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The Bottle Imp

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Scotland as Source: Personal Reflections

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In book blurbs and on my website I acknowledge the land of my birth, Scotland, both personal and national, as a major influence on my work. Hearing first voices – primary voices – means that I am ‘informed by Scotland’ and thus as a writer ‘formed’ by its people, culture, geography, history, landscape and literature.

Born in the middle of Scotland in the middle of the 20th century meant that my childhood was mainly rural and mostly uneventful. We lived on the outskirts of a small town and our household was full of books; non-fiction on every topic: history, biographies, science and geography, and also a wide range of fiction. I loved our traditional folk and faerie tales, fables, myths and legends, stories of all kinds, plays and poetry. My father had a wonderful memory for poems and would recite these to amuse his children.

I'll tell you of the Ancient Gaels,
The ones the gods made mad.
All their wars are happy,
And all their songs are sad.

Being descended on one side of my family from a long line of Ancient Gaels I have a particular affection for stories and songs of doomed heroes and heroines. My siblings and I especially loved the more melodramatic ones, the contests of wits, the battles, the bravery, the stirring declarations, the noble deeds. I thrilled to the ballads and stories told to us by our parents. The family favourite, often acted out by myself and my brother and sisters, being “*Lord Ullin’s Daughter*” by Thomas Campbell. Long suffering aunts and uncles were coerced into watching our presentation of the Highland chieftain’s attempt to elope with his true love. Fleeing from the wrath of the girl’s father, Lord Ullin, who threatens to kill the Highland chief and have his blood stain the heather, the lovers perish, swept beneath the waters of a

stormy loch. Lord Ullin stands on the shore, calling desperately to his daughter:

‘Come back! Come back!’ he cried in grief,
‘Across this stormy water;
And I’ll forgive your Highland chief.
My daughter! – O, my daughter!’
‘Twas vain: The loud waves lash’d the shore,
Return or aid preventing;
The waters wild went o’er his child,
And he was left lamenting.

After our finale there was not a dry eye in the house.

In school we recited poetry according to the set texts the teachers taught us and I can still now recall most of *The Daffodils*. No disrespect to Mr Wordsworth (and I grew to love his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections on Early Childhood*) but when you are nine years old there really is no contest between ‘dancing daffodils’ and ‘blood on the heather’. With my own recollections now on early childhood I realise the debt I owe to my parents and our extended family that I am familiar with the literature of my heritage, the great poetry of Burns etc. My father would sing ‘Jock o’Hazeldean’, ‘Aye Fond Kiss’ and many other similar songs as he worked around the house. When I think also of the number of books at home and of what the income was I see how my parents prioritised our education.

My short story *Notes in the Margin* was a tribute to this.

My siblings and I played outdoors a lot with the nearby Campsie Fells in constant view, their slopes beautiful in sun, shadow, or snow. Being close to the elements had a profound effect on me and I am acutely aware of the impact landscape has on character, as evidenced especially in *Remembrance* and *Saskia’s Journey*. In *Remembrance* the young soldier, John Malcolm, used to the hills of his home in the Borders experiences deep disorientation in the trenches of the Western Front. The eponymous heroine of *Saskia’s Journey* is aware of the sea ‘rustling its skirts below her window’ – the sea becoming a character in the book.

My home town, Kirkintilloch, was a fort on the Antonine Wall, one of the furthest northern points settled by the Roman Empire. In the middle ages followers of Robert the Bruce held the castle for the King. This sense of history exhilarates me and the artefacts our ancestors left behind are fascinating. The burial grounds with their mysterious markings and ancient runes provided inspiration for *Whispers in the Graveyard*.

www.thebottleimp.org.uk

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These sites were in the park close to my home where stood the local public library. One of my earliest childhood memories is being interviewed by the Dragon Lady Librarian to see if I was suitable to be allowed to join! She enforced strict rules of silence, sobriety and sanitarianess. But when I was young the children's books available for me to read never reflected my life. I never found myself in a book. The children I read about owned ponies, had a cook and gardener, and went on sailing holidays in Cornwall. My first book *Simon's Challenge* was, in part, written by me to have the humour of the young readers who visited my mobile library, and to mirror the circumstances of present day Scotland that my own children would grow up in. One of the reasons I love visiting schools and enjoying creative writing sessions with young people is the enormous satisfaction of watching the enabling process as they articulate their experiences and take ownership of their language.

I was a voracious reader and gobbled anything and everything, yet no one ever said to me that I could be writer. My best option on leaving schools was to choose a career as a librarian. And it was while working on the mobile library that I witnessed the devastation on a community wrought by the closure of a steel mill. I wrote my first book about this which won an award for new writers and was filmed for television as a children's drama.

Thus I became a writer. I think now I always was.

The enormous freedom in writing for young people is that I can write modern urban drama, (*Divided City*) or a book set in medieval Italy, (*The Medici Seal*), and as long as the story is satisfying my readers do not mind. Sometimes a book is defined by teachers and academics as *Divided City* has been under many terms e.g. 'Boys, Reading, Citizenship'. *Divided City* is a book about prejudice but it is also about friendship and the nature of friendship. Set in Glasgow it has travelled the world. Chosen for the One Book Project in a cross-border peace project in Northern Ireland, I have also spoken about this book in other parts of the world. Shortlisted for 10 separate book awards it has won the Catalyst Book Award – an award given for the book that changes people. It is a very humbling experience to know that one's work is considered to have that type of impact on readers.

From an early age I was imbued with narrative and a love of language. For me Scotland is Source, not just the literal sense but also in the lyrical meaning – the headwaters, where a

river rises, the spring bubbling underneath the earth. For words have more than practical use, they carry freight. In addition to function their impact is emotional and spiritual. They resonate at the frequency of the human spirit.

And that is both personal and yet universal.

Theresa Breslin is a critically acclaimed Scottish writer of over thirty books whose work has been filmed for television, broadcast on radio, and is read world-wide in a number of languages. She is the author of *Remembrance*, the best selling story of youth in World War One, and of *Divided City*, winner of the Catalyst Award and shortlisted for ten other book awards. She won the Carnegie Medal for *Whispers in the Graveyard*, her compelling story of a dyslexic boy. Website: **theresabreslin.com**



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