

*Afterword for **Ombra sulla Scabbia**
(**Shadows on the Sand**)*

Aidan Chambers

Books are like people. They have parents.

The mother is the author. It is out of the womb of the imagination that a book is born.

And who is the father? Sometimes, for example, it is an image — perhaps from a newspaper, a conversation, a book, a documentary programme on TV, anywhere. Sometimes it is an event in the author’s life or an event observed. Sometimes a person the author finds fascinating becomes a character in a story the author invents. You never know where the seed will come from. In their openness to ideas for books authors are promiscuous.

The ‘father’ of my short novel *Ombra sulla Scabbia* was a class of fifteen-year-old girls and boys who were not academically-minded and didn’t like reading. In fact, they didn’t like anything to do with school, which, they said, had very little to do with their lives outside school.

They would read comicstrips and magazines about sport and motorbikes (the boys) and fashion and very short love stories (the girls), but not novels.

My job as their teacher was to help them become keen readers who enjoyed fiction and poetry and plays.

But I wasn’t succeeding. And I knew why. I couldn’t find books that caught their attention quickly and sparked off their interest and imagination. One day, in desperation, I asked if they knew the kind of longer stories and novels they would read. Yes, they said. I asked them to make a list of what such a book would be like. Here’s what they wrote:

It must be short. (They meant what I would call a novella.)

It must be about people like themselves.

It must be about things they could do and want to do.

It must be written in their kind of language, not in ‘posh’ language. (They meant ‘literary’ and old-fashioned style.)

It must be in short chapters so they didn’t have to read too much at a time.

I understood, because I had had the same problem when I was their age. It wasn't until I found novels about people like myself and my life and background that I became a serious reader of literature.

In talking about their list, one of the boys said, 'This town is boring. There's nothing to do. It's like a little island. The things we want to do happen in cities, not here.'

His remark was the father of my story.

I'd been trying to be a writer since I was fifteen. Now I was twenty-nine and had had nothing published. I was beginning to think I would never make it.

When I read my pupils' list I thought: I want to be a writer but can't get published. My pupils can't find the books they would read. So why don't I write a book for them like the ones they say they want?

That was when the image of living on a small island entered my imagination, where a story grew, about a teenage boy and his girlfriend, their ups and downs with families and friends. Not a story about school but about the part-time jobs they did, just like my pupils, about how they split up when the girl went to work in a city, how the boy followed her and took a job so that he could try to get together with her again. A story about leaving home and fending for yourself for the first time in a strange place, and what both the boy and the girl learned about themselves and each other during that difficult time, and what happened to them afterwards.

My main aim was, of course, to write as good a book as I possibly could. But my other aim, equally important to me, was to write about the everyday life of people like my pupils, who thought themselves boring, and show by the way the story was told how their everyday life, far from being boring, was interesting and extraordinary.

After many drafts and a lot of revision, the story became *Ombra sulla Scabbia*.

I'd intended to make homemade copies to give to my pupils. A book for them only. But on the spur of the moment, I decided to send it to a publisher, just in case. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. They could only say 'No' again, as they had in the past. But wonder of wonders this time they said 'Yes'! And a few months later it was published. The strange unmatched joy of holding in your eager hands a hardback copy of your first novel! As it happened, typically of life, at about the same time a play I had written for my pupils to perform was also published and a year later another play and another novel. Fifteen years of nothing and then all of a sudden four books one after the other.

I felt I was on my way as a writer. At last I had become what I knew from the age of fifteen I was meant to be. Intuitively, I felt there

would eventually be a shelf full of the family of my books. And now there is. I am still grateful to my class of reluctant readers for helping me to find my voice as a writer and achieve my ambition.

So *Ombra sulla Scabbia* was my firstborn novel. Naturally, therefore, I regard it with special affection.

Now it will be read, I hope, by many young Italian readers. And I look forward to hearing what they make of it. In my visits to Italy I have found there is something different about Italian young readers. Or at least there is about those I have met, the ones who like my books. It's hard to explain exactly what this difference is. But it has to do with their passionate enthusiasm, their unrestrained openness, their interest in how a story is told as well as in what the story is about. Their questions and comments are uncompromising and probing. What especially pleases me is that they are interested in ideas and the spiritual aspects of life that I would call 'the soul'. The energy of their welcome and their bright intelligence is stimulating. After meeting them I feel more alive.

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