, and the Rivelin Valley where the grinding mills used to be, and the great pulsing steelworks along the Rother Valley" ("Over" 92). In the chapter, "In Fear of the Giant," Doherty links memory, place, and family history together as Jess tells how her mother took her to see what was left of the "old watermills" in the Rivelin Valley; and how she and her mother visited the home of the "giant"—Jess's enormous Uncle Gilbert who used to work in the mills. The effect of the closing of the mills on family and community is shown through Jess's description of Gilbert and Auntie Louie's neglected and uncared-for home, one of the few standing terraced houses left among the derelict and "boarded-up" homes in Heeley (*Granny* 105-06). The landscape of the

past is also described by Jess as she remembers walking along the canal with her grandfather, Albert. Along its banks are the closed down mills (“the industrial monuments,” her granddad calls them) of a bye-gone era, and the canal water is described as “yellow as dandelions” from industrial waste, while, towards the countryside, butterflies dance among the abandoned machinery and “sorrel” grows among old brickwork and “always in the background,” it is narrated, “there’s the roar of the city” (97).

That “imaginative grasp of the past” that Aiken believed was best achieved through fiction or good biography (75) is realized in Doherty’s novel through details of every-day life and practices that are interwoven into the lives of her characters. The text of *Granny Was a Buffer Girl* invites readers to see, listen, and imagine, for Doherty employs a vivid visual imagery and an extensive use of dialogue that also work to mark the passing of time. When Bridie, Jess’s maternal grandmother, meets Jack (Jess’s grandfather), she refers to him as a “bright young blade,” wearing a “suit and spats,” carrying “yellow kid gloves” and “a silver topped cane” (14). A generation later, Michael, his son-in-law, is referred to as a “Teddy Boy” when he dresses up for the “Saturday hop” (48). Younger readers of *Granny Was a Buffer Girl* may not recognize the term, “Teddy Boy,” but Doherty’s description of Michael with his “brilliantined quaff,” his “[B]right pink socks, bootlace tie, blue shoes with two-inch crepe soles,” and “a pale blue drape jacket with a velvet collar” provides readers with a striking visual image (47). The text makes it clear that Teddy-boys are not exactly welcome at the dance club, and Michael has to allay the doorman’s suspicions that he is not carrying a “flick-knife” (48).

Doherty creates relevance for adolescent readers by writing about a social culture that may differ in its detail but, perhaps, not so much in kind, showing that adolescents construct their own conventional codes of behavior and dress and suffer uncertainties and difficulties no matter the era. Michael does not know how to attract a girl to dance with him at the Saturday hop (50). Like Jess’s Uncle Jack, he does not meet the expectations of his father. He loses the job that his father, Albert, has procured for him at the steelworks and is called “a disgrace to the family” as he sits and reads “American comics” (51). At age eighteen years of age, however, his short-term future is decided for him as he receives his “call-up” papers for “National Service”—an event which grounds him literally and historically into a life-experience common to all young men of his era in the United Kingdom.

In ““Over the Stile and Into the Past,”” Doherty writes that, “It could be said that every piece of fiction is an historical document because it sets, in time, the style, manners, and philosophy of a period, as well as the physical presence of the characters and their immediate world” (92). Although, Doherty sets *Granny Was a Buffer Girl* in a specific city and its surrounding countryside over a period of time, she uses the vivid physical presence of her characters to provide a living history—capturing through their hearts, minds, and souls emotions of love, joy, humor, and sadness.

*Granny Was a Buffer Girl* begins with Jess’s first-person narrative describing a family ceremony in which she and her family come together to celebrate Jess’s going to France as part of her university course and also to celebrate and remember the life of her elder brother, Danny, who had died when seventeen years old from a wasting disease. The dynamics of strong family

relationships are constructed through passages of lively dialogue—a mixture of teasing, arguing, and reminiscing spiced with humor. This communal storytelling is reinforced through a narrative structure in which each family member’s memories, while forming separate chapters, are interconnected and flow one into another.

Jess, her mother promises her, will not be leaving home without knowing her family’s secrets. In the chapter, “Bridie and Jackie,” Doherty draws upon her parents’ own love story, which was originally written as a radio play entitled *A Liverpool Love Story* (“Over” 92). In this re-telling, Jess’s Grandma Bridie, from a devout Catholic family, meets Jack, whose Protestant parents share one dislike—“a Catholic.” Their courtship and secret marriage form the very stuff of romance as Jack carries Bridie, locked out from her home by her father, off into the night in her nightie on his great “Matchless” motor bike. “You’ve made your bed, my girl,” her father tells her as he pushes the bolts across the door. “Now you must lie on it” (*Granny* 25). They are similarly turned away from Jack’s home although Jack’s father, a headmaster, gives them, out of a sense of duty, enough money for a hotel and a honeymoon (27).

Fiction works as social document as Doherty reproduces, for young people, the social and cultural mores of different eras. Jack and Bridie are represented as defying social, religious, and parental opposition in affirming their love, but in Grandmother Dorothy’s love story, the move from a romantic fantasy to that which is, in real terms, attainable becomes a poignant theme as Dorothy, both as a child and as a young woman, experiences the disparity between ideologies of romance embedded in popular culture and what a buffer girl can realistically achieve. She learns this first in the children’s game, “There was a princess long ago” when the prince who rescues and kisses her is, to her disappointment, not the prince of her dreams but “snotty-nosed Arthur Bradley” who lives across the road (29-31).

On her seventeenth birthday, Dorothy scrubs off the smell and dust of her trade and attends the annual dance at Cutlers’ Hall, dressed in “lisle stockings” and a “blue satin dress with red posies” (32-33). Here, she catches the eye of Mr. Edward, the son of her boss, and they dance looking into each other’s eyes. The Cinderella motif is used by Doherty to belie the romantic ideology embedded in traditional fairy tale. The next day, Mr. Edward looks for his Cinderella but does not think to find her among the buffer girls; he does not think the voice he hears and recognizes belongs to the “grimy girl” he pushes past, whose “dust” he brushes “off his coat in annoyance” (39). For Dorothy, it is a coming-to-terms with reality. She realizes she cannot cross the patriarchal barriers of class and economic status that lie between her and a man like Mr. Edward; and she agrees to marry Albert Bradley when he proposes the next morning. But, as it is implied in the text, she has made a clear-eyed decision about her future with Albert and is “ready” (41).

Children, Aiken writes, need knowledge of their family history as well as knowledge of their “historical past” in order to be able to deal with the hard choices that lie ahead of them (73). In *Granny Was a Buffer Girl*, Doherty shows the values and lessons-for-life that young people can learn by listening to the choices made by their parents and grandparents. The view that there must be equality in love and marriage is integrated into the story about Dorothy and Albert’s son, Michael, whose miserable and unequal relationship with Lucy Cragwell comes to an end when

Lucy confronts Michael with the truth that he and she both know. Lucy tells him that she no longer wants a relationship in which she is chasing after a boyfriend who cannot admit to even liking her. In the future, a relationship for her will have to be “equal and fair and obvious from the start” (68). When Michael marries Josie (Jess’s mother and daughter of Jack and Bridie), it is narrated right at the beginning of the chapter in which their story is told that theirs “was always an equal marriage” (71). The honesty of their relationship and to one another is shown to be important in enabling them to accept the truth about their son, Danny.

Jess and her brother, John, learn of the hard decision made by their parents to have more children after Danny was diagnosed with an incurable disease because Danny had begged for a sister (76). They learn that love and loving can be hard. Jess’s mother’s best-kept secret is how scared she was of the responsibility she was going to face as Danny grew older and even how “guilty” she had felt about his birth. She admits to saying that “it would have been better . . . if he’d never been born,” and Jess knows that this is because her mother so loved Danny (74). Jess learns, too, about love from her grandfather, Albert. When she shuns her grandfather’s friend, Davey, who makes teasing advances to her because of his loneliness and past disappointments with girls, Jess thinks about what her grandfather had said about love being “more than kissing and cuddling” (104). Jess, her brother, and his girlfriend, Katy, listen to stories that are built around the responsibilities that come with love and that incorporate values of caring and nurturing.

Secrets are no longer secrets when shared. Through their telling, Jess is given a sense of connection to the past and also a sense of continuity that embraces love, hope, and joy. As Jess boards the train en route to France, her mother gives her a photo of Danny who is “laughing out at” her “from the past” (131). Through this circling back to the family celebration of Danny’s life with which the novel begins, Doherty creates, through a family history, a true remembrance of the landscape of the past that Jess is able to carry with her on her journey toward the future.

### Works Cited

- Aiken, Joan. "Interpreting the Past." *Children's Literature in Education*. 16.2 (1985): 67-83.
- Doherty, Berlie. *Granny Was a Buffer Girl*. New York: Orchard Books, 1988.
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