



A Talent for Happiness: Judith Kerr interviewed

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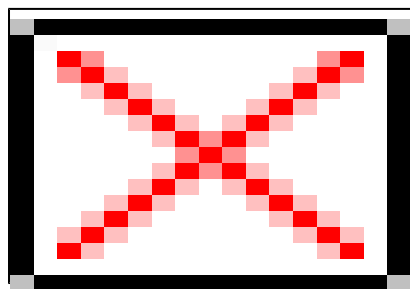
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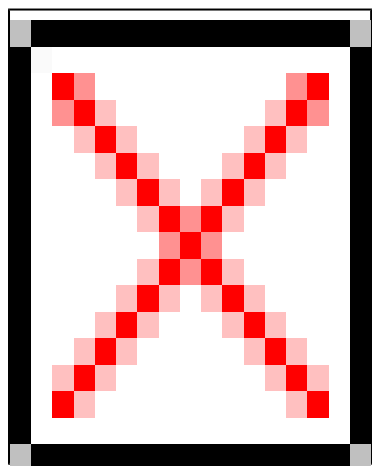
Judith Kerr interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**

Just turned 94, **Judith Kerr** is still full of ideas for stories as **Nicholas Tucker** discovered when he interviewed her for **Books for Keeps**.



I am sitting in the drawing room of a pretty suburban house opposite Barnes Common in London. My hostess is the children's author and illustrator Judith Kerr. Recently celebrating her 94th birthday, she is as spry as ever, full of opinions, still keeping up with everything and unfailingly positive. She can even find it in herself now to welcome her family's forced exile from Germany way back in 1933: *My brother and I always agreed that our childhood in Switzerland, France and finally Britain worked out much better for us than if Hitler had never happened. We loved going to all these different schools and learning other languages.*

The family's adventures are recorded in her autobiographical trilogy **When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit**, **Bombs on Aunt Dainty** (formerly **The Other Way Round**) and **A Small Person Far Away**. Published over forty years ago, they have recently been re-issued in paperbacks sporting smart new covers illustrated by the author. They read as well as ever.



I am with her to discuss her latest picture book, **Katinka's Tail**, published by HarperCollins in a sumptuous hardback

edition. Katinka is Judith's cat, otherwise white except for the existence of her tabby tail. Her various party tricks make up the bulk of this utterly charming book.

I draw back my bedroom curtain in the morning and there she is sitting on the window sill having climbed up the wisteria branches on the wall. Then she has this joke she invented where she lies on the table and then let's herself slowly slip off onto the floor. She refined this to the extent that when she hears me coming in she is actually falling off the moment I open the door.

But although always drawn with a human smile Katinka is also still very much a cat. *She brings me mice she catches and leaves them on the kitchen floor as a gift. I always say 'Oh, how lovely, thank you!' then throw the bodies away on the common when she is not watching. There are also the corpses of baby birds as well, which I find harder to put up with, and once a huge rat that she managed to kill.*

From her early depiction of the famously intrusive and greedy tiger who came to tea, Judith has always avoided sentimentality

Neither the rat nor the birds appear in the book, but the corpses of mice, either whole or half eaten, are there for all to see. From her early depiction of the famously intrusive and greedy tiger who came to tea, Judith has always avoided sentimentality. Her picture book [Goodbye, Mog](#) [3] describes the peaceful death of a much loved cat who had after appearing in many other books finally become 'dead tired.' Small children, so often protected from depictions of death in their books, seem to have liked this title as much as any. The fact that there is a new kitten in the story who takes over where Mog leaves off might also have helped.

Her present picture book once again cleverly mixes everyday reality with fantasy, marked this time in the illustrations by the sudden appearance of tiny flecks of gold. These surround Katinka and her owner as they finish up flying among the stars along with hosts of animals. The result of much experimentation and not a little expense in the HarperCollins art department, these gold showers look as realistic as the genuine article. Judith, who appears as herself in the book, is finally shown returning to her own bed. No longer sprayed with gold she is still clutching the box of paper handkerchiefs that accompanied her to the moon. She is now convinced that this journey was all a dream. But the last picture, with Katinka beaming at the open window with her tail still gold-spangled, introduces just that element of mystery that children like to puzzle over after a favourite book comes to its end.

Judith uses coloured inks first for her picture outlines and then turns to crayons to complete the effect. The illustrations that result are gentle and affectionate. Humour is always to the fore as she and Katinka share breakfast together on the same table and later watch television in amiable harmony. The whole project took her a year to complete. So what's next?

A talent for happiness

Normally when I finish something I say 'Oh good! I can take some time off now.' Then after a fortnight or so I start asking myself, 'What am I doing?' It normally takes me a while to think of the next thing but this time it didn't, and I am more than half way through a new picture book now. And I've thought of the next one after that as well.

She once described her father, the distinguished German writer and satirist Alfred Kerr, as having a talent for happiness. The same could equally be said of Judith. She shares this happiness with others through her many picture books. As she put it to me herself, *'I think the world is incredibly beautiful and I have always loved looking at everything.'* The same spirit shines out on every page of this latest book, as indeed it does in all her other work.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

Katinka's Tail is published by HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0-0082-5529-9, £12.99 hbk

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