



# Authorgraph No 48 - Martin Waddell

Article Author:

[Liz Weir](#) [1]

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**Martin Waddell** was interviewed by **Liz Weir**.

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Newcastle, County Down, is a town set on the edge of Dundrum Bay, some 30 miles south of Belfast. To people in Northern Ireland it's known primarily as a seaside resort, but it is here in a large Victorian house on the sea-front where Martin Waddell alias Catherine Sefton lives and works. On a dark afternoon in autumn, when clouds hang low over the Mountains of Mourne, it is easy to appreciate how stories might spring from such an evocative location.

Martin is an amazingly prolific author with 54 books published and some 17 due for publication, written under his own name and his pen-name of Catherine Sefton.

The obvious first question which children (and adults) clamour to ask is 'Why the two names?' The reason is quite sensible: the Martin Waddell books are very different from the Catherine Sefton books. Whilst most Martin Waddell titles are simply for fun, featuring, for example, growling budgies or green mice, the Catherine Sefton books are longer and more emotionally based, involving more adult themes such as jealousy or family intrigue.

'Sefton is a family name - my father's mother was a Sefton from Belfast who dyed her hair with tea-leaves and wore big straw hats. Catherine is a clear bright name and I wanted my books to have a clear bright feeling about them. Putting both types of my books under the same name would only confuse people.'

When asked, as he invariably is, about why he chose a woman's name, Martin responds 'Why not? The books came first, the name was invented afterwards. The name had to fit the books and I think that it does.'

Martin lived in Newcastle as a child, growing up in a region rich in legends such as Maggie's Leap and place names like Bloody Bridge, unconsciously collecting material which has reappeared since in his work. The young Martin had ambitions to become a professional footballer and was accepted to play as goalkeeper with Fulham FC's youth team where he spent a year. This real life experience has undoubtedly contributed to the authenticity of the 'Napper' series and Martin's continued interest in soccer is witnessed as he awaits the weekly match results to hear how 'our lads' (Fulham) fared!

The early determination which he showed in pursuing a career in the competitive English Football League was to stand him in good stead for his next challenge, to make it as a writer. Despite early rejections he wrote addictively and the breakthrough came with the acceptance of **Otley**, an amusing adult spy thriller which was made into a feature film starring Tom Courtenay and Romy Schneider. The success of **Otley** meant that Martin could write full-time and today the original cinema poster for the film hangs on the wall above his desk.

The first success in the world of children's books came in 1972 with **In a Blue Velvet Dress**, which was televised on BBC's 'Jackanory'. There followed another Catherine Sefton novel, **Sleepers on the Hill**; in both books Martin draws

on *real* places, changing and weaving them into the tale. 'So the *real* places I use are *unreal*, because they get all mixed up in the stories, but I need real places to begin with, if only to give me a map.'

Just when he was getting into his stride as a children's author, disaster struck when he was badly injured in a bomb explosion near his home and for a while Martin wrote nothing at all. Having taken the decision to return to Newcastle, he went on to write a third children's book, **The Back House Ghosts**, set in Ballaghbeg, the Irish name for the town. The house where Martin now lives with his wife Rosaleen and three teenage sons, Tom, David and Peter, closely resembles 'Bon Vista', the guest house in the book, and whilst it doesn't have a backhouse it isn't hard to imagine how it would feel to have to move out when the summer visitors come to town.

Today no ghosts lurk behind the brightly painted blue door, just an 11-month-old retriever called Bessie who delights in gazing at the sea from the first-floor drawing room window! Martin's study doesn't face the shore but it is here where he puts all his energies to work. 'I come to this room each day and I stay in it - by a process of boredom I get to the typewriter!'

But boredom is the last word to associate with Martin Waddell and the shelves of books which line the walls are proof of his tremendous creative output. Having all his books in front of him acts as an encouragement for him to write more. 'I have a whole lot of stories and want to get on to the next. The idea of running out of ideas doesn't occur to me.'

Indeed, gazing at the shelf full of manilla folders each containing another book, no-one would disagree! The folders don't just contain what Martin calls the 'stars' - here too are the 'corpses', manuscripts which might not have made it this time around but which could still reappear one day, perhaps as a completely different book. Martin feels strongly about his need to rewrite.

'Sometimes I completely blot out what I have just written and produce something quite different.' He admits to writing 'frenetically', mailing off five or six different things some weeks and because of the speed of his work he feels he owes a great deal to his agent, Gina Pollinger. 'I need an agent creatively. Gina has a feel for a manuscript and can spot something wrong. Because I work very fast some things can be half baked. I am heavily edited and regard the editor as part of the writing process. I spend a lot of time sitting at a desk with an editor writing, and this can sometimes produce a different book!'

Martin finds what he calls his 'bright ideas' all around. In his study are various objects which have prompted him to start work on stories - a painting, a set of plaster teeth, a boat sign - ideas are everywhere. It is this truth which Martin demonstrates to children when he visits primary schools. About three weeks a year are spent out and about meeting young people in many parts of Britain. For these visits he has devised his 'Build a Story' sessions. Children are encouraged to create a story from scratch, building up character, a happening, and adventures which arise from it. The children use their imaginations to the limit, discuss, select and reject elements and the whole process moves at a fast pace with Martin questioning and stimulating until the time limit is up. The excitement of these sessions touches every child in the class and makes great demands upon Martin who throws himself into it body and soul to the point of exhaustion on some occasions! No bland prepared speech with *this* author!

Sessions such as these have often themselves provided a starting point for stories - the tunnels under one local school providing an idea for **Harriet and the Crocodiles**. Children are encouraged to send their own stories to Martin and he makes a point of acknowledging them all. He feels that this contact with children is vital: 'It is very easy to disconnect from the reality of what kids *are* - publishers are even more remote.' This contact with children isn't just local - a recent letter came from a ten-year-old Australian girl and like the others she will receive a photograph and a personal note.

Martin works a five day week during school term to enable him to spend more time with his family. Rosaleen teaches and Martin stays at home, an arrangement which has worked well since the three boys were much younger. Eldest son Tom (17) would make an excellent press agent showing detailed knowledge of work in progress. The versatility of these two authors in one is quite breathtaking as he covers a range of themes from liberated princesses to a 'choose your own' type adventure, from Great Gran Gorilla to a little bear who can't get to sleep! Obviously it is impossible to compare

them all, as Martin says:

'They are different products, written with different things in mind.' The change from a deeply moving Catherine Sefton to a fast moving slapstick is 'like a mindwash and back again'. A stream of visual ideas can spring from a very short text, perhaps the starting point might even be lost in the finished book.

'I do start with an idea and then create people - every time people don't fit I let them go and do their own thing. The characters take over and lots of ideas go. I believe in giving children exciting stories with a strong read-on hook and often an edge of the supernatural. I believe in writing very carefully for children because they become much more involved in the small details of character than the average adult reader.'

**Starry Night**, winner of the 1986 Other Award and runner-up for the Children's Fiction Award, formed the first part of a trilogy of Catherine Sefton books for older teenagers set in contemporary Northern Ireland. 'I believe in there being a moral message in children's stories. They show a pattern of family life and how you cope with problems. Irish teenagers don't get on with living their lives, they are interfered with by side issues.'

The trilogy for older readers is intended to show the effects of the political and social situation in Northern Ireland today on young people at crucial moments in the development of their personal lives. Being a teenager is difficult enough, given modern pressures, but in these books Martin hopes to show how being a teenager in his native land can be even harder still. 'I'm aware of the pressures constantly crowding in on my own kids; the necessity of having to hang labels of identity on themselves. I've always tried to teach them to look at the views of the other side and in the books I'm preaching the same philosophy.'

The second part of the trilogy, **Frankie's Story**, tells of a teenage girl trying to cope with the difficulties of a parental break-up, squabbles with her sister and boyfriend trouble - the last thing she needs is for the 'troubles' to intrude further into her already complicated life. The story makes for compulsive reading, 'made more harrowing by the truthful observation of the contemporary scene. It makes sense that the author of such an emotionally draining book should look in his other writing for lighter relief. Leaving Newcastle the imposing facade of the Slieve Donald Hotel is clearly seen on the sea front - what a glorious idea to imagine it, as in **The Great Green Mouse Disaster**, full of green mice scurrying about. What a world apart from the daily news bulletins. Martin Waddell manages to capture the imagination at both ends of the spectrum.

### **Some of the many books**

By Catherine Sefton:

**In a Blue Velvet Dress**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 11652 X, £6.95

**Sleepers on the Hill**, Magnet, 0 416 26500 6, £1.50 pbk

**Starry Night**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 11795 X, £5.95; Magnet, 0 416 01142 X, £1.75 pbk

**Frankie's Story**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 12206 6, £7.95

**The Shadows on the Lake**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 11997 9, £6.95

**The Ghost and Bertie Boggins**, Faber, 0 571 11524 1, £5.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.1363X, £1.50 pbk

**The Ghost Girl**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 11428 4, £6.95; Magnet, 0 416 61530 9, £1.50 pbk

**Island of the Strangers**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10914 0, £5.95; Magnet, 0 416 46810 1, £1.25 pbk

By Martin Waddell:

**The Great Green Mouse Disaster**, ill. Philippe Dupasquier, Andersen, 0 86264 006 7, £5.95

**Going West**, ill. Philippe Dupasquier, Andersen, 0 86264 052 0, £5.95; Picture Puffin, 014 050.473 7, £1.75 pbk

The **Napper** books are available as Puffin paperbacks

**Harriet and the Crocodiles**, ill. Mark Burgess, Blackie, 0 216 91886 3, £5.95; Hippo, 0 590 70309 9, £1.25 pbk

(Other **Harriet** books and **Mystery Squad** books also available from Blackie)

**The Tough Princess**, ill. Patrick Benson, Walker, 0 7445 0540 2, £2.95

**The 'Little Dracula' books** , ill. Joseph Wright, Walker, hbk and pbk

Two **Great Gran Gorilla** books and **Can't You Sleep, Little Bear** will be published by Walker later in the year.

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