



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

# AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH LAIRD

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

In the 1950s, when I was a child, there were far fewer children's books around. Enid Blyton's were the most popular, but her writing was frowned on by my parents and teachers, though I did manage to read a few illicitly, and *The Island of Adventure* in particular enthralled me. Kipling of course was a favourite: *Mowgli* and *The Just So Stories*. My great aunt had a cupboard full of Victorian weepies, stories of children bare foot in the snow, with gin sodden mothers, saved by angelic visions of Jesus. I loved them. I cried so much over them that my mother wondered why I came back from staying with my great aunt with so many tear-soaked handkerchiefs. Once I'd discovered the historical novels of Geoffrey Trease, I devoured everything by him that I could find. I met him once, in the late 1980s, and felt quite breathless at the thought that this man had opened for me so many enthralling doors into history.

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

I can't put my finger on any one incident or influence. I think I *was* an author all along, and gradually began to realise and accept it.

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

The story is the main thing. It's got to be gripping, feel true, engage the emotions, and have a satisfactory ending. You don't have to *like* the main characters, but you do have to care about them. The writing is vital too. I don't like tricky writing, that strives for effect, and I'm old fashioned about disliking sloppy grammar. I don't like too much suspense and excitement. It's exhausting!

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

No, I don't think of my readers. I only think of the story. Every now and then I might pull myself up over a word that seems too complicated, or simplify a sentence that's become too convoluted, but since my characters are the target age of my readers, the rest simply follows.

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

I think the physical book has a very rosy future, and will not be replaced by electronic books as long as the world can go on producing reasonably priced paper. Electronic books are good for people who are travelling, or who don't want to carry or store books, but handling and reading a "real" book is much more pleasurable, in my view. You are aware all the time of where you are in the book, how near the beginning or the end. You are reminded of the story every time your eyes drift across your bookshelf. You can borrow books from friends, and lend them your own. You can leaf quickly through a book to remind yourself of the story or the names of the characters. No, ebooks have their place, but they're a pale imitation of the real thing.

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

In the past, I've collected books about Ethiopia, and have quite a wide collection now. I also love folk stories from around the world, and am running out of shelf space to house all the ones I've acquired. The answer is – build more bookshelves!