

Lessons in Knitting



Betsy Cornwell '06

Jana Brown was assisted by Liz Franklin '27 and Arya Bhat '27 during the interview process as part of an Innovation Pursuit.®

THROUGH HER WORDS AND ACTIONS, WRITER BETSY CORNWELL '06 HAS CREATED COMMUNITY IN HER ADOPTED HOME OF IRELAND AND BEYOND.

By Jana F. Brown

On the inside of her right forearm, Betsy Cornwell '06 has a tattoo. Inspired by the words of an admirer of "The New York Times" Bestselling Author's work, the inked inscription reads: "From the bottom of this stranger's heart."

The words have become both mantra and inspiration for Cornwell, who has taken the message and injected it into her work as a writer of young adult fairy tale novels and expanded it to include gestures of kindness toward others.

"This woman wrote to tell me there was something in one of my books, and she had thought she was the only person in the world who felt that way," Cornwell says. "Then she saw it on the page and it turned out someone else felt it, too. That I connected with one person through my work really means a lot to me."

The connections Cornwell has made extend far beyond the pages of her six published novels. Based in Connemara, Ireland, where she lives with her six-year-old son, Cornwell teaches creative writing at the University of Galway and has cultivated relationships both online and in person through The Old Knitting Factory, a childcare-inclusive artist's residence on Ireland's west coast that she founded to share with single mothers in need of a retreat space.

"One of the biggest things about The Old Knitting Factory project is how it's connected me with other single parents, because it can be a very isolating experience," Cornwell says. "Also, the grown-up children of single moms have been some of my biggest supporters, and it's been comforting to see that they turn out to be pretty cool people."

In January 2023, "The New York Times" published Cornwell's essay "I'll Get By With a Little Help From My Herd" in its weekly "Modern Love" column. In the piece, she wrote about her career, the communities that have embraced her, and how the support she received as she settled into life as a single parent in a foreign country — during a global

pandemic — served as inspiration for her to build a creative haven for others. In response to the essay, Cornwell received hundreds of emails from people all over the world.

That she was able to further build a sense of community using her skills as a writer is not surprising. As an early reader and the daughter of a literacy coach, Cornwell became a consumer of words at a young age. "I remember being six years old, looking at books on the bookshelf, and thinking, 'I want to write books someday,'" she recalls. When her third grade teacher recommended "A Wrinkle in Time" by Madeleine L'Engle, Cornwell "totally fell in love with it, and I have remained on this children's literature/speculative sci-fi/fantasy track ever since."

Cornwell arrived at Berwick as a sixth grader in 1999, and immediately found comfort in the smaller class sizes, where she established lifelong bonds. As an Upper School student, Cornwell thrived in English and French, founded a foreign film club, and directed a production of Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap." She credits her Berwick college advisor, Moira McKinnon '88, for pointing her to Smith College, where Cornwell earned a B.A. in English and completed a special project in folklore and fairy tales.

It was at Smith that she wrote her first novel, "Tides," a retelling of an Irish fairy tale called "The Selkie Bride" with a message of acceptance. Cornwell sold "Tides" while she was earning an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Notre Dame. She signed a two-book publishing contract with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and used the money to finance a research trip to Ireland.

Though she only intended to stay in the country for a few months, Cornwell met and married a "handsome Irish horse trainer." They have since divorced, and Cornwell has remained in the Republic of Ireland to raise her son. In her "Modern Love" column, Cornwell opened up about the abusive relationship with her ex, and the unexpected community of friends — old and new — who nurtured her back to herself and inspired her to purchase the converted knitting factory, where she now hosts women and children who find themselves in situations similar to her own. To make the dream a reality, Cornwell had to raise funds to cover the initial costs of the rent-to-own plan.

"My friends from Berwick were my first supporters of the crowdfunding project, so those connections and the community really do stay with you," Cornwell says. "Berwick is a foundational part of the life I have now. Last year, I [hosted] an amazing woman from Sudan who came to Northern Ireland as a refugee with her two young kids and is now working for an NGO in Belfast. This winter, I have a Navajo single mom and her three kids from the U.S. coming to stay at the Knitting Factory. I'm very proud of that."

In a departure from her previously published works, Cornwell is currently drafting a memoir, her first book for the adult market, in which she will recount her experiences of single parenthood. While intended to entertain young readers, her series of fairy tales for the 12+ age group is also laden with messages meant to inspire. For example, Cornwell's second novel, "Mechanica," is a retelling of "Cinderella" — with an empowering twist.

"I started seeing fairy tales as these machines that drive everyone toward the same ending; you marry the prince and live happily ever after," she says. "My Cinderella character is an inventor and a mechanic because I wanted a Cinderella who could reach inside the machine of her own story, take it apart, and rebuild it as something that works for her rather than this one-size-fits-all happy ending. One of the big lessons I learned...from my experience of single parenting is that you are safer and better off in community."

FROM THE AUTHOR

