



AN INTERVIEW WITH COSTA SHORTLISTED AUTHOR HILARY MCKAY

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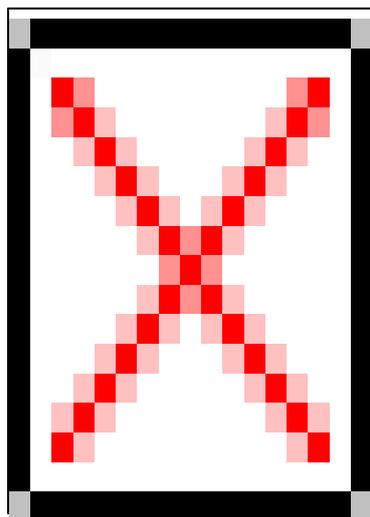
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Philip Womack interviews **Hilary McKay** about **The Skylarks' War**

Hilary McKay is a prize-winning author of many dozens of children's books, including the Casson Family series, which began with the **Whitbread-award** winning [Saffy's Angel](#) [3], and [The Exiles](#) [4], which won the 1992 **Guardian Children's Fiction Prize**. Her latest, [The Skylarks' War](#) [5], has been shortlisted for the 2019 **Costa Children's Award**. Its heroine, Clarry, is a fiercely intelligent girl who pushes against the strictures of early 20th century ideas of what women should be, and whose ineffective father would rather she didn't exist. The plot sees Clarry's handsome cousin Rupert, and Simon, who is in love with Rupert, going off to fight in the First World War, whilst her brother, Peter, having suffered a terrible accident, remains at home. Clarry finds strength in school and learning, and sets her sights on Oxford. Vivid and moving, and full of memorable characters and with great sensitivity to landscape, the book examines social change with warmth and wit. **Philip Womack** spoke to **Hilary McKay** over the phone, one cold morning in December.



*Given your previous win of the **Whitbread**, how do you feel about **The Skylarks' War** being shortlisted for what is now the **Costa Children's Award**?*

I am absolutely chuffed to bits. It's been 15 years, a long wait, in the dark.

Do you find that celebrity children's authors crowd out the market?

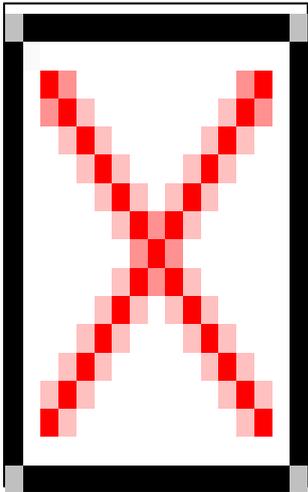
Celebrity is very topical. I go into Waterstones and I find no books of mine on the shelves. David Baddiel and other people are there, but there you go, I'm told they fund the likes of me, if you can do that arithmetic, but I can't work that one out. It makes me cross.

*You say in an afterward to **The Skylarks? War** that the characters came alive for you. Did you find that more so with this book than previous ones?*

I think it's true to say, I'm very possessive about them. But these characters, people talk to me about them as if they're real people. They say, 'what happened?', and 'why did this happen?'. It feels like I'm talking about my friends - it is ridiculous - but I got very fond of them, I have to say. They were all different - I spent 2 years with them, and it took a long time to write.

Do you have a favourite?

I can't possibly choose a favourite! I was very fond of Simon, but I liked them all. I liked Clarry and her courage. I liked



Vanessa, she was a firework, and the Rag and Bone man. Do you have one or two children?

One so far.

When you have two children, try picking, you can't, and if you do, you change your mind. My children are at university. I've just packed their Christmas stockings.

Your books are very often about family relationships. Do you find that you feed in aspects of your own experience?

No, I don't, because with my first book, I was really stupid and I used my three sisters - I didn't even change their names. My agent said you'd better change their names or else they'll have you in court - so I changed their names.

What drew you to the First World War period?

I've always loved this period. I wrote another book set in this time, which went down a black hole. I have things of that period all around me: I have on my desk Clarry's book, and the key to the cricket pavilion that Rupert gives Peter. It's a

place that's almost close enough to feel. I'd love to write about it again, and I think I probably will.

Will there be more from Clarry and co.?

It's wonderful not to have to tell all the back story in the first chapter - if you want it to be read by anybody new you have to put in all the backstory. I think we'll have to leave them there.

A lot of your books feature parents who are absent or neglectful. Did you do that as a way of exploring its effects or as a way of freeing the children from parental control?

It's both of those things, as it does set the children free. If Clarry had had a loving father she wouldn't have done half the things she did, so really it's self-defining isn't it. You could write a story about children who never have to battle, but it would be quite boring. There are neglectful parents. My own father had four children - I don't know if he'd ever given a child a drink or god forbid changed a nappy - he earned his money and handed it to my mum and loved her very much, but as a practical parent he was absolutely useless. So that happens. There are absent people.

Clarry seems relatively unaffected.

I think she was very affected and hurt by her father, but she is one of those people who choose to be nice. Clarry's one of those people who choose to be better, but it's not that's she not hurt. If you're brought up with something from birth, you accept what isn't normal. I have children who write to me because they cannot talk to their parents. If you talk to most librarians in a poor area you would find what perhaps you can't imagine. My sister, a children's librarian in London, had to buy shoes for a boy, as the family shoes were being worn by the father. Heaven knows what's hidden - heaven knows how many children there are like that out there.

How does it feel to be the recipient of such confidences from children?

I feel enormously privileged. One girl wrote to me who started reading my books when she was 9 years old, and she keeps writing to me: I've just wrapped her a Christmas present, and she's now at university. It's a great honour. There's another little boy who moved from locally to Wales - where he didn't speak the language in the primary school - and it's wonderful - you're allowed a space in their life.

Finally, given the themes of the novel, what would you say to your female readers?

I'm all for the girls. I think they're still struggling. A girl just reviewed [The Skylark's War](#) [5] - and she said this book is a clarion call. And I thought, that's nice. My daughter did physics, and she was the only girl in a class of 17 boys - the only girl in the class. Look after each other - that's what I'd say to the girls. And tell your son to look after the girls.

Philip Womack is an author and critic. His books include [The Double Axe](#) [6] and the [Darkening Path](#) [7] trilogy. He is crowdfunding his new novel [The Arrow of Apollo](#) [8] with Unbound.

[The Skylark's War](#) [5] is published by Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1509894949, £12.99 hbk

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