

Introduction

Serendipity

serendipity /ser-uhn-dip-i-tee/ *n.* an aptitude or faculty for making desirable discoveries by accident.

Serendipity, indeed. The word has been brought to my attention so many times that I've started to take note. The serendipity in question connects me to a rather large, bald man with a massive moustache called Arthur Ransome.

Sometimes extraordinary things do happen to ordinary people. Little girls can find themselves becoming film stars. Long ago, and quite unexpectedly, I found myself appearing in the EMI feature film of Arthur Ransome's book *Swallows and Amazons*, made for a universal international audience. I played Able-seaman Titty, one of the four Swallows. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I became Titty for a while, wearing thin cotton dresses and elasticated navy-blue gym knickers, which the camera crew soon referred to as 'passion killers'. The book was written in 1929 and although the film adaptation was made in the early 1970s it has an ageless quality and has been repeated on television year after year, typically on a Bank Holiday between movies starring either Rock Hudson or Doris Day, sometimes both.

I came by the part of Titty because I could play the piano. Although I had no ambition to be an actress, at the age of ten I was cast in a BBC dramatisation of Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*. I played a little girl from the valley of Slad called Eileen Brown. Laurie Lee told us she was the first person he'd ever fallen in love with. He knew my parents and was around during the filming since he had a cottage nearby. I'd been to a village school in the Cotswolds myself and enjoyed being in the classroom scenes, despite having to wear a drab and rather itchy green dress. I was too shy to put myself forward when the director, Claude Whatham, asked if anyone knew the chants to playground skipping games, but I



Me as Eileen Brown with
Claude Whatham in 1971.

coped with having to fall in love. It only involved smiling broadly. The difficult bit was that I had to accompany the eleven-year-old Laurie Lee on the piano while he played a violin in the village concert. I plodded through *Oh, Danny Boy* at an agonising pace.

‘Do you think you could play a little faster?’ the director asked.

‘No,’ I said, flatly. ‘These are crotchets, they don’t go any faster.’

Claude Whatham must have remembered my crotchets, for two years later, in March 1973, a letter appeared, addressed to my father. It arrived completely out of the blue, from a company called Theatre Projects:

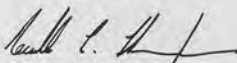
Dear Mr. Neville,

Claude Whatham has asked me to write to you concerning Sophie.

We are at present casting for a film version of SWALLOWS AND AMAZONS which Mr. Whatham is going to direct. We were wondering if you would be interested in your daughter being considered for one of the parts in this film.

If you would like to telephone me at the above number, I would be delighted to give you all the information about it. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,


NEVILLE C. THOMPSON.

Amazing!

To gain a part I had to be able to swim. I think this was to do with ensuring I would not drown. As it happened I could row, sail and swim

quite well. My parents had taught me. I can't remember Claude asking me about this when he interviewed me. He only wanted to know what my favourite television programme was.

'*Blue Peter!*'

'Why?'

'Because they show you how to do things.'

It was exactly what Mr Whatham wanted to hear. Why? Because that is how Arthur Ransome wrote his books. He doesn't tell. He *shows* his readers how to sail, how to camp, and how to fish. I had already read most of the twelve books in the series and loved the stories. What I didn't know then was the effect they would have on the rest of my life.



I couldn't envisage myself as Titty at all. The illustrations show her with dark hair, cut in a bob. Arthur Ransome had described her as 'a little eager imaginative child of about nine'. I was now aged twelve, and thought myself far more like the practical Susan, Titty's elder sister. However, I was soon persuaded that I could climb into the character and *play* the part of Titty. I took this assurance on board and did my best to behave like a nine-year-old with a vivid imagination. Thankfully they cut my straggly blonde hair, and I soon started singing out the dialogue that I already knew off by heart from reading the book: 'I expect someone hid on the island hundreds and hundreds of years ago.'

While Arthur Ransome was obviously impervious to the cold, I was not. I shivered terribly in the sleeveless cotton dress I was given to wear as we sailed off to Wild Cat Island, but otherwise I enjoyed playing Titty and soon became her in every way. She was a child who took to telling stories and drawing maps, her mind entering that of an imperialist explorer of the early twentieth century.

‘Here we are, intrepid explorers, making the first ever way into uncharted waters. What mysteries will they hold for us? What dark secrets shall be revealed?’ Titty wondered, transforming the English Lake District into an exotic land inhabited by natives and savages, some of whom used bows and arrows, while on a houseboat in a desolate bay lived Captain Flint with his green parrot. A parrot that she wanted very much indeed.

The letter from Theatre Projects came while my father was away on business in South Africa. Mum never, ever opened his mail, but made an exception this time. Had she not done so, I would have missed the opportunity to be considered for the part. She replied on his behalf, and Dad took us all into London the morning he stepped off the plane.