Anne Fine is one of the most distinguished British writers, best known for her many works of fiction for children.

You may have seen the Oscar-winning film comedy *Mrs Doubtfire*, made in 1993 and starring Robin Williams. You may not be aware that it was adapted from Anne’s novel *Madame Doubtfire*, now reissued as a Penguin Modern Classic. Two other novels have been adapted for BBC television.

Her exceptional haul of literary awards includes the Smarties Prize, the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize, two Whitbread Awards, and two Carnegie Medals—the last being the most prestigious British award for children’s writing. She has twice been voted *Publishing News*’s Children’s Author of the Year, and was Children’s Laureate between 2001 and 2003. In 2003 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and received an OBE. Her work has been translated into more than forty languages.

During her term as Children’s Laureate, she published three anthologies of poems for children of different ages; and created the My Home Library website, where readers can download bookplates to print and attach to their books, building up their sense of ownership of a treasured collection of literature.

Anne was born in Leicester and went to school in Northampton and elsewhere. While her father was working in Northamptonshire, the family would come back to Leicester most weekends to visit relatives. She recalls these journeys vividly: ‘The triplets had the rear seat of the car. My sister and I travelled in the very back [. . .], lying flat on our backs with our feet on the back glass, reading.’ Evidently books were already central to her life.

She also remembers that, as her grandfather’s car had an extremely memorable number-plate, people in Leicester would continually stop and point as it drove past, mouthing the words ‘Look! A1!’ Clearly she was already used to getting a reaction.

After A levels in languages and history, Anne studied History & Politics at university. Both of those subjects loom large, though often quietly, in the background of her writing. Later she was briefly a schoolteacher; then lived in Oxford, Scotland, and America; more recently she has settled in the North-East of England.

At the age of 24, she started writing a novel ‘on an impulse’ one day, when she was stuck at home in a snowstorm with a baby daughter and couldn’t get to the library to change her books. Since then, she has hardly stopped. She has written for readers of all ages, and her work is so versatile it is difficult to sum up, though it is always lucid and extremely accessible. Many of her books are meant to make us think about social issues and family relationships; others tap a rich vein of comedy. Here are a few examples.
Younger readers may know *Diary of a Killer Cat*, which shows how your pet will get the better of you in the end, especially when you kid yourself that you know what he’s thinking.

Perhaps you’ve read *On Planet Fruitcake*, which shows how children’s deep philosophical curiosity can outrun a teacher who tries to rein them in, until she is defeated and admits she was wrong.

In *Goggle-eyes*, a prizewinning novel for older children, Anne Fine explores how siblings may react differently when a potential stepfather arrives on the scene; and how we can learn to see the good in others that we did not recognize at first.

*Flour Babies* explores how making teenage boys play the role of father to a pretend baby can arouses surprising sensitivity, and put them in touch with their deepest emotions.

*The Tulip Touch* poses a thorny question: what do you do when your best, most exciting friend becomes a danger to herself and to you? Should you ever give upon them?

More seriously still, the harrowing *Road of Bones* shows an older boy suffering terribly under a totalitarian regime. Can he retain his moral sense, or will circumstances lead him to think more and more like his oppressors?

In lighter vein, *The More the Merrier* depicts through a boy’s eyes the most chaotic Christmas Day imaginable. We meet a range of human types in an extended family, who are always rubbing each other up the wrong way: the harassed mother cooking for sixteen; the world-weary father whose continual sarcasm is barely noticed; the indulgent parents of a spoilt little girl; the cousins who allow their awful twins to wreck your house; the grandfather whose only passion is dismantling household appliances; the mischievous uncle who tells the children everything they ought not to know; and finally Great-Granny, who has no inhibitions but tells it like it is: ‘She may be your precious daughter, but the general opinion is that she’s bossy and charmless’. Yet amid the hilarity there is room for moral growth, a gain in understanding—at least for the characters capable of it.

When asked how she deals with fame, Anne Fine demurs, saying most writers are not famous; but to her readers she is a beacon. Mention her name in any gathering, and people will say how much they enjoy her work. A colleague of mine whose children read *Flour Babies* describes the book as ‘strong . . . instructive, funny, and compassionate’. That could serve well as a description of Anne Fine and her work.

Mr Chancellor, on the recommendation of the Council and the Senate, I present Anne Fine, that you may confer upon her the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.