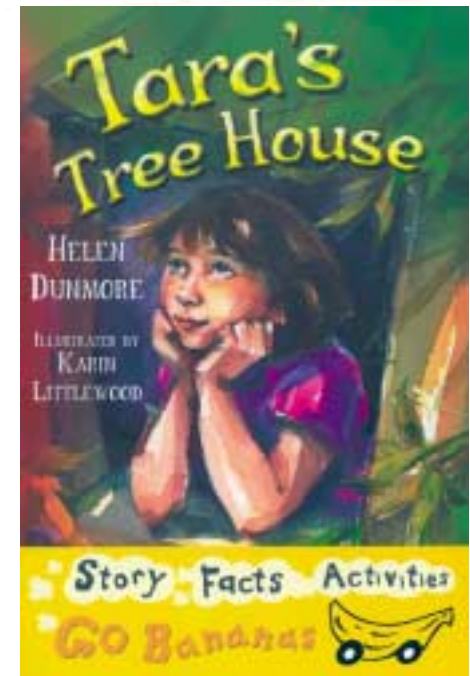


## CHILDHOOD INFLUENCES AND TARA'S TREE HOUSE

Helen's early love of reading was, she says, 'undoubtedly encouraged' by her family. Growing up in a house surrounded by books and seeing people enjoying them made her want to read herself. Helen says that 'you can't bully children into reading': what is important is being enthusiastic about books and sharing that enthusiasm. Helen's parents never judged what she chose to read, but gave her the freedom to discover what she liked.

As a child, Helen read and memorised a lot of poetry, which she continues to find 'extremely valuable'. She was also 'keen on comics' like *Bunty* and *Judy* because of their strong narratives. The first book she can remember being read to her was *The Wind in the Willows*. She liked books produced in interesting shapes and with pop ups, funny books, the fairy stories of Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and Andrew Lang, classics like *A Tale of Two Cities*, true life adventures (Grace Darling, Scott of the Antarctic, Florence Nightingale) and Alison Utley's *Little Grey Rabbit*, among many others. Like other children, she read in 'a very retentive way'. She can still hear the words from some of those early books, like the Janet and John series, and can recall 'the excitement of actually reading' for the first time.



Helen likes thinking from the point of view of children and focusing on things that they will find interesting. In her books for children she hopes to recapture the pleasure she derived from reading as a child when she would be completely absorbed into a vividly imagined world full of colour and life. She is aware, too, of the need to write 'pure and clear sentences'. Children do not want to be 'baffled' by the way the language has been constructed, she says, although they do enjoy 'rich, complicated words'. She is grateful that she was encouraged to learn the structure of English at school and to become confident in using it. She feels that 'knowing the rules' has given her power as a writer.

Among the many books and authors she would recommend children to try are Michael Morpurgo for his sense of place and strong emotional themes, Dick King Smith for his ability to write with a child's eye view, Philippa Pearce's magical *Tom's Midnight Garden*, Diana Wynne Jones, and Tove Jansson's complex and moving Moomin books. She is also very fond of Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War*, which has established itself as a classic and will be read by older children during the Great Reading Adventure.



Illustration of Tara's tree house by Karin Littlewood

*Tara's Tree House*, the book to be used by younger readers in the Great Reading Adventure, was published in June 2004, although the basic story had appeared previously in Helen's short story collection *Aliens Don't Eat Bacon Sandwiches* (2000). The commissioning editor at Egmont had read the original version and thought that it could be adapted as an illustrated chapter book for newly fluent readers, with facts and activities linked to learning about World War Two. The illustrations are by Karin Littlewood.

Tara is a young girl sent to live with her nan while her mother is in hospital. She is bored in the little flat but sneaks into the garden belonging to the downstairs neighbour and discovers a beautiful pear tree and the prospect of adventure. She learns of Nan's own experience of being sent away from home when she was young and also meets Mr Barenstein, owner of the garden flat, who remembers the cherry tree where his little sister Hannah used to play. He allows Nan to create a vegetable plot in the garden and another neighbour, Mr Giovanni, to build Tara a tree house. At the beginning of the book, Tara had thought six weeks was a terribly long time to be separated from her mother. By the end, she realises that children could be separated from their families for years, like her nan, or forever, like Hannah. She says to herself:

I'm going to phone Mum in hospital tonight... and I'll tell her about the tree house, and Nan's veg plot, and all the things that are happening in the garden. Six weeks isn't long really.

The book, with its subtle references to the wartime evacuation of children and the Holocaust, provides a gentle introduction to the way in which family history relates to the major events described in the history books. Because of the sometimes cynical manipulation of history by those in power, Helen believes that people can come to distrust what they are told about the past. She is pleased that there is such a 'huge interest' in history books and television programmes at the moment, and that people are excited by the subject. The importance of holding on to personal and public history is a theme that runs through much of her work.



Illustration of Tara sitting in the pear tree

However, in writing *Tara's Tree House*, Helen's prime purpose was, as always, to write a story that children could enjoy and to which they could relate. The idea of playing in a tree house is central to the book and one that children are likely to find interesting. Although the story shows that children are not immune to the suffering brought by war, Helen does not want to burden her readers with 'huge adult topics'. Hannah's tragedy is implied rather than explicitly described and Nan's experience of evacuation is, on the whole, a pleasant one. The book is 'about love and goodness and passing on stories to be remembered', and celebrates the fun that can be had when young.