

Two sleepy cats and a farmhouse ghost

by Christine Flett

In an 18th century farmhouse, beside Pleasant Bay, Hillier, Ontario, Janet Lunn lives alone except for two sleepy old cats and the ghost of an old woman.

It's perfect for a writer.

With its leaking roof and crumbling walls, she says the ghost was the only soul who cared for the house until Lunn and her husband Richard bought it way back in 1968. They fixed the place up, and although she has never seen the ghost herself, Lunn used it in her historical novel,

The Root Cellar, published in 1981.

Lunn's dark brown eyes watch the world with genuine interest. On this dull, autumn afternoon, she wears a red sweater and printed plaid skirt, to brighten up the day, she says, and munches a croissant sandwich for lunch.

Her 18th century farmhouse reminds Lunn of her childhood home in Vermont surrounded by mountains and trees, where tales of Indian battles and pioneer families first came alive in her mind. As a child she invented characters, conjured up exciting events and pictured every detail of the clothes her story-people wore. "I didn't realise it," she says, "but I was teaching myself to be a writer."

Lunn came to Canada in 1946 to study at Queen's University in Kingston. Instead, she met and married her husband, Richard. "I wasn't very academic, you see," she says. "I was a storyteller after all."

Not until the '50s when her children, four sons and one daughter, were small did she seriously begin to write down her stories. For many years, she went through what she describes as an apprenticeship, sending her manuscripts to children's magazines only to have them returned. Finally one was accepted.

"I sold a little story to the *Montreal Herald* and got twenty-five dollars," Lunn says. "Was I excited! That same day the sewing machine man came to repair the machine. Because I already saw myself as very rich and famous, I let him talk me into buying a new machine." Her hearty laughter is infectious. "On top of that, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* salesman came and I signed up for those too! It took years to pay it all off," she says still laughing. "Twenty-five dollars wasn't even enough for a down payment on that stuff."

Recently, Lunn told this story when she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Queen's, an event she describes as "quite amazing, considering I never even graduated."

For several years after selling that first story, Lunn reviewed children's books and was for a time the only children's book reviewer in Canada. But seeing several of her reviews from different publications featured on the cover of one book, convinced her this was too much power, and she gave most of them away.

She then worked as an editor for a Toronto publisher, until getting up enough nerve to finish her first historical novel. *Double Spell* was published in 1968, and is still in print.

One year earlier, she co-wrote with her husband, a centennial publication about Prince Edward County.

All writers draw on their own personal experiences for inspiration, and Lunn is no exception. "When I was ten, my family moved to the suburbs of New York City, which broke my ten-year-old heart. My sister, who is two years younger, and I cried all the way to New York. It was eight hours by train. It's a wonder our mother

didn't go crazy," she comments, laughing again.

Lunn has certainly moved around. In all she has lived in 15 houses in eight towns and two countries. This might explain why her characters too are always moving from one house to another, one country to another, even from one world to another. "I am fascinated by how time and

"There are some stories you just can't leave alone."

worlds come together — or don't," Lunn says.

In her own life, these worlds come together through her farmhouse ghost, but although she has researched all the families who have lived in the house since 1793, Lunn has no idea who the ghost is and says there is no way of finding out.

There are different theories about ghosts, she says. One is that places hold memories, perhaps because of electrical charges in the universe. "Richard laughed at me for years because I believed there were such things as ghosts, but he is the one who saw her. After that, he never teased me again." In *The Root Cellar* Lunn describes the farmhouse ghost exactly as her husband saw it.

She likens the ability to see a ghost with putting a record on a record player. "You have to have the right speed and the right sized needle." She laughs again. "I guess I'm not the right speed, nor the right needle."

The Shadow on Hawthorne Bay, also set around Pleasant Bay, is about a 19th century girl who leaves her native Scotland to travel to Canada in search of her cousin. "The heroine of *Shadow on Hawthorne Bay* is a psychic who comes from a part of the world where this is accepted and goes to a part of the world where it is not."

In some respects, as her background is not Scottish nor does she speak Scots Gaelic, Lunn felt she had no business writing this book, but says the subject matter was too compelling. "There are some stories you just can't leave alone."

Researching the book took her twice across the Atlantic to visit the western highlands and islands of Scotland.

Her latest book, *The Story of Canada*, written with Christopher Moore, illustrated by Alan Daniel, is very different. Lunn, who had been working on another novel before her husband died, found for a time she was unable to write fiction. She was therefore happy to spend five years working on a children's history book.

The Story of Canada was the brainchild of her publisher who wanted

to do a history book specifically for children. In the book, Moore's historical interest in the stories of individuals is combined with Lunn's gift for storytelling. This book, however, had several hurdles to overcome before finally being produced, not the least of which was its original publisher going out of business.

This fall, Lunn will concentrate on promoting the history book. She also has another picture book in the works and hopes to complete her latest novel.

While Lunn has never consciously written a sequel to a novel, she finds some characters do recur. "*The Shadow on Hawthorne Bay* and *Root Cellar* are related because the heroine of one is the grandmother of the character in the other." Lunn says she is attracted by the possibility of using Henry, who is a little boy in *Shadow on Hawthorne Bay*, in some future novel. "I was fond of him ... I become very good friends with the people I write about," Lunn says.

She also writes about some very good friends. In *Amos's Sweater*, a picture book for young children, she writes about a sheep who is obsessed with recovering his wool, which has in the meantime become a sweater.

"I knew that sheep, but he has long since gone to his sheeplly reward," Lunn says. "He was fourteen years old, old for a sheep, and belonged to a friend in Vermont, who has been a friend since we were in grade one together. I have a shawl made of his wool. My friend clipped, carded and spun the wool and wove the shawl, which is where I got the idea. I wondered how he might feel about that."

Amos's Sweater is illustrated by Kim La Fave, who also illustrated Lunn's second picture book, *Duck Cakes for Sale*.

Lunn is often asked why so many of her novels are written for a female protagonist, a question she finds irritating because it would never be asked of a male writer. "Does anyone ever ask a man (writer) why he doesn't write about girls?"

Recently, Lunn has come to realize she is effectively retelling history from a woman's point of view. "It never occurred to me that was what

I was doing."

One of Lunn's favourite works is a retelling of the fairy story *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, which in 1979 resulted in her first award, the IODE Book Award - Toronto Chapter. She now has many awards including the Canadian Library Association (CLA) of the Year Award for Children for *The Root Cellar* and *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay*. The latter also received the CLA Young Adult Book Award, the IODE Book Award - National Chapter, and the Canada Council Children's Literature Prize. Lunn also won the Vicky Metcalf Award for Body of Work.

In her 18th century farmhouse in Prince Edward County, complete with her cats and her ghost, Lunn is still surrounded by tales of pioneer

families that come alive in her mind.

She still invents characters, conjures up exciting events, and pictures every detail of her story-people.

Fifty years later, Lunn is still reminded of Vermont.

This is the last of our Women's History Month series celebrating the accomplishments of area women.



Janet Lunn