

MARY HOFFMAN

Oxford and Italy – two words that have magical associations and not just for me. I wanted to go to university in the first but it was Cambridge that offered me a place. My first trip to Italy was as a 14-year-old.

Now I live less than twenty miles from the city of Oxford and my daughter, who *did* go to university there and never came back, lives half an hour away. As for Italy, I go there at least once a year and sometimes as often as four times. I speak Italian and go to a class (in Oxford) once a week in Italian literature.



I was born in a little town in Hampshire which grew up around the railways. My father worked for the railways, as did all the men of the family on both sides. Just before I was three, we moved to London, where my father had a job in an office under the ground at Waterloo (which could only be reached by a maze of subterranean passages). It was quite magical visiting him there, like tracking the Minotaur in his labyrinth – though my father was no monster.

I had two big sisters who could read and I taught myself how to do that mysterious and wonderful thing before I went to school. At Primary School I wrote plays which my friends performed in assembly. When I passed the 11+, I went on to a scholarship to an independent girls' school in Dulwich — which was a big culture shock. I stopped writing for a long time.

After I did my degree (in English Literature) at Cambridge, I took a diploma in linguistics at University College London. In 1970 I started writing my first book, which was published in 1975 as *White Magic*. Since then, I have written over ninety books for children and teenagers, including the picture book *Amazing Grace*, the *Stravaganza* series of fantasy novels and historical novels, like *The Falconer's Knot* and *Troubadour*.

My husband is Stephen Barber, who is half-Indian, and we have three daughters. The eldest one, Rhiannon Lassiter, is a published writer of Science Fiction/Fantasy. The second is a theatre producer (Rebecca) and the third (Jessica) is an architect.

We moved from London to a big old converted barn in West Oxfordshire in early 2001 and lots of full-length novels have been written in my lovely new study there, which is green and white, with French windows opening on to the garden. I can

watch the birds on the bird table and rescue them if they are attacked by any of our three Burmese cats.