

John Cooley was an old friend of Laura C. Stevenson's family. "He bought me my stuffed animals," she said quietly, fondly. And when Laura was a young mother, "although he wasn't really at ease with children John would say, 'Here, let me feed the kids'... I just cried."

John, however, was exhibiting signs of Alzheimer's. On one occasion, "he didn't recognise me; thought I was my sister, and that my children were hers." Years later, after her academic career at Michigan and Yale universities had been interrupted by various vicissitudes, a divorce among them, Laura received notification that John C. Cooley had died, and had left her \$10,000. "The money," she added with a decisive nod, "came when I was really broke", at a time when, as "a single working mum", she was cleaning houses to help pay the bills.

Her novel *All The King's Horses* is about Alzheimer's – a bare statement of fact that totally fails to convey anything about the book's achievement. With one bound – vivacity of imagination hand-in-hand with clear-cut, lucid writing – Laura C. Stevenson has subsumed an 'unspeakable' subject into the stuff of a teenage novel full of power, excitement, pertinent observation, humour (the book is anything but gloomy) and sheer readability,

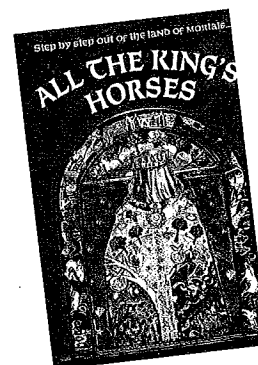
"I take a long time to finish my books," she said, with a droll look. "Publishers want one every eighteen months!" She is currently working on a book about Victorian children's literature.

Laura was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, into a literary and musical family. Her father was a philosopher, her mother wrote and told stories; one of her sisters is the poet Anne Stevenson, another is a violinist. From a young age Laura, too, played the violin, and was (as witness the number of horses, real and mythical, in the book) a keen equestrian – 'though not,' she was eager to point out, "horsey" in the English sense!... I rode all over Vermont, bareback, without a saddle. I saw it *all*," she said, with a knowing look in her eye.

Above all, she wanted to be a novelist. "My sister gave me a typewriter, and I wrote a mystery story – full of Agatha Christie. I was an 11 year old derivative novelist."

She won "quite a few regional prizes" whilst in Junior High and High School, and "I was going to be the editor of the school magazine, but Mum was ill, dying..." Her shrug of resignation was quickly succeeded by a wide smile as she disclosed, in tones of mock horror, "I got to be 19 and I *hadn't written the Great American Novel!*"

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All the King's Horses
£4.99
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From the mid-70s Laura began to have hearing problems; she learnt, for example, that she was playing the violin out of tune. "I had *no idea*," she said, and her startled expression recalled the shock of that revelation. She won a Mellon Faculty Fellowship at Harvard in the early 80s, and by the time her first book – *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature*, based on her dissertation – was published, she "went deaf". It had been, she said, "a gradual process; from the bottom up".

In 1986, Laura returned to academia, to teach at Marlboro College, where she is still co-chair of the writing programme. ("Each freshman has to write ten pages of comprehensible work, or – out they go!" she confided in a half-serious aside.) "At first I taught with an FM receiver. That's OK with residual hearing. But residual hearing" – she made an incisive scissoring motion with both hands – "gone."

Laura and her husband, the poet and playwright Franklin Reeve, live in Vermont but have an apartment in New York's West 70s, and it was here that I met her. Our chat took place at the living-room table: me typing onto her computer, she delivering pithy replies with unstinting verbal energy and panache (plus, it has to be said, the graciousness to overlook my frequent – embarrassing – typing-errors), supported by an impressive array of cogent, eloquent gestures. Franklin remained discreetly on hand, but Laura's proficiency ("It's how I live professionally, so I'm used to it," she cheerfully explained) ensured that his assistance was under-used.

Whatever hardships Laura has faced – lean times in general, the onset of deafness, and Repeated Stress Syndrome (not only was she "a violinist who'd gone deaf, but a novelist who couldn't type!") – she has retained a robust sense of humour and a sensitive awareness of and interest in other people.

And it comes as no surprise that she has donated the equivalent of John C. Cooley's original "legacy" from her advance on *All The King's Horses* to the Alzheimer's Association, which is combating the disease that took from John every dignity – except, as Grandpa says, *'the dignity of being loved'*.

Chris Stephenson

Laura C. Stevenson and the dignity of being loved

which invites discussion and promotes greater understanding.

It is a fantasy story with its feet firmly on the ground. No fairy glens with tinkling brooks here; a run-down neighbourhood, rotting warehouses, the site of an unfinished highway, a dump for clapped-out cars and refrigerators... these are the "Outskirts of the Otherworld", where Cathbad, one of its denizens, steps *'through the plastic bags and newspapers on the ground'* to greet the children.

The time, too (1957), is specific. "I purposely didn't set it in the present," Laura explained, "because people would have asked, Why isn't Grandpa with an Alzheimer's support service? – and that would have been a different novel. Besides," she added meaningfully, "I was eleven in 1957."

Two previous novels, *Happily After All* and *The Island and the Ring*, have been shortlisted for nine children's book awards.

