

Some Enchanted Reading

>> Two children's books lost in the mists of time, a 22-year quest by an *SFX* writer and an appeal from Neil Gaiman. Jayne Nelson explains why the search is finally at an end...

Photography by Rob Scott

“Sebastian knew that magic was at work and that magic things didn't happen to ordinary grown-ups... but people who hadn't grown up yet? Well, that was different.”

– The Winter of Enchantment

Back in March 1982, I had a cold. It was croaky, stuffy and sneezy enough to keep this future *SFX* hack away from school, leaving my ten-year-old self with nothing to do except curl up in bed with some tissues, a bottle of Lucozade and a randomly-chosen library book.

The cold went away. The book didn't.

The House Called Hadlows was written by Victoria Walker. I loved her storytelling so much I couldn't get it out of my head, so I borrowed *Hadlows* from the library again a week after I'd taken it back. And then once more for good measure. Eventually I ended up reading it once a month. I tracked down its prequel, *The Winter of Enchantment*, from another library and found it was just as fabulous. Both books became part of my childhood in the same way *Blue Peter*, *Pac-Man* or chopper bikes might be part of yours. They were everything to me, sparking an interest in fantasy, reading and writing which became more than a hobby; it ended up as my career. Not that I realised that was going to happen when I was ten, of course. I just knew I loved those books as much as Tony the Tiger loved his Frosties.



Children's author Victoria Walker today (except now she's Victoria Clayton).



Which made it all the more devastating when, one day, both novels disappeared from their library shelves and I never saw them there again.

It felt as though somebody had snatched away a huge chunk of my imagination. I tried to find copies to buy, but soon discovered neither book was in print and nobody had ever heard of Victoria Walker. Over the course of the next two decades, I searched every bookstore I came across, rummaged through countless charity shops and scoured the database of every library in Britain. Nothing.

It was like my favourite books had never existed. >>

"I had to buy *The Winter of Enchantment* the other day for £63 and I rather minded!"

VICTORIA CLAYTON

Well, that was then. Nowadays, if you type "The Winter of Enchantment" or "The House Called Hadlows" into eBay you'll find copies selling for hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds. Both are being reprinted in the next few months. And SFX, as you can see, is running this feature. The reason for all this sudden interest? Um, that'll be me. And Neil Gaiman. Plus a horde of dedicated sleuths on the internet who were determined to find out, once and for all:

Whatever happened to Victoria Walker?

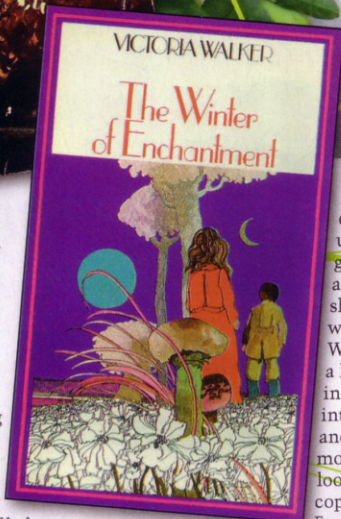
"I have heard," said the God of Winter, "that you are seeking the Emerald of the Enchanter..."

The Winter of Enchantment was published in 1969 and tells the story of a little girl named Melissa, held captive by an evil Enchanter for 100 years.

Through a magical mirror she meets a boy called Sebastian, who sets out to rescue her with the help of a cat named Mantari. A year after its release, the book was made into a charming cartoon series for Anglia TV which is so chock full o' quality you can't help but feel sorry for today's *Pokémon* and Teletubby-raised nippers. *The House Called Hadlows*, meanwhile, written three years later, flits everywhere from ancient Olympus to the depths of Hell as the children go on a quest to reunite the four elements of the Elixir of Life.

Both books are wondrous and strange, burning themselves into your brain with moments of exquisite imagery: Sebastian sharing a meal with the four seasons; Melissa having an argument with Nightmare; Sebastian playing chess with the Devil (who, rather unsurprisingly, is a bit of a cheat). Filled as they are with such creative brilliance, it's astonishing to think that they've been out of print for over 30 years and, until recently, quite forgotten.

Victoria: after three decades out of print her books are due for release once more.



Above: The much looked-for books, old and new versions.

The quest to find my own copies of the books took me up until May 2002. I'd almost given up my search: even the almighty internet shrugged its shoulders and looked puzzled when I typed in "Victoria Walker" or "Hadlows". It took a long, long time, but finally – in a dusty corner on the interweb, ignored and neglected and covered in metaphorical mothballs, I found what I was looking for. After 22 years, a copy of *The Winter of Enchantment* was mine for £42

and *The House Called Hadlows* for £80. One glance at the cover art of *Hadlows* after so many years brought back my childhood in a sugar-coated rush.

I thought that would be the end of it, but it wasn't. SFX's esteemed features editor, Nick Setchfield, decided to send an email to Neil Gaiman musing on how sad it is when children's authors get lost in the mists of time. Gaiman, to our complete surprise, had loved *The Winter of Enchantment* as a child, too. "I remember it as being utterly magical," he wrote on his website, "although the actual what-happened is a confused jumble of magic mirrors and cats and the four seasons and Victoriana." Then he went on to ask, "Who was Victoria Walker? Is she still alive? Why just those two books? Why have they both been out of print for 30 years?"

The word started to spread. Thanks to Gaiman's endorsement, Walker's books began to sell for silly amounts (the



“Sebastian suddenly had the feeling that everything in the world was much larger and more mysterious than he had ever dreamed it could be.”

“I certainly am amazed,” smiles Victoria Clayton, née Walker, as this rather star-struck journalist chats to her in the garden of her picture-postcard 17th-century home. “I first noticed all the fuss when my husband said, ‘Good heavens, do you know there’s a copy of *The Winter of Enchantment* selling in America for £200?’”

Today, Clayton is a successful novelist, penning romantic fiction for adults with a dedicated following of its own. As warm, friendly and delightful as any long-lost children’s author simply has to be, she explains that she wrote the first of the now-legendary books back when she was in her early twenties, London was swinging and she was trying to figure out where she fitted in. By

contrast, its sequel was penned on a farm in Wales surrounded by sheep, cows and chickens. With no electricity and rather disagreeable company (“We fought every day, the Polish Count and I, and it was like *Wuthering Heights*,” she declares, in a tale too involved to print here but as evocative as any of her novels), *The House Called Hadlows* was written to bring “some beauty” to a difficult time.

“My whole life was a bit of a fantasy then, really, and so these books were kind of an offshoot of that fantasy,” Clayton points out, matter-of-factly. “But I think that’s what their appeal is. It’s not that they’re particularly well-written, it’s because they sort of... tumble out.

There’s an enthusiasm and an energy to them which is of youth. Of course, that’s going to appeal to children.”

After penning her stories, Clayton put them behind her, only scratching the itch to write again much later on in life. With a wry grin, she confesses that, even with all the recent fuss, “I haven’t read them again. I’m afraid that I will find things that bother me in the language and the style. That there will be clichés that I wouldn’t dream of using now but, when I

was 21, I probably wouldn’t even have recognised as a cliché.”

Clayton doesn’t have anything to worry about. Both books stand up as well today as they did 30 years ago, although, perhaps because of their time in the wilderness, there’s a faint sense of melancholy hanging over their musty pages. “It felt a bit like rediscovering an old friend, you know?” the author confides wistfully, when asked how it felt when she heard her books were being revived. “Somebody you haven’t thought about much, and then you run into them again years and years later. You recognise the shape of their nose or their voice and you suddenly remember that you really like this person.”

What’s truly strange is that two tales of magic and enchantment were breathed back into life by something as solid and scientific as the internet. “Isn’t that interesting?” Clayton muses. “It couldn’t have happened but for the internet, could it? There would still be individual pockets of people remembering them, perhaps, as we all remember childhood stories that we loved, but nothing would have happened. The internet is absolutely marvellous. Although I had to buy *The Winter of Enchantment* the other day for £63 and I rather minded! I didn’t have an English copy in hardback, you see. I only had the paperback.”

Anybody wanting to taste some of this long-lost magic for themselves won’t have long to wait. As a lifelong fan of *The Winter of Enchantment* and *The House Called Hadlows* I can assure you that they’re wonderful because, fittingly, they’re filled with wonder themselves. “I’m absolutely delighted that I’ve given pleasure, which is what I’m writing for,” Victoria Clayton says happily. “And this has been one of the few experiences of my life that has been unalloyed pleasure.”

The pleasure, Miss Walker, is now ours. **SFX**

The Winter of Enchantment will be published in November and The House Called Hadlows next year by Fidra Books (www.fidrabooks.co.uk).

highest price spotted to date has been a copy of *Enchantment* on eBay for \$1,800; at time of writing, there’s one being flogged for \$1,200). However, the fate of the author remained a mystery for another two years. Her final unveiling came after book dealer Graeme Roberts read a discussion about her work on a forum and, curiosity piqued, decided to wade into the fray. Thanks to some detective work Sherlock Holmes himself would be proud of, Victoria Walker was found at last.

She’d had no idea anybody had been looking for her.



Above: Victoria on the dust jacket of *The House Called Hadlows*, circa 1972... and as she is today.

“There’s an energy to my books which appeals to children.” VICTORIA CLAYTON

Famous Fan Neil Gaiman confesses how he was enchanted by *Enchantment*...

When did you first stumble across Victoria’s books?

I’d have been about eight or nine. And in our local library. They only had *The Winter of Enchantment*.

What made it so special?

Mostly the way it stayed with me. I remember running across the book again when I was 12, and reading it again, and it being just as strange – scenes remained, and characters. And when I was 42 and read it again, it was just as vivid.

Which scene did you remember most vividly over the years?

I think it was the revelation of why the cat, Mantari, was magic...

Did it have any influence on your own writing?

I think so, yes. I would be hard put to say exactly how, other than there’s a sort of a point of view of the fragility of the world and of the nature of the powers beyond it that I definitely absorbed back then.

What do you make of the way the books have been rediscovered?

I’m thrilled. Mostly happy that people won’t have to pay the silly money I had to for my old copies. And it’s all because of Jayne...

Do you think the internet has opened the door for other long-lost authors?

Yes. But children’s authors and children’s books are the ones that vanish harder than anything. They get read until they get

thrown away or are discarded, and they don’t seem to wind up for sale on the internet, and when they do show up people who want to buy a little slice of their childhood are prepared to spend much too much for them.

Do *The Winter of Enchantment* and *The House Called Hadlows* have anything to offer the children of today?

Good stories and magic.

