

Biography: Nancy Farmer

JULY 9, 1941- Author of: *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm*

I GREW UP in a hotel on the Arizona/Mexico border. The guests included retired railroad men, rodeo riders and the circus crowd. I remember cages of lions and wolves in the parking lot. Once, when I was nine, the circus vet invited me to attend an elephant autopsy and he discovered that the animal had two hearts.

Life there was a wonderful preparation for writing. I worked at the desk from age nine, renting rooms and listening to the stories the patrons told each other. One man, who only had one eye, told me he lost the other in a fight with a grizzly bear. He had a picture of the stuffed grizzly in front of a trading post.



The only writer in the hotel was a man who wrote a western every month and was paid \$300, a decent salary in those days. He lived on egg sandwiches and whiskey. One of my jobs was to make sure he got enough sandwiches to dilute the whiskey. Seeing him slumped over the typewriter day after day made me decide that writing was a lousy job.

After finishing college, I joined the Peace Corps and went to India. I was trained to speak Hindi and to teach English. Due to an administrative error I was sent to an area where they threw rocks at anyone who spoke Hindi. They wanted a chemistry teacher. I taught chemistry because I could read the textbooks faster than they could. Back in the U.S. I got a job as an insect pathology technician. I had never taken entomology. All I knew was that bugs had more legs than cows, but my boss wanted someone who wouldn't talk back to him. He wanted to supply all the information. This was fine with me. He was an excellent teacher.

If one is interested in bugs, the natural place to visit is Africa, which has the biggest and meanest bugs in the world. I bought a ticket and \$500 worth of traveler's checks. I wound up running a lab on Lake Cabora Bassa in Mozambique. This was an absolutely wonderful job. I spent two weeks every month sailing around the lake in a little boat in the wildest country that exists on the planet. One of my chores was to visit remote villages, to be sure their water supplies were safe. I saw a lot of things that were completely mysterious. African culture is extremely complicated, and I don't consider myself an expert even after twenty years.

When this contract ran out, I went to Zimbabwe. Someone introduced me to Harold Farmer, who taught English at the University. He proposed after about a week and we have been happily married for eighteen years. We have one son, Daniel.

Oh, yes. How did I decide writing wasn't a lousy job? When Daniel was four, while I was reading a novel, the feeling came over me that I could create the same kind of thing. I sat down almost in a trance and produced a short story. It wasn't good, but it was fun. I was forty years old.

Since that time I have been absolutely possessed with the desire to write. I can't explain it, only that everything up to then was a preparation for my real vocation.

Nancy Farmer was born in Phoenix, Arizona. She received a B.A. degree from Reed College in Oregon in 1963. She served in the Peace Corps in India from 1963 to 1965. She studied chemistry at Merritt College in Oakland and the University of California at Berkeley from 1969 to 1971. She worked as a lab technician, in Zimbabwe, from 1975 to 1978. She married in 1976 and her son was born in 1978. She then became a freelance writer. She returned to scientific work at Stanford University Medical School, from 1991 to 1992.

Farmer has had several books for children published in Africa. Lorelei was published in 1988. Tapiwa's Uncle, a former version of Do You Know Me, was published in 1992. A shorter version of The Ear, the Eye and the Arm was published in Zimbabwe in 1989. Farmer also wrote a picture book called Tsitsi's Skirt, published in Zimbabwe in 1988, and she wrote stories for many readers for the fourth, fifth, and seventh grades that were published in Zimbabwe.

In 1987 she won the Gold Award for a short story submitted to the Writers of the Future Contest held by Bridge Publications. The prize money allowed her and her family to move to California. She received a National Endowment for the Arts grant for 1992. Farmer has had her stories anthologized in Writers of the Future Anthology #4 and Best Horror and Fantasy of 1992. She is also working on a children's novel, several picture books, and a book of adult science fiction. She is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.

The Ear, the Eye and the Arm was named an Honor Book in the 1995 Newbery Awards by the American Library Association. The book was also named a Notable Book and a Best Book for Young Adults by the ALA. It was named an Honor Book in the Golden Kite Awards, given by the Society of Children's Writers and Illustrators.
