

Edinburgh International Book Festival 2023 – Celebrating Joan Lingard

The author Joan Lingard was born in a taxi on Edinburgh's Royal Mile, but spent much of her childhood in Belfast, where her father worked on a Royal Navy training ship.

In 1950 she returned to Scotland, trained as a teacher at Moray House and worked in schools around the city for the next ten years. She'd written her first – unpublished – novel *Gail* at the age of 11. She wrote it (in green ink and complete with a space at the front to list her future books – she had confidence!) because she had run out of books to read. She went on to write over 60 more for both adults and children.

Joan died in July 2022 at the age of 90. Last week at the Edinburgh International Book Festival her family, friends and many fans gathered to celebrate her life and work.

Joan's friend and colleague, literary agent Jenny Brown, explained that the Book Festival (of which she herself was the first director) was a very appropriate place to honour an author who had been instrumental in founding it. Joan, said Jenny, was the voice of authors on the committee (and later on the Board of Directors), and could represent both adults' and children's writers. For the first festival Joan personally wrote all the invitations asking authors to speak, and her name and reputation added credibility to those invitations. She also believed that authors should be paid for appearing,

and that everyone should get the same fee, famous or not; they did then and they still do today. (When she later discovered that children's authors were being paid less, she soon sorted that one out.)

A fascinating slide show, put together by Joan's daughters Bridget and Jenny England and accompanied by music specially composed by Jenny, led the audience through Joan's life, from babyhood to old age. It is difficult, Bridget explained, to describe Joan

'She could be so many people at the same time'

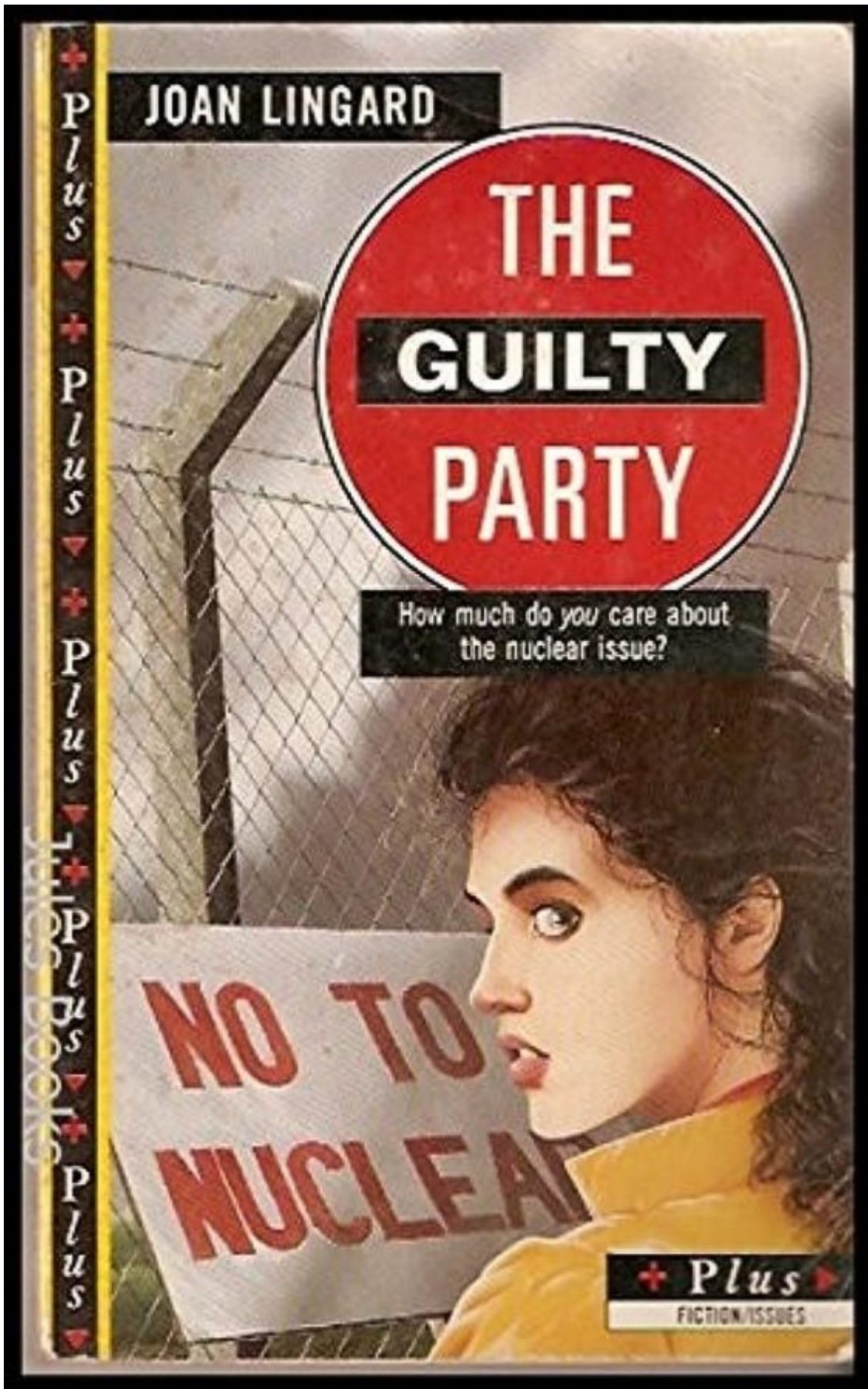
As a mother she was carefree and up for adventures, but she also worried incessantly about her children. She held the Irish author Dervla Murphy (who in 1963 cycled alone to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India with a gun in her pocket) up as an example to the girls, but she also wanted to know exactly what time they'd be back after an evening out.

Joan's literary agent Lindsey Fraser, journalist Alan Taylor and writer Theresa Breslin all spoke warmly of their memories of Joan

Lindsey first met Joan in her own first week working at James Thin's bookshop (now Blackwell's) – a week that coincided with the opening of the first book festival. Joan was a frequent visitor, calling in to check that her books were in the window

'She was courteous and friendly but it felt a bit like a royal visit..by then we'd all fallen in love with Fraser'*

(*James Fraser, a main character in Joan's *Maggie* series)



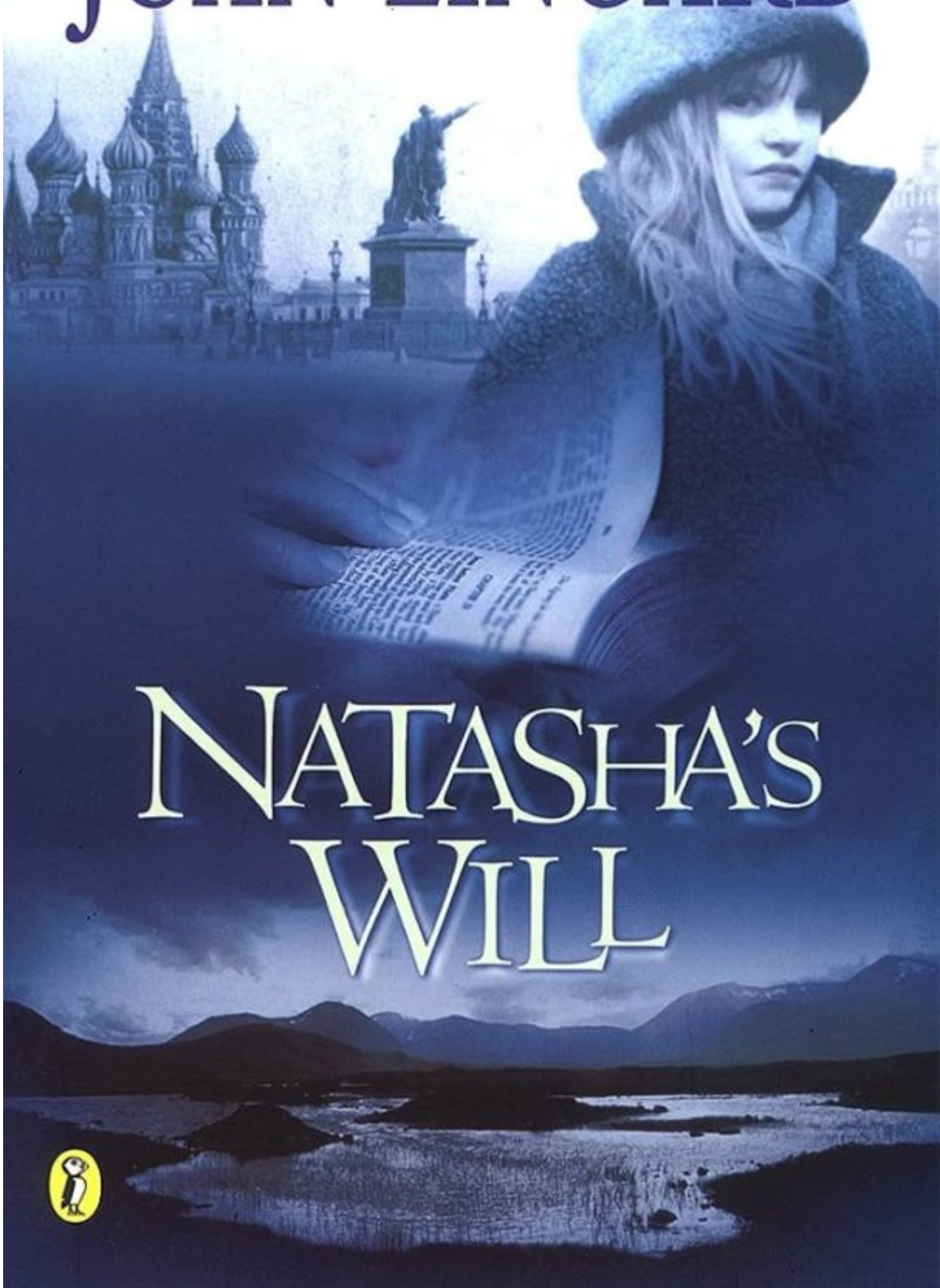
Later on they met again when Joan visited Cambridge to promote her 1987 anti-nuclear novel *The Guilty Party* (Joan was the founder of Scottish Writers Against the Bomb) and Lindsey, who

was was working there, was given the task of driving Joan around to various events

'She never spoke down to teenagers. She was very popular.'

Joan often used her own and her family's experiences as source material for her work. For *The Guilty Party* she drew on her daughter's time at Greenham Common; two years later she used her Latvian/Canadian husband Martin Birkhans' experiences as a refugee when she wrote *Tug of War*. She also liked to use settings with which she was familiar – not only Northern Ireland but also the Highlands, Edinburgh, Latvia and Spain. She loved research (and did a great deal of it for *Natasha's Will*, which is set partly in the modern day Highlands and partly in revolutionary Russia); details mattered to her.

JOAN LINGARD



Joan's writing career had taken off long before the 1980s; her first published novel for adults was *Liam's Daughter* (1963), and she continued to write only for adults right through the

1960s and 70s. Then, in 1970, came *The Twelfth Day of July*, the first of the hugely popular Kevin and Sadie series in which a Catholic boy falls for a Protestant girl. Her agent asked Joan why she wanted to change her readership – there was no ‘Young Adult’ genre then, and why on earth did she want to set a novel in Northern Ireland anyway? No-one would publish it!

A KEVIN AND SADIE NOVEL

the twelfth day of July

JOAN LINGARD

In fact *The Twelfth Day of July* has stayed in print ever since. One of the things Joan most wanted to tell young people was that they could think for themselves, they didn't

have to accept their parents' prejudices. Joan had grown up in the province (though her family was neither Catholic nor Protestant, but Christian Scientist)

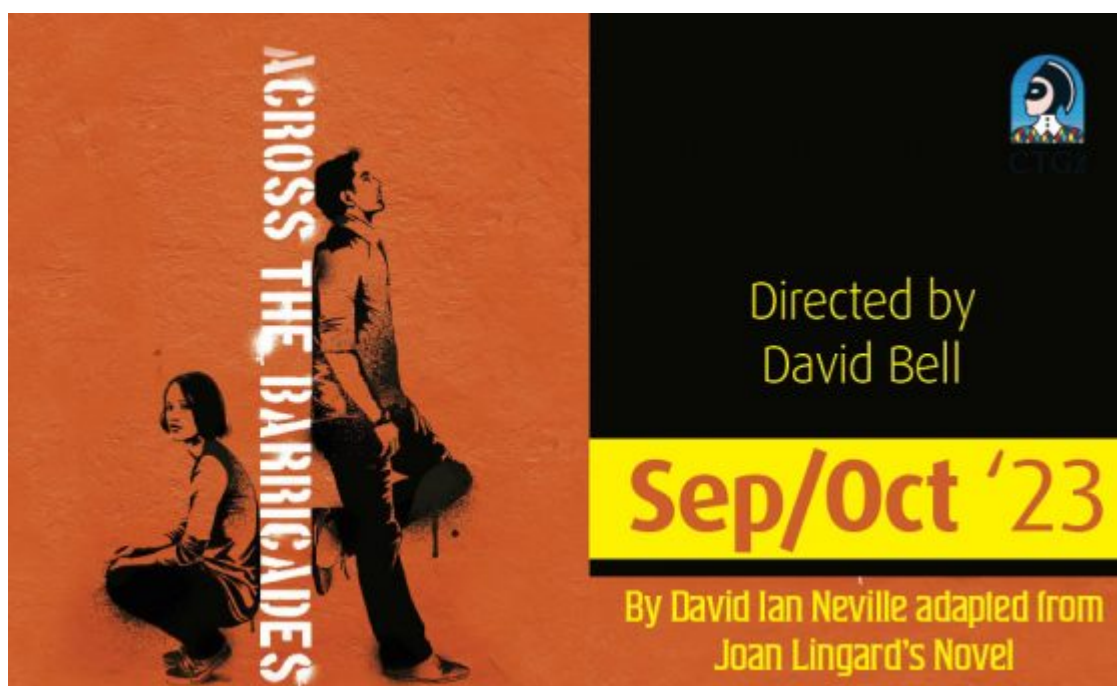
'Growing up, I felt very much an outsider, because my friends were either Presbyterian, Church of Ireland or Methodist, and each denomination seemed to me to feel a superiority over the other ones.' **

Joan wrote fiction because she felt it had more impact than non-fiction; she could 'get inside the characters' heads.'

Joan loved visiting schools, libraries and book festivals to meet her readers; children wanted to confide in her

'She loved a good long signing queue'

Across the Barricades, the second Kevin and Sadie book, was successfully adapted for both radio and the theatre. It has been performed in Glasgow and Newcastle, and this autumn David Ian Neville's adaptation will be staged in Brisbane by the Centenary Theatre Group.



Theresa Breslin spoke of her experiences while organising

author visits to schools. The area was very mixed, some parts being affluent but most very poor, with ex-mining villages and travellers' wintering areas; some children were 'very lively.'

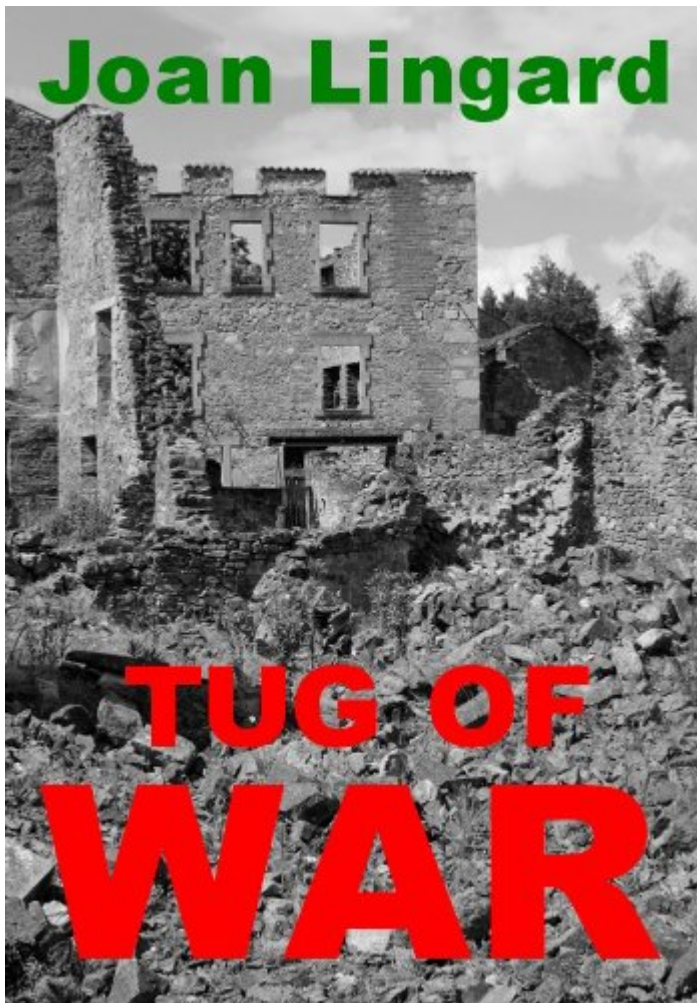
Joan had very high expectations of her audiences, no matter what their background

'She respected the children and they respected her'

On one occasion Joan read out a particularly moving scene from *Tug of War*, in which a sister and brother are accidentally separated while fleeing Latvia in 1944

'I knew the story but her reading kept my attention totally on her. When I looked at the children they were similarly transfixed. She had a command of the audience; it was a heart stopping moment.'

And Joan's books, Theresa said, are still relevant today, when children are again being forced to flee invading armies, and refugees are seeking asylum, 'They show us how those children must feel.'



Later, when Theresa was managing a Scottish Library Association project aimed at putting 30 books into every school in the country, a CD was made to introduce some of the writers. Theresa interviewed Joan

'She was compelling. She talked about prejudice, young people, and how reading creates empathy. She spoke of the power of reading and writing – "Regimes always burn books".'

When Alan Taylor worked at the Edinburgh Central Library he used to organise 'Lunch at the Library', for which he invited authors to come along, read from their books and choose some music. At one such lunch he met Joan, and she was soon asked to join the 'Meet the Author' committee. The meetings were held at Joan's family home in Great King Street

'It was like 10 Downing Street...it was the nearest thing Edinburgh had in those days to a literary salon, I miss those

days.....at that time all the male authors just met in pubs'

The 'Meet the Author' committee was, Alan said, 'perfect.' They simply invited any author they liked; almost all said yes. In 1981 their guest was Salman Rushdie, who had just published *Midnight's Children*. The turnout at The Queen's Hall was huge

'I asked (Rushdie) if he knew he'd written a good book. He said 'yes.' Then he won the Booker Prize.'

Joan persuaded many famous authors to come to Edinburgh; John Fowles, John Updike, James Baldwin. Gore Vidal and Anthony Burgess all obliged. Hunter S Thompson (Joan was the only person who'd even heard of him but she was very keen to have him) said he would only come if he got

'a grouse moor, drugs, and a round of golf at St Andrew's'

Four hundred Hell's Angels bought tickets (Thompson had written *Hell's Angels* in 1967, after spending a year living and riding with the bikers' club.) The committee waited anxiously in The Oxford Bar. Thompson never appeared; his taxi driver, plied with alcohol by his passenger, had driven the car into a ditch.

*'The Hell's Angels were delighted; 'it's a b****y bourgeois festival'*

Once EIBF had started there was a regular 11am slot at the Roxburghe Hotel followed by a boozy lunch at Martin's restaurant in Rose Street

'I said to Joan "my liver can't keep up with this".'

Those lunches, says Taylor (whose liver was clearly stronger

than he'd feared), forged friendships; authors wanted to come back.

Many audience members had their own memories of Joan; one recalled rushing to Lossiemouth Library to borrow the *Maggie* books, then later writing to Joan, who replied with a letter and an annotated list of her books

'It showed me that authors were people just like me. Her writing to me as an individual made such a difference. She was a warm human being who gave me huge pleasure.'

Theresa Breslin again

'Joan enabled children to find their own song, she enabled Scottish writers to find their own song, and she enabled me as well.'

In later life Joan suffered from dementia, and became, said her daughters, 'more mellow'. Her condition suddenly made Joan more open to singing. Jenny is now writing a PhD about dementia and music, and is undertaking the [Alzheimer Scotland's Memory Walk](#) in the Oban area in September, to which she invites anyone who would like to to walk with her.

Bridget concluded the evening by summing up the thoughts of everyone in the room

'She really did give us a love of books and I'd just like to say thank you to her.'

Joan Lingard: born Edinburgh 8 April 1932, died 12 July 2022.

**In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl*, ed. John Quinn (1986)

Image of Joan (c) Edinburgh International Book Festival