

From the authors

I grew up in England, the daughter of a northern Protestant patriarch and a southern Jewish matriarch. Both my parents believed they were right and wronged. My mother was totally unprepared for life in a northern community where men were ‘the rulers’ of their households. My father was equally unprepared for life with a woman expecting to rule her own. As a child, of course I knew my parents were not the same as those of my neighbours. I had a different accent from my friends and my brothers were both very talented musicians who practised their instruments each evening. This marked us out as different, too.

As a child I was struck by how different the families of my parents were. My mother’s family was a huge crowd of noisy, argumentative members. My father’s family was much more closed and I never really knew what they were thinking. I can remember wondering which family I really belonged to and switched my allegiances often.

I used to visit the homes of my Indian and Pakistani friends, play games and sample their fabulous homemade sweets, cakes and drinks after school. Their houses seemed really exotic, with the shrines and incense of the Hindu homes, the Spartan elegance of the Muslim households and the beautiful, colourful, perfumed saris worn by the women. Gradually, the Asian families started to move away and into their own language/religion-based communities where it was more difficult to visit them. People looked at me strangely: a white girl walking about in ‘their’ territory. It became increasingly obvious that I was not welcome.

My friends were equally divided. The Muslims who were friendly with Hindus at school didn’t mix with them at home, while some of the class were against people who mixed with different ethnic groups and were hostile towards those of us who did. I railed against all these groups who wouldn’t just ‘get on with it’ together. I remember my mother telling me that there would always be prejudice and that nothing would ever change: it had been the same for her when she was a child. She had quickly decided she didn’t want to be Jewish. I was shocked to learn that she had been frightened into wanting to be other than herself. I’d thought my mum wasn’t afraid of anything.

It is this belonging and not belonging, understanding and misunderstanding, wanting to be ‘myself’ and learning that my ‘self’ was sometimes a separate thing from the identity given me by others, that gave birth to the questions and ideas that, over the years, have become this book.



I was brought up in a little village in North Wales until the age of 13. The languages of the home were English and Italian. My father was an Italian immigrant, my mother was half English, half German. None of us spoke Welsh, the language we heard all around us.

Acutely culturally unaware, I took the volcanic cultural events of my childhood to be simply what was meant to happen, what did happen, and I had no thinking tools at that time for analysis. Edward Hall, Hofstede and Trompenaars had yet to write their seminal books! It is with analytical hindsight that I now understand the huge part that cultural misunderstanding and conflict have played in my life, both in my home of origin and later.

My father would regularly fly off the handle. My mother would withdraw into her shell. One a doctor of engineering and the other with her PhD in comparative literature, Daniel Goleman might say that they lacked emotional intelligence, while Howard Gardner might refer to lack of interpersonal intelligence. My feeling is that it was *cultural* awareness that they lacked.

At 13, I was dispatched to spend five years in an English ‘public school’ as a boarder. The place was a ‘total’ society in that, like a naval ship or a prison, it claimed to control every aspect of life. At home, I had developed the ability to be on my own: clock-time had never seemed very important. At school, everything was measured to the minute. Those years severely imprinted me with values that I now consciously reject but which, I fear, wander freely inside me.

The transposition into a new family is probably one of the most universal areas of culture shock we experience. Upon marriage, I ‘immigrated’ into an upper-middle-class Anglo-French family. Entering this family was deeply confusing, in terms of not perceiving or understanding the web of tacit assumptions and presuppositions they lived by. They were kind, well-intentioned and supportive and therefore I could not understand the uncanny distance I felt between them and me. And I guess they, too, will have had problems in dealing with this intimate intruder.

Much of the above has always been present in my mind, but it is the writing of this book that has drawn these matters into sharp focus. How I could have spent so many years as an EFL teacher without focusing on culture in a conscious way is a matter of wonderment to me. The writing of *Culture in our Classrooms* with Gill has added a thrilling new dimension to my passionate enjoyment of teaching.



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