

# Obituary: Barbara Willard

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Barbara Willard, novelist: born Brighton 12 March 1909; died Wivelsfield Green, East Sussex 18 February 1994.

BARBARA WILLARD was the last of the outstanding children's novelists whose best stories were drawn from remote episodes in British history.

Like Cynthia Harnett and the queen of all historical children's writing, Rosemary Sutcliff, she meticulously researched her novels and they were tightly constructed. They eschewed 19th-century identification with king or courtier in favour of tales closer to common folk and their daily concerns. Loyally backed by her publishers and then by Puffin Books in paperback, she never had a mass following. Today, her books already seem distant from a children's world of video games and horror novels. But for some young readers, she regularly made history more vivid and comprehensible by describing it from the vantage point of the quarrelsome, passionate and always very human contemporary characters that she wrote about. A strong personality herself, she also created some doughty female heroines, always more than a match for the men they live among and occasionally trade with.

Educated at a convent school, Barbara Willard - like Noel Streatfeild before her - originally tried acting as a career. But after her first adult novel *Love in Ambush* was published when she was 22, she went on to write one a year until the outbreak of war in 1939. In 1945 she went to live in Sussex, reading plays while also working for the story departments of different film companies. Her first children's book, *Snail and the Pennithornes*, appeared in 1957. After that she wrote over 40 more, covering a variety of plots and settings. *The Penny Pony* (1961) describes how two small children buy a life-size model of pony because they cannot afford a real one; a situation thankfully rectified by the end of the story. This animal theme is continued in *Duck on a Pond* (1962) and *A Dog and a Half* (1964). By contrast, *The Battle of Wednesday Week* (1963) describes the conflicts raging between two rival sets of stepchildren in a modern reconstituted family.

Yet it was as a historical novelist that Willard made her most important contribution. Here she drew on her vast knowledge of the Sussex Weald where she had made her home, first in Lewes and later in Nutley. She was for some time a member of the Board of Conservators of Ashdown Forest. The eight *Mantlemass* books, her undoubted masterpiece, were begun comparatively late in her life as an author. *Mantlemass* itself was a manor farm in Sussex, around which revolve the stories of two yeoman families, the Mallorys and the Medleys. The series begins with *The Lark and the Laurel* (1970), describing the conclusion of the War of the Roses, and ends 250 years later with *Harrow and Harvest* (1974). Both families live within the forest pale, and are made up of horse-breeders, foresters and ironworkers. They talk in forest dialogue, which while not always easy to follow avoids any hint of unconvincing gadzookery. Historical issues touched on

include the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the coming of the Armada, depicted alongside strong domestic dramas involving child marriage, bitter quarrels and changing work-patterns.

The fourth book of this series, *The Iron Lily*, won the Guardian award for 1974. It has not survived as well as the runner-up that year, Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War*, where the history described is more recent and the characters and plot generally more arresting. But few would begrudge recognition for so hardworking and dedicated an author as Barbara Willard. She once described the art of writing as 'a kind of thorny paradise . . . the awful vacancies, the lonely wrestling, the disappointments'. Yet she also stressed the occasional ecstasies of the job, and the increasing pleasure and satisfaction gained from her writing as she grew older.

In 1984 she won the Whitbread Award for *Queen of the Pharisees' Children*. Although not part of the Mantlemass series, it still draws on the same fictional roots. This time the families' burnt-out house acts as temporary shelter for a 17th-century travelling tinker's family reduced to vagrancy because of the loss of the father's cart. A pervasive sense of injustice in this story is tempered by a gentle insistence that unfair situations like this can still sometimes be overcome. The dignity of the family is respected throughout by an author who never falls into the trap of making poor and uneducated characters seem stupid as well.

Still published in her eighties, and regularly gardening or walking in her beloved forest, Willard was struck down by infirmity only towards the very end of her life. She died in a nursing home set in the Sussex Weald she had described so successfully and in such depth for young readers and over the years for a number of older ones as well.