

An interview with Cathy Cassidy

Q1. What are your earliest memories of books and reading? For example, did you have a favourite or inspirational book?

I was crazy about books as a child... reading them, making them, imagining their worlds. I got my first library ticket at the age of seven when a very brave primary school teacher marched the whole class down to the local library, and my dad and I were soon visiting weekly, coming away with armfuls of books. After a while we added on two other nearby libraries, too. For me, almost all of those books were memorable and inspirational... one book at a time, they formed a ladder out of my dull, grey childhood and into a future I could never have imagined otherwise. They opened my eyes, opened doors of opportunity – and sowed the seed of hope that maybe one day I might become an author too. Books that really stand out? The Ladybird Cinderella book, for the fab illustrations; Grimm's Fairy Tales for the terror; series such as Little House on the Prairie, Swallows and Amazons and The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe for the escapism, the adventure, the wonder. And a special place for Watership Down by Richard Adams, the first proper book I ever actually owned, because it shook my life and got me asking big, scary questions at the age of twelve. Don't ever be deceived by the pretty picture of the rabbit on the cover...

Q2. What inspired you to become an author / illustrator?

Libraries were a huge part of it, but even as a very young child I already had an addiction to daydreaming. For me, that was making up stories in my head, escaping from reality into a whole different world. Writing the daydreams down was the next logical step, and I started doing that very young. I remember being encouraged in my ambitions early on by the film The Railway Children... I was deeply impressed by the fact that the mum not only wrote stories and got paid for them, but always bought cream cakes to celebrate.... Seemed pretty idyllic to me! In the end, I went to art college and studied to be an illustrator... and after college ended up getting a job on the legendary Jackie magazine. I ended up as Fiction editor and learned huge amounts there, but my first children's book wasn't published until a good while after, in 2004.

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or illustration?

I am interested in feelings, emotions, what makes people tick... so real-life stories with lots of emotional punch are the ones that do it for me. I read a lot of YA fiction and current favourites are Sarah Crossan and Jandy Nelson who are both pushing the boundaries a bit with the way they use words. In their different ways, they have created a way of writing that falls somewhere between poetry and prose, and it's very powerful and strong. Illustration wise, I am kind of the opposite... I love rich, fairy-tale, fantasy artwork and my favourite illustrators are Jane Ray, Jackie Morris and the up and coming Erin Keen, whose work is so quirky and cool.

Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books / plan your illustrations?

It sounds cheesy, but 99% of the time I write for me. I know who will be reading the books, because I spend a lot of my time meeting readers and talking to them, or connecting on social media, but when I am writing I get lost in the story and it's just me and the character and the story that has to be told. I am very lucky that my publisher Puffin have not tried to change or shape me in any way... they let me follow my heart with characters and stories, and my readers seem to like that too. I think the bit of me I am writing for actually IS a thirteen year old girl, so it kind of works!

Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?

I don't think so, or not anytime soon. Figures are showing a big swing back to paper books, and in many parts of the world there has been little or no swing away from them anyway. I think a physical book carries a kind of magic that is lost when the story is reduced to words on an electronic screen. Having said that, I am happy that people are reading, and if people choose to use e-readers, fine... but they are not for me. I've tried reading books on screen, but it just feels like work... and the ritual of having a book to hold and open up when you need to escape is lost. Maybe it will happen one day, but it would be a sad day I think, a day when we lose one more connection with the physical world and settle instead for virtual reality.

Q6. Are you a book collector? Is there a special book you'd love to own?

I am a collector of old, pre-loved books... children's especially. As all my childhood books came from libraries I fell in love with a lot of books I didn't own... and I love finding the versions of those books I once loved. I collect old magazines and comics from the early 20th century too... I just love them. I have a ton of contemporary YA, childrens and picture books now too... books are one thing I never feel guilty for spending on!