

JOY COWLEY

A Writer's Life



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*To all those dedicated teachers who empower children
and make a difference to the future of the world.*

With love and gratitude,

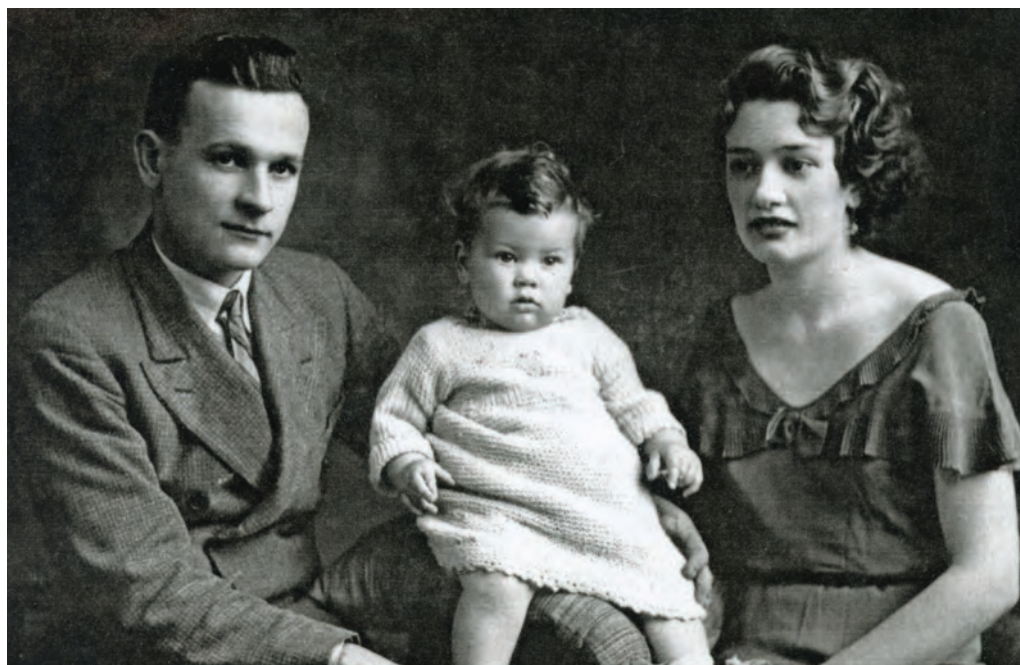
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CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings

I came into the world on a poultry farm located in a small town on the North Island of New Zealand. A breach birth and a sickly baby, I eventually showed signs of survival to my parents' great relief. I was to be named Cassia Cathrina after my mother. But they changed it to Cassia Joy. The "Joy" taken from William Blake's poem about a baby: *Joy thou art, Joy be thy name.*

All their lives, my parents remained lovely children—lit with laughter and song when they were without stress—but generally unable to cope with the burdens of poverty, illness, and five children. My dad, Peter Summers, was born



Me, at age one, with my mother and father, Cassia and Peter Summers.



The oldest of five children, I pose (right) with my next two siblings, Joan (left) and Heather (middle).

in Scotland. He was a lively man with a strong intellect and a weak heart. Mom, born in New Zealand and named Cassia Gedge, was a beautiful girl of a passionate nature. But by the time she married, she already showed signs of the mental illness that would eventually cause much hardship for her and the family.

As the eldest of five, I remember happy times—singing with my parents by the fire, going to church on the back of Dad's bike, Mom telling bedtimes stories

about David and Goliath, and Jonah inside a whale. There was porridge for breakfast, cheese on toast for supper, and sometimes pies made from the blackberries that grew by the road. Dad taught me how to whistle and tie my shoelaces. Mom introduced me to knitting and let me make gingerbread men from leftover cookie dough. But these and many other sunshine moments were punctuated by my parents' storms—arguments that escalated to violence with furniture overturned and plates broken. We would crouch under our beds waiting for the shouting to go away.

Much of the stress concerned money. We lived on a "sickness benefit" that never went far enough. I used to wonder why our family moved so often in those days. But I realize now that my poor, dear parents were probably always in debt.

My sister Joan was born when I was nearly two. Three years later came Heather and then Barbara. Brother Peter arrived when I was thirteen. My active imagination and fascination with story developed into a bedtime ritual that lasted for many years. My sisters and I would crowd into one bed where I would tell them tales about children like us who could overcome any peril. If a wicked witch locked us in a tower, we would fly away on the back of a dragon. When our ship sank and we were washed ashore on a pirate-infested island, we escaped in a boat with a chest of treasure. These stories went on night after night, and although we didn't realize it, we were using story to empower ourselves.

In the early years, the ideas were recycled from children's radio programs. Later, I would adapt ideas from books. But I was a child who was slow to learn to read. There were a number of reasons for my slow progress: several different schools in my early years, overcrowded classrooms controlled by the teacher's cane, and a phonics-based reading system that made no sense to a visual learner. Like any other child, I had started school with the expectation that I would learn to read books. That didn't happen, and by the time I was eight, I had labeled myself "a bad reader."

The breakthrough came when I was nearly nine. Although we had no school library, a National Library Service van brought books to country schools. Most

of my classmates received thick books: *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *Treasure Island*. But I was given a picture book *The Story of Ping*. I must have developed some reading skills because I devoured that book. I got lost on the Yangtze River and enjoyed the huge adventure of being lost and found again, all from the safe environment of my desk and chair. When I finished the book, I went back to the beginning and read it again. And with that, I made a great discovery. *The Story of Ping* was exactly the same on the second reading. A child who had been raised on oral story—never the same twice—had discovered the constancy of print.

It seemed to me that with *The Story of Ping*, I instantly became an avid reader. I know that didn't happen. The difference was in my attitude to reading. It was no longer about trying to guess the sounds of those squiggly fragments of language. Reading was about story.

Soon after, my father took me by the hand to the public library in our little town and introduced me to the kindly librarian who made out a card to Miss Joy Summers. Miss! I could read that! She called me Miss! I grew several inches taller, and immediately, she became my friend.

I remember that librarian when I go into a class to work with students. I always address the children as "Ladies and Gentlemen." After initial surprise, they sit up straight, eyes shining with a sense of inner worth. We have established the mutual respect that will form the basis of our session.

At the little Otaki public library, that kind librarian guided me to the meager section of children's books. After I had swept through those, she introduced me to suitable titles from the adult section, the so-called classics. I read works by Melville, Dickens, Dumas, Verne, Kingsley, Scott, Stevenson, Twain, and if I encountered words or phrases I didn't know, I simply skipped over them to chase the story. I was, however, confused by an error in a book by Alexandre Dumas. The main character, whose name was in the title, was not in the book. I read the volume twice and could not find him. He was *Les Miserables*.

The stories I told my sisters at night closely resembled *The Man in the Iron Mask*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, or whatever I was reading at the time. So did



Having been raised in a small town myself, I enjoyed sharing a story with this young student at a little country school. This school—at its peak—has had as many as fifty students.

my writing at school. I would borrow freely from books, mix the ingredients, and then cook them in my imagination. It is something children still do. I know teachers who get a little concerned at the amount of derivative writing that comes from TV, video, and computer games. They would like to see students writing creative work connected to their own experience. That will happen. But we all go through a four-stage process of development in any endeavor: observation, imitation, innovation, and creation. Students don't come to creative writing until their experience of life and language have formed the tools they need.

When I was nine, World War II ended and so did the general climate of fear in the country. We had rationing, but there were no more blackouts, barbed wire on beaches, or talk of possible invasion. Schools were still run on military discipline. We marched into class to Souza marches—left, right, left, right—and had morning inspection to make sure our fingernails were clean and our hair parted straight.

But change happened there, too, with a new wave of teachers back from the war. Gradually, the emphasis on rote learning shifted to learning for meaning, and creativity in the classroom was encouraged. By the time I was eleven, I was a confident student. I enjoyed the affirmation of teachers who saw past the appearance of poverty and were actively encouraging.

At thirteen, I was the top student at Foxton Primary School winning the Dux prize. After Foxton, I went to the high school next door. This secondary school was small, and most of its students left on their fifteenth birthday to go to work. In my first year, I was a little frustrated at being in a class where fellow pupils were simply marking time, but I was rescued from boredom by a young English teacher. She said that one day I would be a writer and I should learn to type. She gave me a big Remington typewriter so I could practice after school. She gave me only one condition—that I put the machine away in the school storeroom before I went home.

I ignored the book on touch-typing and picked away at the keys each day, transcribing my stories into something that looked like a printed page. The clacking of the keys echoed in the empty classroom until 4:30 p.m. when it was

time to go. Then I would carry the heavy machine to the school storeroom and heave it onto a shelf with several other Remingtons.

That year I learned to type, but it seemed to me that the rest of the time was wasted. I became restless and read books in my lap during classes to avoid the boredom.

One night, I phoned a friend who traveled by bus each day to a school in the city of Palmerston North. She told me that students could travel free if they took subjects not available at our local high school.

I asked my parents if I could go to Palmerston North Girls High School. Their only concern was money. They said if there was no cost, I could go. I boarded a bus to the city, found the school, and enrolled myself. At Girls High, I discovered strong, intelligent women who became my teachers and shaped the beginning of my writing career.



A Writer's Life

An autobiography for teachers and parents to share with their children.



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