



The Letterpress Project

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

Apart from sharing books at bedtime with my parents, my older brother always read his Beano aloud to me when I was tiny! I LOVED listening to stories and closely examining illustrations, but problems started for me at primary school when I struggled to read and write for myself. It turned out I had an undiagnosed hearing issue so I found it tricky to follow what was going on in class. I became acutely shy and anxious, and things only turned around after I had an operation to improve my hearing and when I had one-to-one help at school with reading. I always tell children about my difficulties when I do author visits, as I think many of them – especially less confident readers – assume that all authors must've been brilliant at reading and writing from a young age. And that's definitely not always the case!

As for a favourite or inspirational book, I discovered 'The Strange Affair of Adelaide Harris' by Leon Garfield in my regular Saturday morning haunt, ie my local library, and adored it so much I bought it with a birthday book token so I could actually own this precious thing! What impressed me about it was how it brought historical characters vividly to life, instead of them being two-dimensional characters that seemed to be viewed from behind sepia tinted glass. It was also the first time I'd encountered black humour in a children's book, so that blew my mind...

Q2. What inspired you to become an author?

I was working on 'Sugar', a teenage girls' magazine, when they decided it might be fun to have a short story in every issue. I offered to write one, which led to another and another and another! At the same time, I was reviewing books that were sent into the magazine. The combination made me wonder if I could write a whole book myself... After a couple of false starts, I was commissioned to write a book by Scholastic. I was only paid a tiny advance for it, so I had to keep working at my normal job and write at the weekends. But that not-very-successful book started my whole career, and back then I'd never have presumed I'd be here in 2023, celebrating my 101st published book with 'The Broken Dragon'!

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book?

If you're talking about what I perceive as success in terms of my own books, it's not about awards. Mainly because I've never won one, apart from a fantastic award that my kid made for me from old cereal box! Nope, success for me is all about libraries. When I get feedback from librarians, saying how popular my books are, especially with reluctant readers, it makes my heart burst. Also, authors receive PLR – public lending rights – every time their books are borrowed from a public library. The extra income is very welcome, of course, but it's also

amazing and touching to study the stats and realise how many thousands of children and young people read and enjoy and connect with my books every year.

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

Growing up, I related to real-life stories, either contemporary or historical – fantasy and magic wasn't my thing. So I think I often pitch my books to the kid that was me! And of course other people and their experiences can inform my writing. For example, when my brother and sister-in-law broke up years ago, I wrote a book with my nieces and nephew in mind, as well as every other kid who's witnessed a family dissolving. In 'An Urgent Message of Wowness' (2007) I tried to reflect the inevitable sadness but also illustrate how life can slowly shapeshift into something else, into a new type of happiness.

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

E-books have been around for a long time, but print books are still going strong – particularly with children – so I can't see that healthy balance changing now. After the awful Amazon Effect (ie, when they ate all the bookshops) I was thrilled to read a recent article about the resurgence of indie bookshops. I'd love to see that continue, and maybe another chain appear, so that there could be a book retailer of one kind or another popping up on high streets, just like there used to be. And I'd of course I'd love the trend of library closures and lack of investment to reverse, and for also for there to be an expectation that primary schools invest time in regular visits to local libraries to help build that culture of reading.

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

I do have quite a lot of books but I try to be practical and always give away the ones that I don't think I'll read again. What I aspire to have is a Little Free Library in my front garden, so neighbours could browse and swap books. It's on my wish-list!

As for special books, I totally treasure my complete set of 1970s 'Little House on the Prairie' books, even though they've been read and re-read so many times over the decades that they're falling apart! Luckily, I've solved the problem for my next re-read by buying a collection of newer copies that I stumbled across in a local charity shop. It would've been heartless to leave them there! The modern illustrations in those will never beat the evocative originals in my vintage set, though...