



Authorgraph No.141: Hilary McKay

By *admin*

Created *Oct '09*

Article Author:

[Stephanie Nettell](#) [1]

[141](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

Hilary McKay interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**.

Hilary McKay interviewed by Stephanie Nettell<!--break-->

A first novel may be so rich and mature that its admirers fear its author has packed everything they had to offer into that one book. That's how the Guardian judges thought in 1992 on giving their Children's Award to Hilary McKay's exuberant family comedy, **The Exiles** - only the second time a first novel had won the award. And when we met the author herself? well, she seemed so quiet, so self-effacing, with such a light, delicately enunciating voice? where had those vigorous, opinionated characters sprung from?

Hah! Her second novel, **The Exiles at Home**, won the Smarties Prize, and pressure from fans brought a third a few years later, **The Exiles in Love**, before she cried 'Enough!?' In between and since, there have been more than 20 books overflowing with that same energy and humour, the same crisp dialogue and cool prose.

Now she may have found herself enmeshed in another trilogy. Last year that gem, **Saffy's Angel**, won the Whitbread Children's Award, and a sequel about Saffy's brother is coming this September: **Indigo's Star**. The atmosphere is recognisably McKay - good-naturedly crazy family, engagingly tough little sister, sharp, empathetic insight into her characters' frailties - but although her work, while shunning sentimentality, is always touching, here is a seriousness, an extra tenderness, to make readers demand more.

However, she hates committing herself: a deliberately precise, self-aware writer (taking two years over her 'real' books), she shies away from publishing demands for samples, synopses and multi-book contracts. She seems both disciplined and unpredictable, fretting crossly over copy-editing interference in **Indigo's** proof but often self-doubting and grateful for guidance - the highly experienced Chris Kloet, her first editor at Gollancz, remains a friend and mentor, and it was out of loyalty to her that when Penguin swallowed Gollancz but spat out Kloet she opted to go to Hodder.

Expecting an anarchic household, I found an immaculate garden round a modern bungalow, with the living room's glass wall looking out past Derbyshire stone cottages to a steep wooded hillside, husband Kevin offering tea and the eminently civilised Bella, aged six, and Jim, ten, raising scarcely a squeak with their Playstation. Everything had been madly tidied up for me, she said - but there could not be a less bohemian study than her neat, sparse little room, its eclectic selection of books, 'read to rags?', hardly suggesting a rebellion: shelves of Elizabeth Goudge, the Chalet School and Tolkien, plus Meindert DeJong, Ransome or early Pullman.

'I've always written assuming children read like I do, but I've recently discovered they *don't* read a book 30 or 40 times, that they expect to get the whole story first time round, so I shouldn't be putting in all these things that just

darken the water. They'll tell me, 'Oh I loved such-and-such' but they've loved it and given it to the school bazaar! She wistfully wonders if this is why **The Amber Cat**, in her Porridge Hall trilogy, about a small ghost seeking friends through the long years, an intriguingly crafted story which repays pondering, 'has passed almost unnoticed'. (The real cat is actually agate, but became amber 'because of the sound, softer and more hummy for a summer ghost story'.)

But those characters? Family life, sometimes chaotic, always interesting, is the mortar of her stories? 'my childhood still seems close enough to touch'? but like so many growing up in a loving, closely held family unit, she did indeed turn rebel.

'Yes, my mother was certainly interesting. She started nursing when she was 14, when her father died and she had to leave school and be out there earning. But she did everything she could and finally got a degree in nursing. Opinionated, very much into books, she always read to us, and Dad, an engineer, always making things, was also a great reader.' Hilary, now 43, was the eldest of four girls, two and two separated by six years. They weren't allowed a television ('You could always read a book!' their father would say), but were free to roam, light bonfires or swim, get messy or lost, which brought an independence that makes her ashamed of her own protective fear for Jim in today's world. Yet they still longed for television.

'A whole language was closed to me? I really hated not knowing the programmes. We were allowed to see only one, **Little Women**, when a neighbour said, 'Your children would like this,' and dragged us in to watch, but that was it.' When she and Bridget were about 14, they got a set, 'so the younger ones benefited from our whingeing. My parents have been glued to it ever since'?

They lived in a tiny village between Boston, where they went to school, and the coast, so she has gone 'from the flats to the hills' and Lincolnshire is *flat*. Lots of sky, but not much you can do with it without wings. But I did enjoy the birds, and spent happy days and nights on the Gibraltar Point reserve as a volunteer warden. 'Loving wildlife, she chose to study zoology? a mistake? at St Andrew's? not a mistake.

'Today you can do a degree in, say, ecology, but then zoology was very old-fashioned, with three hours four afternoons a week dissecting your way up the animal kingdom until you were doing humans with the doctors. Not my idea at all.'

St Andrew's, however, was. 'I applied only to the four universities furthest from home to make it as hard as possible to visit. I didn't want my parents turning up with my three little sisters in tow!' Although far from unhappy and knowing they were much loved, the older girls felt strictly watched. An all-girls family, an all-girls school: boys were definitely unwelcome.

'We were *held* closely, if you can understand that. 'This is your family, and these are your friends,' who could not be at the same level of intimacy as family. I didn't agree with it? I used to like my friends and quarrel with my sisters. Six strong personalities made too much of a houseful. Four girls sharing bedrooms, sharing homework desks, sharing everything? boarding school was my ideal! I just wanted a bit of freedom, so I deliberately planned to be out of driving distance.'

St Andrew's, despite the zoology, came through for her. 'All my friends were arts-based, so I went to their lectures? brilliant English Language ones? Anglo-Saxon? I loved it!' Peter Bayley ('the Spenser Bayley?') generously let her take their exams, 'so I came out with a science degree, but had passed the English exams for my own satisfaction.' And at St Andrew's she met Kevin, equally far from his Belfast home.

Uncertain of what she could do, she tried teacher training for a year. 'I loved the children? *they* didn't make mincemeat of me, but the whole system did. You need such patience! Kevin teaches maths at secondary level: he can persist? you know?' She returned to the sciences. They lived four years in Cumbria, then Berwick, before Derbyshire, where she worked in a county council analytical lab until Jim was a year old. 'People don't know these exist, but they're very interesting places, testing tap water or make-up, fireworks, restaurants, toys, furniture? a huge range of things.' The children have settled them here, and (nice twist) 'it's only two hours from my parents'.

She says her sisters have objected to her family portrayals ever since the first **Exiles**, although her readers covet such relations. Especially a Big Grandma. Variations of this amazingly competent soul (she's 95 in the Pudding Bag School story, **The Birthday Wish**) turn up throughout her work, from the picture book, **Pirates Ahoy**, to **Indigo's Star**: brisk, no-nonsense, wise. She was 93 for **The Exiles's** publication – could she still be alive? I'm afraid she went at 99. She'd lived by herself, doing everything and had just two weeks in hospital before dying, which was how she wanted it, never dependent. We loved her very much, she was so warm and strong.

So her characters – dazzling creations like Sun Dance, a small boy in the Porridge Hall stories, whose mind runs with a speed and logic of its own, and Saffy's friend Sarah, a demon in a wheelchair – have roots in real life, even amid the playful magic of her younger stories (like the wilful little Queen duo, **Practically Perfect** and **Happy and Glorious**, or **The Magic in the Mirror** in Paradise House, or **A Strong Smell of Magic** in Pudding Bag School.

Dialogue is the motor powering her narrative, a rare skill she shares with the likes of Jan Mark. Has she always been funny? She looks puzzled, thinks a moment. 'I was always an *observant* child – probably a knowing little beast, actually. You know when people have a photographic memory? I have photographic ears. I can play back conversations, the atmosphere, the feeling, the manner of speaking. It's what I remember about people, more than their appearance.'

After ten years of children's writing, she may be chafing at its restrictions (and its advances), wondering if a gamble on an adult book would endanger the mortgage, but one thing is certain: when the judges picked **The Exiles**, they were merely tugging at the first bright handkerchief of a conjuror's endless string.

Stephanie Nettell is a critic, author and journalist on children's books.

The Books

published by Hodder Children's Books

The Dragon Downstairs, ill. Amanda Harvey, 0 340 84141 9, £9.99 hbk, 0 340 84142 7, £4.99 pbk (November 2003)

Happy and Glorious, 0 340 64074 X, £3.99 pbk

Indigo's Star, 0 340 87578 X, £10.00 hbk (September 2003)

Pirates Ahoy, ill. Alex Ayliffe, 0 340 73698 4, £4.99 pbk

Practically Perfect, 0 340 65574 7, £3.99 pbk

Saffy's Angel, 0 340 85079 5, £10.00 hbk, 0 340 85080 9, £5.99 pbk

Was That Christmas? ill. Amanda Harvey, 0 340 86626 8, £6.99 hbk

Exiles

The Exiles, 0 340 72691 1, **The Exiles at Home**, 0 340 72692 X, **The Exiles in Love**, 0 340 72693 8, £4.99 each pbk

Pudding Bag School

The Birthday Wish, 0 340 69833 0, **Cold Enough for Snow**, 0 340 69834 9, **A Strong Smell of Magic**, 0 340 69835 7, £3.99 each pbk

Porridge Hall

Dog Friday, 0 340 72694 6, **The Amber Cat**, 0 340 72695 4, **Dolphin Luck**, 0 340 79186 1, £4.99 each pbk

Paradise House

The Zoo in the Attic, 0 340 72286 X, £3.99 pbk

The Treasure in the Garden, 0 340 72287 8, £3.99 pbk

The Echo in the Chimney, 0 340 72288 6, £3.99 pbk

The Magic in the Mirror, 0 340 72289 4, £3.50 pbk

The Surprise Party, 0 340 75301 3, £3.50 pbk

Keeping Cotton Tail, 0 340 75302 1, £3.50 pbk



[Hilary McKay.JPG](#) [3]

Page Number:

8

Source URL (retrieved on Dec '21): <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/141/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no141-hilary-mckay>

Links:

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/stephanie-nettell>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/141>

[3] [http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Hilary McKay.JPG](http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Hilary%20McKay.JPG)