

INTERVIEW

Northern poet wins largest literary prize

In a move that will get London writers shifting their garrets to Sunderland, the largest literary award in Britain on Thursday, April 18 went to a Durham poet, specifically for living in the north. Anne Stevenson, 69, won the first £60,000 Northern Rock Foundation Writer Award, set up by the Newcastle-based bank for writers resident in the north-east. At three times the worth of the Booker prize, and outstripping the combined £50,000 Whitbread awards, it is the UK's biggest literary award for an individual writer. Stevenson has published 15 volumes of poetry since 1965, with her verse described as heart-breakingly terse and "objective". A contemporary of Sylvia Plath, she published a biography of the American poet, Bitter Fame in 1989. Stevenson grew up in the US and lived in Ireland, Scotland and the south of England before moving to Durham in 1988. She has been a Northern Arts literary fellow since the 1980s. The poet, who will receive yearly instalments of £20,000, said: "This award comes as a confirmation or affirmation of my writing at a time when I was telling myself that I should perhaps retire from poetry." Stevenson said the award was a tribute to the large arts scene in the north-east, which includes Booker prize-winning novelist Pat Barker, the poet and critic Sean O'Brien - twice winner of the Forward poetry prize - and the children's laureate, Anne Fine. Stevenson said: "Only unobservant and benighted southerners who have never troubled themselves to look north of the Trent imagine that London is and will always be the only city of culture in the United Kingdom."

Cynthia Haven: You've had a long career your first book was published way back in 1965, under the auspices of Generation at the University of Michigan. How do you think you've changed as a poet since then?

Anne Stevenson: I suppose, over the years, I've become more conscious of what I can and what I can't do in poetry. And I hope I've learned not to think of myself as the center of the universe. It's apparently very hard for people to swallow that they aren't all that important. Don't you think it's better to open one's eyes to the objective world than to become a slave of ambition and desire? But I'm not very good at saying such things in interviews. If I could, maybe I wouldn't have to write poetry.

CH: Could you describe your daily schedule?

AS: Practically nonexistent. I used to do a great many readings and arts councilings and that sort of thing. But my husband prefers a quiet life, and I myself have found that for writing, I'm better off not scooting around too much. As a consequence, my new book, at least in my opinion, is one of my best.

CH: Your new book was published in Britain?

AS: Granny Scarecrow came out last May. It's published by Bloodaxe Books. Oxford stopped publishing poetry at the end of last year. Bloodaxe is, fortunately for me, based in Newcastle Upon Tyne, just a few miles from my home in Durham. [Ed. Note: Bloodaxe is one of the preeminent British publishers of poetry.]

CH: You attended the West Chester Poetry Conference this summer. Was that the first time you participated in a U.S. poetry conference since your move to Britain decades ago?

AS: Yes, and I had pretty cold feet about going.

CH: Why?

AS: Partly because I'm seriously deaf. But I went in company with a good young English poet, Chris McCulley. It was a deal. I was supposed to keep him from drinking alcohol. He was supposed to do my hearing for me. [Stevenson laughs] **CH:** So you haven't been back much to the U.S. as a poet?

AS: Well, I gave a few readings early in June/et in Wisconsin, one in Ann Arbor, and then took part in one in West Chester. I don't much like traveling around giving readings. I sometimes wonder what people get out of listening once to poems they don't know. Even when my hearing was better, I know I missed most of what was read on such occasions. I admit I do quite enjoy "treating the boards" if the audience is sympathetic and small enough.

CH: What did you speak about at West Chester?

AS: In my "master class" I tried essentially to make a distinction between rhythm and meter. The former is a physical-cum-musical concept; the latter has to do with prosodic forms. People forget that memorable rhythms are not always metrically exact. Mainly I used examples from poems that I thought would be familiar to the students: poems from Shakespeare, George Herbert, Emily Dickinson, and most of all from G.M. Hopkins, whose ideas about sprung rhythm can be shown to apply almost universally. I also drew attention to Ivor Gurney's experiments with form and rhythm, and to the elegant free verse of my friend Frances Horowitz, who, alas, died of cancer at forty in 1983. And, yes, I quoted nursery rhymes and pop songs. It's surprising how much so-called traditional poetry is not metrically exact especially if you count stresses per line instead of feet. Once you know what a foot is in a line of poetry, it's good to get away from the straightjacket of over-strict meters. Poetry has to either sing or talk most naturally. Otherwise, it gets boring.

CH: Yet you've written much verse in very traditional meters...

AS: Well, I suspect there isn't really such a thing as free verse. Or if there is, I don't think I've written any. Readers may not always realize how formally constructed my poems are but I assure you, not a single line has ever been passed over as accidental or unconsidered. Let me show you a poem that illustrates what I mean.

[Stevenson reads her poem: "Trinity at Low Tide"]

Sole to sole with your reflection on the glassy beach, your shadow gliding beside you, you stride in triplicate across the sand.

Waves, withdrawn to limits on their leash, are distant, repetitious whisperings, while doubling you, the rippling tideland deepens you. Under you, transparent yet exact,

your downward ghost keeps pace-pure image, cleansed of human overtones: a travelling sun, your face; your breast, a field of sparkling shells and stones.

All blame is packed into that black, featureless third trick of light that copies you and cancels you.

As you must have heard, there are a great many assanational sounds there: beach, leach, repetitious obviously echoing words or echoing noises. "Repetitious whispering" is onomatopoeic. "Doubling you" and "deepens you" are chiming, rhythmic phrases. Since there are eight lines in the first stanza, all of different lengths, the second stanza has to repeat or reflect the same number. The poem is, among other things, about reflections. Then the "you... you...you" noises are important as are the repeated "cs": cleansed, copies, cancels, and the rhyming of pace and face. The effect is of rhymes running all through the poem's wave-like rhythms. I wanted them to reproduce the sound of water lapping against the shore.

CH: It also conveys what one critic called your "nervous echo, the insistent double, the recollecting mirror." He said: "this doubling develops into something between a persistent motif and a personal signature." But it's interesting you use terms like "echoing" and "chiming" where many would use "internal rhyme," or "alliteration."

AS: I rarely think of terms like alliteration, internal rhyme, et cetera. Either a poem sings or it doesn't. I am conscious of the line endings, yes, but I never analyze what is happening when I write. That comes later. As Elizabeth Bishop put it, it's too easy to talk the life out of poetry. My model is, anyway, music: that is, poems come to me in musical phrases or cadences. Some of my poems are probably just musical toys.

CH: So how do you begin a poem? How does a poem come to you?

AS: Sometimes a line just appears, but most of the time I see something or hear about something, or even read something that makes me sit up and say, "I'm sure there's a poem there." Once I've drafted a first stanza the one, say, in the poem I just read usually decide to carry through the pattern it sets up. I don't know how long the poem's going to be, of course. Sometimes I don't even know what the poem is going to be about. But by the time I've worked my way around a few drafts it usually takes me, oh, I would say twelve to fifteen drafts to write a short poem like "Trinity at Low Tide" and by the time I've found a rhythm that seems right, and I've got an idea running smoothly through it, then the poem sort of comes together of its own accord. The process is not unlike solving a crossword puzzle. No, not really the same, because most of what happens is unconscious, and most of the time you work on a poem/say, for a couple of days, very hard getting nowhere with it, or losing the thread completely...and then, you wake up one morning and the whole thing works!

So writing a poem is like conducting an argument between your unconscious mind and your conscious self. You have to get unconsciousness and consciousness lined up in some way. I suspect that's why working to a form, achieving a stanza, and keeping to it deciding that the first and third and fifth lines will have to rhyme, and that you're going to insist on so many stresses per line/ineedly helps the poem to be born. That is, to free itself from you and your attentions to it and become a piece of art in itself. Heaven only knows where it comes from! I suppose working out a form diminishes the thousands of possibilities you face when you begin. And once you've cut down the possibilities, you can't swim off into the deep and drown. Well, it's a very, very strange process.

CH: How did you begin writing poetry?

AS: I suppose my father read lots of it to us. And I have always loved ballads and songs. Those are what I wrote as a child, you know ballads and songs. I knew a great many by heart, though I couldn't recite them now. And when I got to high school, I had very good English teaching, and I spent my summers writing poems and practicing the piano and cello. At the time, I wanted to be a musician. My father was a good amateur pianist.

CH: And you began as a musician, didn't you?

AS: Well, in my teens and for two years at Michigan, I studied the piano and the cello, but I was never very good. My hearing is so bad now I don't try to play the cello, but I can still hear enough to enjoy my piano.



Anne Stevenson

Music and poetry developed together for me, and despite my deafness, I still believe that music is the finest of the arts.

But maybe something else goes into making a poet: you could call it a resistant discontent with the given thing. I've never been a quick learner, and in grade school my teachers thought I was slow, even stupid. One problem may have been, even then, unreliable hearing. And not being able to hear may have made me the kind of person who has to think about everything hard before taking it onboard. Being slow to understand can be an advantage, and perhaps I learned at an early age how to make the baffling world make sense.

CH: Music is very much evident in your poetry in its composition and sounds, even its subject matter. I am particularly fond of "Kosovo Surprised by Mozart" which appeared in Britain's FN Review earlier this year and later in **Granny Scarecrow**. Can you describe its origins?

AS: "Kosovo Surprised by Mozart" was written, as the title indicates, in April, 1999, the day after I had listened to Bernard Roberts in Harlech play K 533 in F Major. Roberts gave a series of recitals that spring centered on classical 18th, early-19th century/piano music at a time when the horrors of Serbia's invasion of Kosovo were, in Britain, nightly "entertainment" on the television. The elegance of Mozart's music has always struck me as a true artist's response to squalor, evil, and human folly. One doesn't wallow in violence and cruelty, one rises above it! Very unfashionable point of view today but, nevertheless, mine. Out of Mozart's short, sad, in many ways squalid life, arose all that magnificent music; it survives still, bringing to those who can hear it great joy today, though Mozart the man was buried more than 200 years ago in a pauper's grave.

The horrors of Kosovo on the television were symptomatic of humanity's willingness to inflict, record, and accept misery. It's easier to wallow in a cinematic hell there before you on the screen at the flick of a switch than to listen and understand the passionate compassion Mozart imparts through those "inky dots," but, really, nothing is more boring than sustained violence, nothing more degrading to the spirit, which is why, to a few, Mozart's music is like a redemption, despite the continuing defeat of the beautiful and good in a world, past and present, of terrible yet ephemeral events.

The theme of "Kosovo Surprised by Mozart" is that of "The Miracle of Camp 60" a poem about the chapel built by Italian prisoners of war in Orkney during World War II. Art of any kind, if it really is art, moves us towards sympathy, understanding, and a release of the spirit, just as Aristotle taught in the 4th century B.C., and as W.H. Auden and Wallace Stevens, with their very different beliefs, taught in the 20th century A.D.

CH: The Dictionary of Literary Biography said you have "a fine sense of the complicated differences between American and British poetry, and [embod]y the traditions of both in a poetry that achieves definition because of its allegiances, and distinction because of its intense and relentless individuality."

AS: Who said that?

CH: J.E. Chamberlin of the University of Toronto.

AS: Indeed. Well, that's quite good a bit academic.

CH: How do you combine those sensibilities? And how do you see the differences?

AS: That's not for me to say. That's for somebody else. I think I'm vain enough to believe that if anyone took time to study my poetry, they might find quite a number of things to say about...well, the kind of things I say.

CH: Do you see an affinity between your native Michigan and the north of England where you live now?

AS: Probably. The south of England, Oxford and Cambridge, are a bit like Harvard and Yale, aren't they? That ever-present, coolly

assumed superiority. I'm sure I'd rather live in an environment where there aren't quite so many tropical fish, as it were, crowding the fishbowl, mostly bent on eating each other. I don't thrive in a community of egos. Not at all. I feel the Midwest-ern part of me is the healthiest part you know, feet on the ground, common sense. But I need a lot of space, too, in which to think. I need to read a lot. I don't just mean reading poetry, but reading novels and books on science and history, lots of biography. I wonder how poets ever have time to read enough when they're flying all over the world giving readings.

CH: It's good to have time for mulling.

AS: Mulling, yes. You have to mull a lot. You have to be in touch with yourself, with your deeper self, to write poetry. Having to project yourself, as I do at readings, cheats me from being in touch with the self that writes the poems. There's one of me that's a "projector" an actress, if you like but the me that writes poems is a more difficult person. If I give too many readings, or even see too many people, I find myself behaving in ways that I fancy might please them. Afterwards, I feel rather dirty and nasty, as if I'd betrayed somebody behind her back.

CH: Maybe that's what ate Sylvia Plath.

AS: Sylvia Plath felt the same. I know she did.

Her journals analyze her social discomforts again and again. It's clear she found people exhausting, but she needed to impress them, too. Then, when she got to Devon and there weren't any people she much cared to impress, she became depressed and miserable. I don't think that's so surprising, mind you. Probably for Plath, as for me, poetry was the only language through which she could approach her emotional truth. Alas, the truths in her case were so devastating they killed her.

CH: Did you know Jane Kenyon? Of course you must have. She grew up in Ann Arbor, too.

AS: I knew who she was.

CH: But she was married to Donald Hall. Didn't your paths cross?

AS: Donald Hall was married to somebody else when I was in Ann Arbor. Jane was a little younger than I was.

CH: Tell me a little bit about your connection with Donald Hall. He encouraged you to write your first book about Bishop, Elizabeth Bishop [Twayne, 1966].

AS: Yes. He introduced me to poetry, really. I owe Donald Hall a great deal. I took his course in contemporary American poets. He was intelligent, inspiring, a fine teacher.

CH: At the University of Michigan?

AS: Yes. I was a graduate student. It must have been 1960, 1961.

CH: One thing Sylvia Plath, you, and I have in common is that we all left university, moved to England, and married Englishmen.

AS: There's lots else we have in common. [Stevenson chuckles.] **CH:** Yes. But of the three of us, I was the only one who went back. Why did you first move to England?

AS: I was born in England. I was born in Cambridge.

CH: I thought you were born in Ann Arbor.

AS: No. I was born in Cambridge, England, where my father [Charles Leslie Stevenson] went to study philosophy with [Ludwig] Wittgenstein and G.E. Moore, among others, after he'd taken a first degree at Yale. I was born in Cambridge, in January, 1933. That's why I was in such a hurry to get back to Cambridge after I'd graduated from Michigan.

CH: And your first husband was from Cambridge, yes?

AS: During the war, my family adopted two English girls from Cambridge as part of an Anglo-American university scheme to send the children of English dons to the States to escape the bombing and the Nazis' very possible invasion. Robin, my first husband, was the younger brother of these girls. He must have been nine at the time (I was seven), and he lived with a banker's family just up the street. Much later, when we were both at university he was at Cambridge and I was a senior at Michigan we met again one summer and decided it would be nice to seal the family bond. So I came to England, actually, to marry Robin Hitchcock. The marriage was not a great success, but we have an awfully nice daughter and two lovely grandchildren to share between us. We're still on good terms.

Robin was utterly unlike Ted Hughes; they had almost nothing in

common, but there was a curious connection. Robin was the son of the Queen's College rector who had died during the war. His widow, through the kindness of the new incumbent, was invited to stay on in the rectory and support herself by taking in lodgers. Ted Hughes's best friend, Lucas Myers, happened to be one of the lodgers. Luke tells the story of Ted's nights in the St. Botolph's chicken coop in his appendix to **Bitter Fame**, but even though Ted was around now and again, I never met Sylvia Plath. We were nearly the same age, but by 1955, the year Sylvia came to study at Cambridge, I was already married and living in London.

CH: Why do you think people are still fascinated by the Plath legend? With the release of the unabridged journals this year, we can see it is still pretty much a national obsession still, after forty years, on both sides of the ocean.

AS: Don't ask me. Maybe because everybody loves a romance. Why do they still get excited about the woes of Tristan and Isolde? The Hughes-Plath story is another desperately tragic tale. It will probably never disappear from 20th-century mythology.

CH: In a recent San Jose Mercury article, I argued that the frenzy seems to arise from very different national ideologies, and very divergent attitudes about personal responsibility, psychological health, and human relationships.

AS: You think so?

CH: Coarsely put, the English attitude seems to be that Plath needed to take responsibility for pulling herself together and be "a good wife."

AS: Well, she was a good wife. Maybe too good. Oh, it's very complicated. I think I've told the story as well as I can in **Bitter Fame**. Put coarsely, Sylvia was completely unable to accept failure. If her marriage failed that was it, forever.

I've read an interesting article recently by a psychiatrist who puts a great deal of responsibility on the shoulders of Ruth Beuscher, Sylvia's therapist. Ruth Beuscher, who later became a pastoral psychologist in the Church, was young and inexperienced when Plath first met her. It was Beuscher who persuaded Sylvia to have electrical shock treatment the second time, and, of course, that shock treatment became a central trauma to Sylvia later on. In Boston, Beuscher gave Sylvia "permission to hate" her mother rather extreme, don't you think, to give an impressionable girl permission to "hate" her mother, even though this particular mother, by doing right may actually have perpetrated wrong? A more mature psychiatrist would have realized that the hatred of a mother and the love of the father aren't so simple as the Electra complex formula would have them be. Sylvia clearly took everything Ruth Beuscher told her to heart. Finally, when Ted Hughes was having an affair, and Sylvia got wind of it in Devon it wasn't much of an affair; I don't excuse Ted, but you can see why he might have made a bid for liberty just then it was Beuscher again who advised her to break with Ted immediately. Don't try to patch it up, Beuscher almost ordered. She'd been through a divorce experience herself, and she knew that, once caught straying, a husband could never be trusted to be faithful again, so Sylvia set up on her own.

CH: You're taking a very English point of view. You patch things up. You make do.

AS: No. I'm not taking an English point of view. Heavens, I've been through three divorces, but I do think what you need when a marriage is going wrong is a trial separation. You don't just jump into divorce right away. If you're a psychiatrist advising someone, you try to help them put it together, especially since it was such a close marriage, a marriage of two soulstuo children to think of, too. No, I don't think mine is an English point of view. It's just common sense.

Cynthia L. Haven, a literary critic for The San Francisco Chronicle, has written about poets and poetry for newspapers and magazines throughout the U.S., including the Los Angeles Times Book Review, Stanford Magazine, and The San Jose Mercury. She has written two books on education, and has published essays, poetry and translations.

BOOK REVIEW

Everyday miracles

Mistry draws his fine balance between scepticism and affirmation, faith and bigotry, family nurture and control, writes Maya Jaggi

Family Matters
Rohinton Mistry
487pp, Faber, £16.99

WHEN *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry's second novel, was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1996, Germaine Greer commented that, though she had spent some months teaching at a women's college in Bombay, she failed to recognise the poverty of the "dismal, dreary city" it portrayed - comments later described by the Bombay-born Canadian author as "asinine".

A Fine Balance won the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and is now an Oprah Winfrey recommendation. But it is tempting to see a riposte to Greer in Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters*, with its stab at "foreign critics" who "come here for two weeks and become experts". One character has read a novel that resembles *A Fine Balance*, about the consequences of Indira Gandhi's 1975 Emergency: "a big book, full of horrors, real as life...But some reviewers said no, no, things were not that bad...One poor woman whose name I can't remember made such a hash of it...ou fell sorry for her even though she was a big professor at some big university in England. What to do? People are afraid to accept the truth."

Mistry finds truth in the quotidian life of Bombay tenements, minutely trawled through a realism reminiscent of the 19th-century novel. The focus of his new book is the tyranny and solace of family relationships, with an ageing patriarch the catalyst for both conflict and tenderness. Through one family, the novel reveals not only dilemmas among India's Parsis, Persian-descended Zoroastrians, but wider corruption and communalism. It hints at the ripple effects of public policies on private lives.

Nariman Vakeel, pushing 80 and with Parkinson's disease, lives in "Chateau Felicity" with his middle-aged stepdaughter and stepson, Coomy and Jal. The victim of parental pressure and "marriage arrangers, the wilful manufacturers of misery", Nariman is haunted by his decision to marry a Parsi widow and abandon the Goan Catholic he loved, a move that resulted in scandal and death. Coomy, meanwhile,

resents having to care for the step-father she blames for her dead mother's unhappiness. The stricken household has a foil in "Pleasant Villa", where Nariman's daughter, Roxana, lives with her husband, Yezad, and their sons, Murad and Jehangir. When Nariman breaks his leg, Coomy and Jal conspire to shift their bedridden stepfather from their seven-room apartment to Roxana's cramped flat. He welcomes the move from a home "empty as a Himalayan cave". As he says: "Can care and concern be made compulsory? Either it resides in the heart, or nowhere."

Much of the novel charts family conflicts over caring for Nariman: the cost of medicine; lack of space and privacy; the daily routine of bedpans and urinals, sponge baths and bedsores. But as the perspective shifts between family members, there is sympathy for the revulsion, pity, anger and bewilderment of Coomy and Jal at the "excretions and secretions of their stepfather's body", described in insistent detail, from the fetid smells pervading living quarters, to "little gobs of mucus" floating in Nariman's wash-bowl. It is stressed that all human beings become "candidates for compassion, all of us, without exception".

How we treat the elderly, the novel insists, is not only a measure of our humanity, but a means of grasping it. A hospital orderly bears a "smile of enlightenment" like "Voltaire's in old age". How, Nariman wonders, did one acquire such enlightenment, "here in a grim ward, collecting faeces and urine from the beds of the lame and the halt and the diseased? Or were these the necessary conditions? For learning that young or old, rich or poor, we all stank at the other end?"

When Nariman's needs cause friction between Roxana and her husband, she reminds him of Gandhi's teachings, "that there was nothing nobler than the service of the weak, the old, the unfortunate". Stealthily, even movingly, Mistry reveals small triumphs of humanity over distaste, minute shifts that signal leaps of compassion. Roxana exults that "our children can learn about old age, about caring - it will prepare them for life, make them better human beings", and Yezad comes to realise that,

with death, helping one's elders through it is the only way to learn to face one's own. As Roxana watches her nine-year-old son feeding his grandfather, the boy wiping a stray grain of rice from the 80-year-old's lips, "she felt she was witnessing something almost sacred".

Subplots revealing the encroachments of a corrupting world are less successful. There are parallel struggles against temptation for Yezad, with mafia-run gambling and "black money" deals, and his son Jehangir, who takes bribes as "homework monitor" to help his parents. The "sleeping snake" of the Hindu fundamentalist Shiv Sena fuels a subplot involving Yezad's employer, a Punjabi shopowner who insists all faiths be celebrated in his shop. The novel is not least a lament for Bombay (or Mumbai), a "miracle of tolerance" threatened by "goonda raj and mafia dons".

Secarian intolerance finds an echo in orthodox Parsis' obsession with purity, fearing "extinction" through intermarriage or migration. The novel both affirms Zoroastrian ritual and derides bigotry. Though the sceptic Yezad returns to the fold, his insistence that his sons marry Parsis threatens to replicate Nariman's tragedy. Yet while his family is baffled by this "non-stop praying stranger", the reader is aware that Yezad's fundamentalism is born of guilt - yet another response to a corrupting world.

Mistry's aim is to dignify the local and mundane. Yezad finds his son's addiction to Enid Blyton pernicious: "It encouraged children to grow up without attachment to the place where they belonged". Were they to taste the muffins and kippers they crave, they would better appreciate their mother's "curry-rice and khichri-saas and pumpkin buryani and dhanask".

The result can veer towards sentimentality or didacticism, and Jehangir's child's-eye view is occasionally cloying. Yet the novel steers clear of closure with a far from harmonious epilogue. With deceptive simplicity, Mistry draws his fine balance between scepticism and affirmation, faith and bigotry, family nurture and control. His pared-down language has an almost spartan plainness, yielding illuminating epiphanies amid the dirt and stench.

FICTION

Everyday story of courtly folk takes romantic fiction award

The historian, feminist and broadcaster Philippa Gregory won the Parker Romantic Novel of the Year award for her meticulously researched true story of Mary Boleyn, younger sister of Henry VIII's second queen, Anne, **Angelique Chrisafis**



Philippa Gregory

BURSTING bodices and randy royals romped home in the romantic fiction awards last night - but only with a dose of realism about the sweatiness of Tudor underwear and the chauvinism of flatulent, sadistic kings.

The historian, feminist and broadcaster Philippa Gregory won the Parker Romantic Novel of the Year award for her meticulously researched true story of Mary Boleyn, younger sister of Henry VIII's second queen, Anne.

The other Boleyn Girl is based on three years of archive-digging into the almost unknown story of the teenaged Mary, a pawn in the patriarchal court system. She played lover to Henry VIII and later made way for her more ambitious sister.

Under the seriousness of the historical work lie emotions that ring true to fans of modern fiction's forlorn, dieting romances.

"He caressed me gently and praised the roundness of my belly, and I stored up his words so that when my mother next reproached me for being fat and dull I could claim the king liked me this way," says Mary in one passage.

Jean Chapman, chairwoman of the Romantic Novelists Association, said the appetite for historical romance was greater than ever, and romantic fiction looked likely to overtake crime as the best-selling genre in Britain.

Gregory, who won £10,000 after the prize doubled its value this year, said that the book reflected a trend for strong heroines up against the frustrations of a chauvinist society.

"This is a story of a woman who overcame tyranny and patriarchy to dominate the royal court and eventually marry for love. My depiction of history is always very bleak and realistic."

Philippa Gregory is a rare type of novelist. Her writing is pacy, compelling and passionate, and she enjoys outstanding success in the field of popular historical fiction, with such bestsellers as *Widacre* and *The Wise Woman*. However, her versatility as an author who is constantly exploring new forms in her writing is such that, when you open a Philippa

handsome prince. Her latest book for children is a charming story of a dragon found by a little boy in the North East of England.

Philippa makes her screen writing debut this spring with an adaptation of her novel *Mrs Hartley and the Growth Centre*. Starring Pam Ferris, it will be shown as part of the BBC's forthcoming Screen Two series. The BBC has commissioned Philippa to write another screenplay for the series.

A Respectable Trade and *The Wise Woman* have both been optioned for adaptation for television.

Trained as a journalist, Philippa maintains a prodigious output in the press - as 'Kate Wedd' she used to write regularly for the *Guardian* and she is well known for her provocative reviews in the *Sunday Times*. She also makes regular contributions to other newspapers and magazines, with short-stories, features and reviews. A frequent broadcaster, Philippa is a team captain on The Heritage Quiz for BBC Radio 4.

Philippa's life, like her work, is full of contrasts. A committed socialist, she was founder member of a self-help centre for unemployed people in Hartlepool, she lectures on literature and teaches creative writing and talks to writers' circles. She is involved in a project to support the school in the village of Sika in The Gambia and has dedicated *A Respectable Trade* to the people there.

Born in Kenya in 1954, Philippa moved to England with her family and was educated in Bristol and at the National Council for the Training of Journalists course in Cardiff. She worked as a senior reporter on the Portsmouth News, and as a journalist and producer for BBC radio.

Philippa Gregory obtained a BA degree in history at the University of Sussex in Brighton and a PhD at Edinburgh University. She has taught at the University of Durham, the Open University and Teeside Polytechnic, and in 1994 was made a Fellow of Kingston University. Now a full-time writer, she lives with her family in West Sussex.