

THE AUTHORS SHOW – Nonfiction

Author: Ruth Finnegan

How on earth?

How did a little Irish girl from a remote Donegal cottage, later a girl in a thatch-behatted African village, come to be a celebrated novelist, speaker, and internationally-known academic author?

Impossible! - but she did ...

Though, hm, 'celebrated'? I like to say that but it's an exaggeration. True, I'm an OBE and medal-holder from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland; elected Fellow of the British Academy; one of four International Fellows of the American Folklore Society: great honours all. I've published (thirty is it?) academic and fiction books (see

[https://www.amazon.co.uk/RUTH-FINNEGAN-ANTHROPOLOGIST-Ruth-Finnegan/dp/1329916840/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1504531474&sr=8-](https://www.amazon.co.uk/RUTH-FINNEGAN-ANTHROPOLOGIST-Ruth-Finnegan/dp/1329916840/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1504531474&sr=8-1&keywords=ruth+finnegan)

[1&keywords=ruth+finnegan](https://www.amazon.co.uk/RUTH-FINNEGAN-ANTHROPOLOGIST-Ruth-Finnegan/dp/1329916840/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1504531474&sr=8-1&keywords=ruth+finnegan)), many of them prizewinning and a couple reputed to be ground-breaking (The hidden musicians and Oral literature in Africa - both inspiring international conferences); a multi-award dreamed novel Black Inked Pearl; an oratorio libretto; and a major-award screenplay

(<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:UBdxHhR9UkUJ/:https://www.gofundme.com/black-ink-pearl-film-production+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk&client=safari>).

Oh but - mine is no household name. I earn next to nothing from writing if I count expenses, so must draw on savings for my donations to charities like 'Combat Stress', 'WaterAid' and supporting a young West African orphan. But 'celebrity'? Well, not really.

Yes I did grow up partly in a far-off Irish cottage – no road, water carried across bogs from a distant well, no electricity; but a magical wood and a mother who told us of tir-nan-og, land of the eternal young, just there across the estuary where the moon rises over the full autumn tide. Then a Quaker school, escaping the dire Ulster divides. There I learned of the sound of language and music and (sitting next Judi Dench) of drama.

After that Oxford: amazing! this little Irish girl beat the public school boys with one the top three classics results of 1956! And oh that miraculous Greek and Latin literature! with me every day.

But – I wanted more. Were there other wonderful cultures in the world? My democratic convictions said yes. So: anthropology, Africa, and the multi-sensory arts of story-telling. So much to learn and to pass on (<https://www.balestier.com/books/humanities/time-for-the-world-to-learn-from-africa/>).

I now try to learn from trans-disciplinary perspectives, and, like Socrates, ‘follow the argument wherever it leads’ and ‘know that I don’t know’, true wisdom; and, in my writing, at the Open University (magnificent open-to-all learning), and in my small Callender Press (www.callenderpress.co.uk), to eschew the big-battalion constrictions and be among the advocates of self-publication and open access – of and for the small people. How well that chimes with the democratic vision from my father who fought so bravely to bridge local, national and international divides.

So, then: how on earth do we quote? Remember proverbs (so unexpectedly controversial); snatches from Shakespeare, Bible, great literature; allusions that bring depth and resonance; intimate phrases between lovers; speaking for another and so (sometimes punishably) somehow claiming their status; a way of linking past to present, present self to the past ...

What was the first written quotation-collection? Caxton print? Alfred’s Proverbs? Sumerian pottery four millennia ago? Where did ‘quote marks’ start? Follow an intriguing search through nineteenth-century novels, Gutenberg, mediaeval manuscripts Greek texts ...

I haven’t left much room, have I, for my chosen book, *Why Do We Quote?*. But that’s okay for Open Book Publishers put all their books on the internet for anyone to read for free, one of the first humanities book publishers to do so. Isn’t that how knowledge should be? (see <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/75/why-do-we-quote--the-culture-and-history-of-quotation>, or, quicker, 2 minutes with

<https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/75/why-do-we-quote--the-culture-and-history-of-quotation/>).

But I'd better obey the rules. Here's something from the book's 'Preface', a weeny bit edited just for you:

"Until this book somehow crept under my guard I hadn't thought I was interested in quoting - nor probably did you, nor, it seems, did others. Certainly I learned to use quote marks at school and was vaguely aware that words and voices from elsewhere run through everything we write and say. But I just took this for granted, nothing to be seriously noticed, far less arouse curiosity.

But then I saw how little I knew about quoting and quotation. What does it mean, this strange human propensity to repeat chunks of text from elsewhere and to echo others' voices? How does it work and where did it start? Why do people quote?

I started by reflecting on my own experience and was startled by how quoting permeated my world. This led me to enquiring how people here and now actually use and think of quotation; and whether 'current problems' (plagiarism and all that) belong just to the present century, or perhaps have longer roots ...

My book is upside down from many monographs. It goes backwards from the present to the past rather than the other way round, and outwards from the nearby to the further-off. It's in an unusual order in another way too: it begins with the personal and local rather than the conventional stuff about scholarly literature and theoretical rationale (for that - if you must - it's the Appendix 1).

I'm not sure when the idea of doing a study of quoting first hit me. But once it did it I saw that I was in fact intensely interested in it. It converged with themes with which I've long been engaged. Being drilled in the difference between 'indirect' (no quote marks) and 'direct' (quote marks obligatory) speech in my classical studies (perhaps they're not so different after all?); tussling with differing American and British citation conventions in my editing; warning students about plagiarizing in my teaching; or contemplating the beauties of allusion and the

transmission of wisdom over the ages and who controls it – all this fed my fascination with the words and voices of others. So too did the elusive question of how we interrelate with voices from elsewhere, and, something that in my Communicating book I found most intractable of all, from other times”.

Well, why do you quote? Think about it – and wonder!