



# A Spoonful of Sugar: A Nanny's Story

*Brenda Ashford*

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## **A Spoonful of Sugar: A Nanny's Story** Brenda Ashford

From Britain's beloved oldest living nanny comes a charming and uplifting memoir of a real-life Mary Poppins.

In her extraordinary memoir, Brenda Ashford shares her endearing and amusing experiences as a British nanny caring for generations of children over the past sixty-two years.

Brenda's lifelong love for children began the minute she laid eyes on her baby brother, David. As a teenager, she applied to London's Norland College, famous for producing top-class nannies, and, after a grueling interview, she was accepted on scholarship. It was a radical change from her idyllic country life in the village of Surrey. The training was rigorous and discipline strictly enforced, as Brenda and her classmates scrambled to pass inspections on everything from morality and neatness to needlework and pram pushing. Meanwhile, World War II began, and Brenda's heart was broken twice. She vowed never to fall for a man again and devoted her life to caring for other people's children, never having any of her own.

Brenda's memoir offers readers an enticing glimpse into the joys, frustrations, adventures, and mishaps of children of all ages and situations. She peppers her story with delightful bits of cultural history and timeless life lessons. *A Spoonful of Sugar* is an irresistible Mary Poppins story that will touch your heart and remind you of what is truly important in life.

## **A Spoonful of Sugar: A Nanny's Story Details**

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## From Reader Review A Spoonful of Sugar: A Nanny's Story for online ebook

### Charlotte says

Loved this! Her writing was beautifully descriptive and her stories so interesting and inspiring.

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### Kim says

Maybe it is due to my postpartum state, but I found this 90 year old's memoirs of being a nanny to be charming.

"Give them your undivided attention; laugh and join in, and they will love you for it. Their childhood will last that much longer, too."

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### Elizabeth Evans says

Having been a nanny myself (but not trained at one of the most prestigious nanny-training schools in the world!) I really enjoyed this book. I can't say it was written as literature, but I could sure hear Brenda's voice in her words. She trained as a Norland Nanny, (yes, they're still around!) which places nannies with the royal family and other members of the glitterati. Uniforms, hats, gloves, learning how to smock (!) and how to wash laundry by hand (surely not any more?): it's all there. Brenda started out near the beginning of WWII, and had some interesting experiences. She never found love, sadly, and never had children of her own, but she has love for the many many children she cared for over the years. From the country estate, to the city nurseries that were set up during the war for the children of working mothers, she saw it all. A fascinating read, but I wish there had been more stories. Bless her heart!

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### Rob Slaven says

As is my usual preamble, I received this book for the fat sum of exactly nothing because of a GoodReads giveaway. Despite that kind consideration my candid opinions follow.

The summary of this one is easy. Our author is 92 and for 62 of those years she has dedicated her life to taking care of children. In that time I daresay she's seen it and done it all and she shares some of those experiences and wisdom in her book.

My first concern on cracking open this book was that it would be rather whitewashed. When you liken your life to the story of Mary Poppins in your subtitle, this seems a fairly reasonable concern. I was delighted to see though that she does not take this tact. Most certainly her life was a primarily happy one dedicated to her craft but she's not afraid to share some of the darker times with her readers too. Her memoirs are refreshingly honest and complete. We're treated to the good and the bad, a life as balanced as any.

The second concern was that the author might be preachy but again, Ashford speaks with well-earned wisdom and she's not afraid to state an opinion but she is anything but preachy. Her delivery of parental

correction is gentle, effective and well-practiced. She's like the benevolent grandparent that you listen to because they've been rearing children for three times longer than you've been alive. She clearly and emphatically points out examples of bad parenting but does so with a glowing benevolence that's hard to resist. This is the sort of person you'd like to sit down and talk to for months at a time.

In addition to sharing her life and her wisdom, our author also shares some recipes and provides us with a history lesson. While skillfully avoiding the pedantic tone of many history lessons she illustrates in vivid color how child-rearing has changed over several decades. She not only appreciates the advantages of modern parents (no more heating an iron on the stove) but also the pitfalls of the internet and other modern temptations.

In summary, Ashford's book is part memoir, part history lesson, part recipe book and part parenting guide. Her presentation is gentle and inspiring but not afraid to be opinionated. In her 62 years on the job she's earned the right to tell parents how they should raise happy, healthy children and she's knows how to pass along her knowledge. While it would be cliché to say that this is a "must-read" for any new parent, I would say that it certainly couldn't hurt. If even on parent remembers to just sit on the floor and play with their child because of Ashford's careworn wisdom then the world will be a better place. Just plain exceptional.

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## **Kelli says**

This book was a nice, feel-good read. The author, Brenda Ashford, is 92 year old woman who was a nanny for over 100 children during her long career. The book follows Ashford through childhood, to Norland College and into the world of being a nanny. I don't have children, but I found this book interesting and heartwarming. Ashford cares so much for children and loved her job so much; this comes through on almost every page of this charming memoir.

While the first half of the book followed consecutive years, the second half of the book skipped across a decade and only highlighted a few specific nanny positions Ashford held. This transition made the book feel a little unbalanced but it didn't take away from the feeling that Ashford loved what she did with all of her heart.

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## **Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says**

Two and a half stars. I really can't give it three, though if it had continued to be as interesting as the first quarter of the text it would have been a solid four. The story of her training etc was interesting, but even then she would make a "teaser" statement and give the impression it would be discussed (such as when she speaks of hurrying through an air-raid with a baby in her arms, or "dodging shrapnel") and then--nothing; the anecdote is never told, or told in such a superficial and general way as to remove all impact. The style is of course rather sententious and I-know-best, but then she *is* an elderly nanny. We are treated to such gems as "Did Hitler really believe he could replace our beloved cucumber sandwiches with stollen and bratwurst?" (p 194) I'm sure Ashford didn't intend the reader to guffaw at the ridiculousness of that bald statement coming where it did in the text, but I did! She gives the impression that "the Norland" disappeared in the 50s, but it's still going strong and yes, their nannies are still wearing the uniform.

There are other things that had me wondering about her reliability as a narrator, such as the scene in Fortnum's tearoom when her prospective employer invited her to tea and then "strode out, hailed a cab and vanished." According to Ashford, "It was only later, *as I packed my suitcase* that I realised he hadn't paid for

our tea!" (*italics mine*). Even if she was dressed in Norland's nanny uniform, I doubt very much that she could have been the last to leave, and not have been asked to pay, particularly as a "young person" as Fortnum's would have classed her.

Nanny life certainly was harder work than the au pairs I know today are prepared to do, but from the thirties to the sixties, her charges all seemed to live on bread and butter, cake, and jam, if we are to believe the detailed timetables we are given seventy years after the fact--and how did she keep them all straight? Oh, right--because she's Mary Poppins. To hear her tell it, she never made a serious bloomer in all those years, and there was only one mother she didn't get along with. She never hit on a father with adultery on his mind, or met with an impossibly spoiled brat that she couldn't discipline because it was "mummy's pet." All of them, without exception, call her "a treasure." To her face. In so many words. "Nurse Brenda, you are a treasure." And yet with one exception, she only stayed for a few months at most in each position--none of the lifelong nannies we read of in the memoirs of the upper classes. It was rather sad that she felt she had to show us all her "excellent" marks and "testimonials" to bulk out the text. And why did she feel the need to tell us all about taking her charges to the toilet? "Better luck next time!" *Ugh* I'm also surprised (and doubtful) that a young mother would ask an 80-year-old woman to nanny her children!

I found myself skim-reading the final chapters just to finish the book, as her sententious handing down of childcare law--and the recipes--was seriously annoying.

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## Caroline says

I wish this book had a different title, and I wish there had been a bit less sugar sprinkled over Brenda Ashford's story of her 60 years working as a nanny. Having said that, I come from an era where the idea of 'unconditional love' carries enormous kudos – and I don't think I have encountered anyone who practiced it better than Ms Ashford.

Her love for children just flows out of every page – be they the orphan-like offspring of British aristocracy, or unwashed nit-infested tykes from the East End of London. Ms Ashford adores them all – she really does. It's enormously heartening; and it makes for a cheering read.

It was also intriguing to read about the training given to Norland Nannies. They are still today the *crème de la crème* of nannynod, and it was very interesting to hear how they get to reach that pinnacle of hallowed child-minding.

*Nurses on pram parade. Ready for afternoon inspection*

She also worked for a while (as part of her training) in Great Ormond Street Hospital, and that was a pretty amazing eye-opener about hospital discipline and snobbery at the time. The bulk of the book though is about her experiences as a nanny during the Second World War, including her work with evacuee children.

All in all she comes across as a thoroughly decent, loving and caring person... and I think she must have been the best nanny ever.

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Photograph belongs to Brenda Ashford.

## Bev says

It's obvious from the title and the first paragraph of the synopsis that comparisons are being made between Brenda Ashford and Mary Poppins. Having just read P. L. Travers' classic story of the nanny that Disney called "practically perfect in every way" I can tell you, Brenda Ashford is not Mary Poppins. She's better. The Mary Poppins of Travers' book really isn't a nanny I would have wanted. Mary is sharp-tongued and vain and while she may love the children underneath all that--it certainly isn't obvious. Nurse Brenda, on the other hand, loves her charges and her boundless affection for all children comes through in every line of the story she has to tell. All of the children who came under her care were most fortunate, indeed.

I loved reading her down-to-earth and common sense advice for raising children. She truly has a knack for knowing exactly how to deal with small people. And she tells her story very well with plenty of gracious good humor. It was also very interesting to read about Britain from pre-World War II days through the present. I'm particularly interested in those earlier years and while I have read a great deal about that time period, it was refreshing to get an eye-witness account from someone who worked in a child-care role that many of us (particularly Americans) know very little about. So many of my Golden Age mysteries have nannies as characters, but I couldn't really understand them since I knew so little about how they were trained and what their lives were like.

A lovely memoir that was a quick and enjoyable read. Four and a half stars.

Read as part of a Providence Book Promotions Blog Tour. I received a free copy for review--but no payment whatsoever. Full tour post at My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

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## Catherine says

Always interested in non-fiction, history of ordinary people, and children psychology, I am in heaven here!

The author has been for more than 60 years a nanny in the UK. Trained during the 30's, her career starts just before the second world war. She recalls her own childhood and then describes her story as a Norland trained nanny. With passion and a great sense of humour and love for the children she cares for, she writes about her 'ordinary' life, her chores, her employers. She provides a good description of the ways children were raised in the beginning of the twentieth century in London and its surroundings. But also just simply a good description of the ways of living in London and in the UK villages. A long part of the book happens during the second world war and the description of people's fears and behaviors makes me feel like I was there. (I would be surprised if the book was not turned into a movie by the way...)

The author has a warm personality which make the book entertaining and lovely to read. The story is not all a fun read: she describes children very difficult living conditions for the poorest children but also the often very cold relationships between parents and their children due to a lack of understanding of children's psychology. Diseases and neglect were legion. Nevertheless, her loving and caring character wins, and makes it an easy and entertaining book to read overall.

If there is a second tome, I'll go get it.

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## **Lisa says**

What a sweet memoir. Nanny Brenda Ashford was trained as a nanny by the prestigious school of nannies (my word) Norland College. Beginning her professional career based on an intense and innocent love of babies in 1939, she trained in all aspects of child-rearing with an emphasis on love over corporal punishment. She was a nanny for children for more than 60 years. During that time, she had bouts of falling in love with men, but her true love was always the children she cared for at work.

Filled with great little inset lessons of raising children well with an emphasis of love and health, this story was a great Brit "downstairs" read. I wish I read this book before I had children or at least when my boys were young -- I would have definitely applied a lot of her common sense advice to raising them.

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## **Linda C says**

Oh, dear! Criticizing this book feels a bit like criticizing Great Aunt Millie. Although I am very impressed that the author worked as a nanny for over 60 years and was able to get a book published at 92, that doesn't necessarily mean that it's a well-written book. Which is a shame, because with either a better editor or a ghost writer, Miss Ashford's memoir could have been a very good book.

She certainly had an extraordinary life, during a period of history when the world changed dramatically. Personally, it sounded as if being a nanny was only slightly less difficult than being an indentured servant. I couldn't see why anyone would have wanted to be one. She was basically at the beck and call of these families from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., when she fell into bed. The parents maybe saw the children for an hour or two at day, at most. The rest of the time, they were with Nanny.

I wish that Miss Ashford had simply told her stories, without feeling the need for additional commentary or saccharine prose. Too much of this book was as overly sweet as spotted dick. (Yes, that is a real British dessert, something that involves raisins, sugar, custard, cream and suet.)

Examples: "With each home and family I worked for, I realized what I loved more than anything was getting the family on their feet and creating the happiest home I possibly could." or "I had enjoyed a blissful childhood and home life filled with love, laughter, and rich cooking smells." Really??? Was her editor asleep on the job?

When I started this book, I was anticipating something like the James Herriot series, only with children instead of animals. Unfortunately, Miss Ashford doesn't have the talent of James Herriot, nor the ability to laugh at herself. The book is simply too earnest and too sweet. It made my teeth ache.

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## **RWaggoner says**

Enjoyed this memoir written by a 92 year old British woman looking back on her life of service as a nanny. Lots of personal advice and tips. Fascinating accounts of life in WWII among refugees and evacuees.

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## Angela Holland says

This was one of the best books I have read this year or should I say listened to. Of course I liked the narrator as she had an English accent which I could listen to all day long. It was interesting to not only hear about Brenda's adventures as a Nanny but to hear how she views changes of her time as a nanny and how a nanny's position is today. I also enjoyed hearing about her personal life and her younger years. There was one part that brought tears to my eyes and I have a lot of respect for her after hearing her story. I wish she would write more books as I think they would be enjoyable. I highly recommend this book.

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## Josh says

Audio book.

You get what you expect from this book. Old lady with old values. For instance she thinks the Victorian level of morality and formality, e.g. the traditional insistence on special uniforms went possibly a bit too far. Possibly a bit. Yet she's gung ho about never saying No to a kid. She never notices the paradox of being strict and controlling w kids and schedules (and with adults acting proper in society), yet encouraging kids to flourish by not restricting them (and allowing herself to flouting convention when it suits her).

Just when this book gets exciting, about 3/4 of the way in, bc she works at a house where the dad is a gambler or bookie, and the house gets sucked into the side effects of involvement with sketchy elements, and the action is picking up, our heroine nanny feels it's too scandalous, puts in her notice, leaves, and forces the reader back into her preferred blase world of recipes, schedules, and traditional values.

Cute stories if you like Call the Midwife, but you don't get the killer emotional hooks.

She's opinionated about arbitrary things, but wants people not to be so opinionated.

Also, she includes the recommendations of lots of her past employers, praising her to the skies. Not too classy.

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## Carrie says

From the very start of the *Spoonful of Sugar*, I found Brenda Ashford to be an inspirational lady, I could not wait to read on...

### **Heartwarming and Heartbreaking.**

As the words and pages past me by, I could not help but feel that warm feeling inside, I think to be one of the many people Brenda has touch would surely be a blessing. Reading these words made my heart swell with such admiration and hope. If I am fortunate enough to make it that far in years, I could only hope to be as blessed as her.

Each opening chapter we are given a little nursery rhyme or lullaby, and I can only imagine the number of times she has spoken those words to a sleepy or upset child. Then at the end of them she has included a

section titled "The Nannys Wisdom", they are filled with wonderful advice and information, and sometimes one of her family recipes. :)

Brenda Ashford has opened up to us and shared so many wonderful memories. Memories that must have brought new smiles as well as fresh tears to her face. The things she has seen and lived through.

In her early years of a being a Nanny the world was at war, WWII was shaking the the earth to it's core. So not only were her charges the children of private households but many of her early ones were those poor children who had to be taken from there homes and families. Then there where those little ones who have been treated wrong.

**"Love Never Faileth"**

-Norland motto

I wonder what become of those ones, the ones who were abandoned and ignored? I wonder about the all the lives that this lady touched, what happened to them?

It has been such a joy and pleasure to view this wonderful lady's life. It has truly been an eye opening experience for myself, as I have taken many breaks to reflect over the words I have read and how they affect my own life and how I want them too. Brenda Ashford hasn't just written about her life and experiences but she has given us, the reader a chance to relive them our selves. We get to share in her childhood, her days learning to be a Norland nanny, WWII and life after war and changes that came with it for both herself and the world. For I truly felt all she felt, she took me back to another time and place and made me feel as if I was watching her life as her life happened. As I have said, she is an inspiration. And yes she really is Britain's oldest and longest-serving nanny.

Thank you Brenda Asford for sharing with us your life, your stories, for thoughts, your fears, your emotions, thank you for sharing yourself to the children in your care, to us the reader and the world. It has been an honor to have gotten the opportunity to read your story.

**"I think you are a super nana"** (Penny,one of the little girls Brenda cared for.) I would have to agree.

**\*Copy provided by Doubleday via NetGalley\***

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