

Jack & Jen in Oz: Cornish themes in Fiction

Rosanne Hawke

I've just been reading the fourth book in Helen Dunmore's excellent *Ingo* series set in Cornwall. Helen Dunmore has managed what many writers setting their books in Cornwall have failed to do: to evoke the true spirit and atmosphere of Cornwall rather than just dropping a story there and hoping Cornwall's magic will do the rest. Dunmore has done her research. The language the Mer people speak is Kernewek, the ancient language of Cornwall which is being revived. Cornish idiosyncrasies are included in older characters' speech while allusions to Cornish folklore and superstition sprinkle the text making me feel like I was actually there, hearing the wind and smelling the sea. Apart from the accurate Cornishness displayed, these books are a great read written by a skilled writer of adult literary novels.

Being a Cornish descendant, I'm interested in finding books with a Cornish theme in the Australian setting. Even though over twenty percent of South Australians alone have a Cornish heritage there is not a lot written by Australian authors. Boori Pryor speaks of his Cornish heritage, but *Today Tomorrow* is the only book in which he writes about it. Max Fatchen tells me that his Cornishness influenced the seascape in *Spirit Wind*, but there is no overt mention of it. Gillian Rubinstein's *Labyrinth* and *At Ardilla* have references to Cornish folklore and the characters have Cornish names. Plus, the setting of both is a Cornish part of South Australia. When asked, Gillian said she had spent childhood holidays in Cornwall, hence the influence.

I sent an email to Jennifer Rowe. With a Cornish name like that and a pseudonym of Emily Rodda I was sure I was onto something. I love "Rowan of Rin" and surely the series speaks of a group of people who had to move far from their home to make a new way of life. Rowe wrote: It's the Australian landscape and situation that has always been at the forefront of my mind. Still, the fact that my family came from Cornwall has, in fact, affected my writing quite profoundly – in a more indirect way. When I visited Cornwall in my twenties...I had a powerful, instant feeling of being at 'home' – not in the towns, but in the countryside.' Rowe said that this experience gave her a strong belief that people and places have links, ties in the blood over generations, and she says that this idea has come out particularly in her fantasy books, *Deltora Quest* and *Rowin of Rin*.

Errol Broome, though not a Cornish descendant, has written of the Cornish in *Splashback*. Ned Manford is learning to belong in his swimming family but he doesn't like the water. While rowing with his friend he is knocked on the head and falls into the harbour. When he is pulled out he has slipped into a different time. He has been rescued by a whaling boat bound for Cornwall. The novel accurately depicts Cornish life, customs and speech in nineteenth century Fowey. The family who take him in are his ancestors and through the experience he learns that he belongs in his family. This story has been well researched to portray the Cornish respectfully in their language, customs and outlook on life.

Tricia Stringer from the Yorke Peninsula, Australia's little Cornwall, has published two books, *Boy of the Mines* (A historical story showing the life of Cornish miners in Moonta) and *Piskey*

Trouble based on Cornish folklore regarding the darker side of piskeys: that of causing mischief, especially to those who don't believe in them.

There are my own books: *Zenna Dare* about finding a Cornish identity; *Wolfchild* based on the Cornish legend of the lost land of Lyonesse, and *Across the Creek* inspired by Cornish folklore and set in the Kapunda mine. Even *The Keeper* and *Sailmaker* have a Cornish feel for they are set on the Yorke Peninsula with the sea affecting Joel Billings' character. The old sailmaker tells Joel and Mei a Cornish story of Tom Bawcock during a violent storm.

Caz in *The Last Virgin in year 10* is a Cornish descendant like Jenefer in *Zenna Dare* but unlike Jenefer, Caz is aware of it with some boredom. She's more interested in fitting in at school. Her new friend Matthew is easy with who he is. He's a fantasy buff and has books arguing the origins of Arthur, a reference to the old Cornish belief that Arthur would return. Caz has to come to grips with more than her ethnic identity, but she is firmly Australian and the knowledge of her ancestry adds to her sense of self-esteem. It is Jenefer from *Zenna Dare* who will probably go that further step of visiting Cornwall where her triple-great-grandmother originated.

An important, though less accessible, area of Cornish influence in children's literature is the work of South Australian Lilian James, who writes children's short fiction in Kernewek, the revived Cornish language. Her stories are Australian in setting and theme e.g. *An Boekka*, *The Red Dragon*, is about a bushfire. Kernewek is James' second language and she writes to add to the body of Kernewek literature for children in Cornwall and for the worldwide students of the language.

There are of course quite a few titles from overseas about Cornwall. Canadian Troon Harrison's historical novel, *A Bushel of Light*, about Cornish twins separated when one was sent as an orphan to Canada, is worthy reading. Many other titles come from within Cornwall as a list on this website shows.

When one considers the number of Australian titles showing other cultural identities e.g. Irish, German, there is a shortage of children's literature dealing with the Cornish culture. Much of this is due to the fact that many still think of Cornwall as part of England. Even Kerry Greenwood's *Journey to Eureka*, an excellent story about the gold fields of Victoria, never mentions the Cornish even though the Cornish were a significant ethnic group there at the time and still are.

I hope there will be more local titles showing the Cornish culture as writers search for roots and see the importance of the ethnic identity of young people.

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