

2014

# Shannon Hitchcock: A New Voice in Historical Fiction

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## Repository Citation

Hinton, KaaVonia, "Shannon Hitchcock: A New Voice in Historical Fiction" (2014). *Teaching & Learning Faculty Publications*. 40.  
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## Original Publication Citation

Hinton, K. (2014). Shannon Hitchcock: A new voice in historical fiction. *The Alan Review*, 41(2), 62-65. doi:10.21061/alan.v41i2.a.7

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## Shannon Hitchcock:

A New Voice in Historical Fiction

**S**hannon Hitchcock recently published her debut novel, *The Ballad of Jessie Pearl*. It is an engaging story that features a relatable protagonist, offers genuine depictions of illness and grief, and captures the essence of rural North Carolina. *Publishers Weekly* says the historical fiction book is honest and “gently and lovingly written.” *Kirkus Reviews* agrees, while pointing out how the book “neatly captures a full flavor of the setting and period” and contains “authentic-sounding dialogue.”

When the novel begins, 14-year-old Jessie is helping her sister Carrie give birth. Frightened, Jessie finds comfort in the memory of her deceased mother’s hope for her future. Of her three sisters, Jessie is the one committed to fulfilling their mother’s dream of having a teacher in the family. However, several matters complicate her decision, including mores of the twentieth century that suggest women should dream about motherhood, not careers. When Carrie contracts tuberculosis, Jessie’s devotion to family dictates that she put off graduating from the eighth grade and tuck ideas of attending a teacher’s college away. Through Jessie and her sisters, readers see how women impacted by tuberculosis in rural North Carolina might have lived and made decisions about matters that remain important today, such as first love, career choices, friendship, and devotion to family.

My agrarian background, North Carolinian roots, and interest in historical fiction drew me to *The Ballad of Jessie Pearl*. Curious about the route a children’s



literature author might take to become a young adult novelist, I interviewed Hitchcock to learn how *The Ballad of Jessie Pearl (Ballad)* developed from conception to publication. What follows is a profile of Hitchcock developed from a telephone interview, e-mail exchanges, and other sources about the author. Undocumented quotations attributed to Hitchcock come from personal communication with me.

### **Before *Ballad***

Shannon Hitchcock grew up on a large farm in East Bend, North Carolina, where *Ballad* is set. Hitchcock says she was a struggling reader in elementary school until two teachers intervened. One of them patiently taught her to read while the other inspired her with biographies of women as varied as Betsy Ross and Annie Oakley. After that, Hitchcock became an avid reader. Historical fiction and biographies were her favorite:

I loved all of the Little House books. I loved any kind of biography. I was always reading biographies. [And] I liked *Heidi Grows Up* by Charles Tritten. Actually, my favorite book as a child was called *Requiem for a Princess* by Ruth M. Arthur. I actually found myself a copy on Amazon . . . a couple of years ago and purchased it. That book has stayed with me probably since I was in fourth grade. I read it as a library book, and I used to check it out over and over. I loved it so much. I started thinking about it as an adult after I got back into children’s literature, and I thought, *I wonder if I can find that book*. I’m happy to say it’s just as good now as it was then.

Hitchcock's love of reading coupled with her family's interest in storytelling influenced her. She laughs and says, "[I told] one of my friends, 'Listen, my family likes nothing better than sitting around telling big lies.'" At a young age, her sister Robin began looking to her for engaging stories. Hitchcock obliged and used their adventures with horses to concoct tales dubbed "The Carolina Cowgirls." Years later, her sister's untimely death in a car crash served as the impetus for Hitchcock to put her career as an accountant aside and pursue her dream of becoming an author.

She says she reconnected with literature for youth when her son was born. "I started reading to him, [and] I started falling in love with children's literature again. I had always loved it when I was young, but you know you get out of it and you start to read adult things." As her son grew older, she continued to read with him: "If he was reading something for school, then I would read it, too."

Hitchcock says she loves writing for youth, and she believes the books read during childhood are significant and life changing. She has been writing for children for over ten years, and laughs as she explains that her journey to publication has been circuitous:

I struggled for a number of years on my own. I didn't know how [to write for publication]. I had not gone to school to be a writer. I didn't have a journalism degree or an English degree or any of that. I have an accounting degree. So I didn't know what I was doing. I was just writing stuff and sending it off to New York houses and thinking that somebody was going to publish it. I was just ignorant about the process. I did that for a number of years until I saw a little blurb about the Institute for Children's Literature. If I had just been smart enough when I first started to say, "I have a dream; I want to do this thing, but I don't know how, but there are people that have gone ahead of me that have figured it out" and sought out some of those people to begin with and taken a couple of classes. If I'd just prepared myself better, I could have skipped some of the anguish, but it was just ignorance on my part. I didn't really know anybody who was a professional writer, and I didn't have any formal training in it, so really all I had was being a girl who loved books and somebody who had always scribbled and liked to write. And it just took me a lot longer than it probably had to.

The correspondence course delivered through the Institute for Children's Literature taught Hitchcock how to write stories for children's magazines. Her teacher suggested that she join the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), so Hitchcock

got involved and took what she learned and wrote a number of stories that have appeared in *Highlights for Children*, *Cricket*, and *Ask*.

Her involvement in the SCBWI fueled her interest in young adult literature. While attending conferences sponsored by the SCBWI, she became inspired by Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* and Kirby Larson's *Hattie Big Sky*. Hitchcock says, "I just love all of these historical books, and that's the kind of thing I liked when I was growing up, too. I think that's a real clue. If you loved it growing up, that kind of book is probably the kind of book you would enjoy writing as an adult." Hitchcock started

to wonder if she could write fiction for young adults: "I wondered if instead of or in addition to doing . . . magazine articles, I could write something like [young adult literature], and so I started [writing]. I actually have a drawer full of such manuscripts."

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## From Family History to Historical Fiction

### The Seeds of a Story

*Ballad* was one of the manuscripts in Hitchcock's drawer. When her son was in the eighth grade, he was assigned a project in history class that required him to learn more about his family (Craven, 2013). While doing research, he uncovered details about the family that Hitchcock was unaware of, particularly the story about her great-grandmother's sister, Crawley Hennings, who died of tuberculosis, leaving her husband and infant son behind. The idea of her grandmother, who was 14, taking on the responsibility of raising a child perplexed Hitchcock and her son, who was 14 years old at the time. Hitchcock recalls,

All I had really were a few basic little things: I had that my grandmother's sister was twenty, and shortly after giving birth was diagnosed with tuberculosis, that she died, and left a ten-month-old baby and a letter planning her own funeral. Then the elder sister, Anna, also got sick from tuberculosis, and because [Crawley] had died at home, Anna wondered if she went away to the sanatorium if she would stand a better chance. She did go away to a sanatorium. She actually

did come home, and she lived to be an old woman. When all of that happened, my grandmother was fourteen, and she in fact took her sister's baby and raised him for about two and a half years until his dad remarried. So that was the basic outline that I had and that was really all I had.

Hitchcock began to imagine what raising a child in rural North Carolina might have been like for a teenager with a bright future. She turned to her par-

ents, who had both grown up on farms in North Carolina during the 1930s and 40s, for answers. Hitchcock's mother had read the letter Crawley left behind numerous times because her mother had kept it in a bureau beside her bed, but over the years, the letter was misplaced. Hitchcock says, "I have never seen

the letter and nobody seems to know where it is anymore. I've heard rumors that it's in a safe in Savannah, Georgia, but I had no access, so I just made up a letter."

### Setting and Structure

With the basic details of her family's story in place, Hitchcock began to plan the novel. She knew she wanted to set *Ballad* in and around her grandmother's house. Hitchcock says, "My grandmother lived in it actually until the day she died, so I was very familiar with the house." Both of Hitchcock's grandparents were tobacco farmers, and she grew up on a tobacco farm—though most of the process had been automated during her childhood. She began to outline the novel around the tobacco harvest and other agricultural events. Hitchcock decided that the novel would take place over the span of three years, so she developed an outline from January 1922 through the spring of 1924. She says plotting the novel involved "filling in what would have been going on on the farm during each month because I knew that it was going to have to revolve around the farming seasons . . . . They would be shucking corn in November. Trying to cut wood and get ready for the winter. That was the next step, kind of just filling in the calendar."

### History Is in the Details

The details gathered from her parents about living on a farm during that time proved invaluable: "[My parents] were able to tell me about the outhouse. They were able to talk to me about how if you needed something to be spread in the community, you went to the general store. Nobody had a telephone. And so those kinds of things that are in the book really came from my parents' memories." Other details came from sources Hitchcock used while engaged in research for the book:

There was a woman who was a schoolteacher in my hometown. Her name was Ms. Irma Robinson. Ms. Robinson had self-published her memoirs, but they were just delightful! There were just little snippets of what she remembered about growing up. She talked about a Christmas Eve service that was lit by kerosene lamps. Whenever I wrote the scene about the Christmas Eve service, I used a lot of the details from her book because she talked about hanging oranges on the tree with twine. I thought, *Ooh, that's different*. [Ms. Robinson] talked about the minister's face being backlit by kerosene lamps and that kind of thing. I just thought they were authentic, but really unique, details that I could use.

In order to develop scenes to indicate the severity of tuberculosis during a time when treatment was unavailable, Hitchcock turned to memoirs written by people who had actually lived in sanatoriums: "This woman [Betty MacDonald] wrote a book called *The Egg and I* based on being on a poultry farm; then she developed tuberculosis and she wrote *The Plague and I*. She was a wonderful writer, and I got a lot of wonderful details about what the disease really would have been like by reading her book." Hitchcock wanted to know more about how the disease impacted women's lives, so she turned to *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History* by Sheila M. Rothman. Hitchcock maintains,

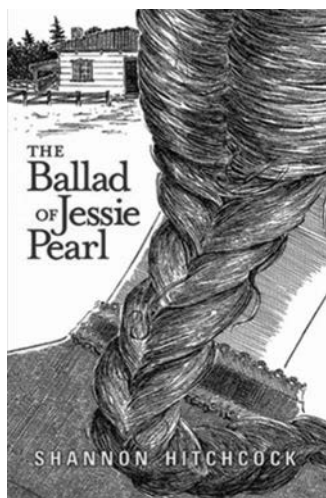
[*Living in the Shadow of Death*] is actually a scientific study, if you will. [Rothman] went through a lot of journals of people who had tuberculosis. Her book, more or less, tries to tell from a woman's perspective what it was like to try to manage the household when you had this disease. I got a lot of details from that book. For example, if a woman hadn't been diagnosed yet, but had tuberculosis and then got pregnant, the symptoms could be masked so that she would appear very well during the pregnancy, but after she gave birth, it would just come with a vengeance. That was really a model from what had happened in my family

for the character that became Carrie in the book. [Carrie] was well during the pregnancy and then afterwards got very sick and died when her son was ten months old. So [reading about how tuberculosis affected pregnant women] was really helpful to me.

During the six months she spent researching, Hitchcock also read materials from the historical society in East Bend, North Carolina, and novels set in North Carolina: “I read *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe again because it’s the same time period. It’s [set] in the 1920s, and it also has quite a bit about tuberculosis in there because it’s set in Asheville. After that, I just started to write kind of through trial and error.”

### Road to Publication

*Ballad* found a home when Hitchcock went to a Highlights Foundation workshop and met Stephen Roxburgh. Roxburgh, who had recently formed his own publishing company called Namelos, was tasked with



commenting on Hitchcock’s manuscript. Hitchcock explains, “[Stephen Roxburgh] had read [my manuscript] before I got there and had marked it up. When I sat down with him, he said, ‘You know, this novel is delicious, and it’s exactly the kind of thing I’m looking to publish,’ and I was shocked!” It took time before *Ballad* was ac-

tually ready for its debut. The period from conception to promise of publication seemed long. Hitchcock had spent six months researching, four months writing, six months percolating while the draft sat in a drawer, and now, she had found a publisher.

### More History to Tell

There are other manuscripts sitting in Hitchcock’s drawer waiting for a home. Most of them are historical fiction. In fact, Hitchcock says she thinks historical fiction “will be the genre that I always come back to.” She’s working on a historical novel now based

on something else that happened to her family. During the 1960s, Hitchcock saw her sister get hit by a vehicle. Though it was not her fault, she began to ask, “What if?” What if she wrote a book in which a similar situation occurred and it was the protagonist’s fault? Hitchcock says, “I started throwing in other things that were going on in my hometown during the 1960s.” For example, one of the teachers who turned Hitchcock into a reader was Pauline Porter, an African American hired to work in Hitchcock’s newly integrated school in East Bend, North Carolina (Craven, 2013). Reflecting on her planning process, Hitchcock laughs and says, “I was off to the races, so we’ll see how [the draft] turns out.”

During a time when most recently published titles are labeled fantasy or science fiction, it is exciting to hear that Hitchcock plans to write another piece of historical fiction. And it sounds as if it will be as poignant as her debut novel.

**KaaVonia Hinton** teaches at Old Dominion University and is the coauthor (with Katherine T. Bucher) of *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation, and Appreciation*, 3rd ed. (Prentice Hall, 2013).

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