



Susan Fletcher

Inspiration

I FIRST BEGAN TO MAKE up stories in our downstairs loo. I was, perhaps, seven or eight. There were no books involved in this, no paper, no pencils; rather there was simply a map of the world which my mother had pinned between the cistern and the coat rack — multicoloured, tatty and huge. Three or four times a day, I'd have the opportunity to consider this map in private; I'd swing my legs and study its names and shapes and colours. And I'd start to imagine the people living in these other parts of the world.

It was, in the beginning, only the southern hemisphere that I could see; it took several years' worth of growing before I could examine the world above the equator. Thus I'd marvel at such names as Tierra del Fuego, Madagascar, the Great Australian Bight. I couldn't pronounce these places — but I could, and did, dream of what the houses might look like in them; of what it might be like to have all that cold ocean at one's feet, or all those mountains overhead. I wondered what animals lived in the Falklands or Fiji, what clothes people wore. I wondered if Australians also had maps in their downstairs loo.

Now, in my forties, I have a far better idea of geography. I have been to many of the places that I imagined, as a child — so that I've thought of my humming, nonchalant eight-year-old self when standing on New Zealand's most southerly tip. I've been to certain cities simply because I remember trying out their consonants and vowels to myself, thirty-odd years ago. I am older. But that's not to say that maps have lost any of



their childhood wonder for me. In fact, the opposite is true. I am a true cartophile these days — with shoeboxes full of Ordnance Survey maps, with antique maps of much-loved places, a world atlas that creaks when it opens and – best of all – a globe. I love maps for their own intrinsic beauty — their colours and outlines. I love them for helping me to know a little more. But I love them most of all because they are sources for my best daydreams, even now; as in my childhood, I still imagine the lives in these far-flung places. I still picture cowboys or minarets or cresting whales or the northern lights; I imagine people coming home at the end of the day – barefoot or in snow-boots – to a fireside, and I imagine the views they have from their windows, the drinks they pour or the losses they cradle. I imagine the loves and deaths of these lives. From this, stories begin in my head. My fingers will seek the keyboard or pen. In short, novels begin. And so more than anything else it is maps that inspire me: the geographical world and all its human lives.