



Authorgraph 236: Abi Elphinstone

Article Author:

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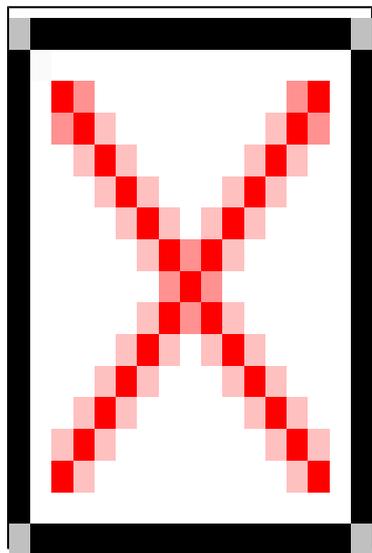
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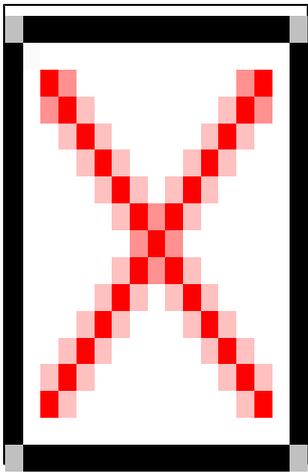
Abi Elphinstone interviewed by **Joy Court**

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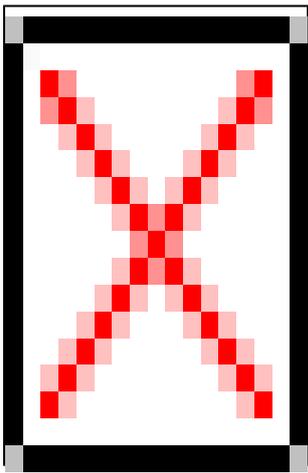
?I am a writer because the Scottish wilderness made me one?. As readers we have to be very grateful that Abi Elphinstone's parents moved from Leicestershire to live at the foot of a glen in Angus. Living close to it myself, I can vouch for Market Harborough, where she was born, having much less scope for wild adventures. But, unlike many authors, her childhood was not actually filled with dreams of being a writer, nor was she the 'classic bookworm' and her dyslexia may have been responsible for that. Yet Abi played out the stories filling her head, for real, with her playmates, siblings and animals and when she came to writing her debut **Dreamsnatcher** she didn't have to invent Moll's outdoor world, she had grown up in it. She did not set out deliberately to write a strong, adventurous girl either; that was just 'what was normal and natural in my world?.

That is not to say that [Dreamsnatcher](#) [3] had an easy journey into print. Four previous attempts at novels had garnered 96



rejections between them and Abi says that what she tries to tell young people in the creative writing workshops that she loves, is that to be creative requires 'grit': hard work and perseverance and to not be afraid of failure, which can teach you so much. After studying English at Bristol and a soul-destroying couple of London years in marketing and PR, a one-way ticket to Africa and advice from her family of teachers found her teaching in Tanzania and finding the time to start writing for children. Teaching continued on her return to the UK but a full time job and marking left her too tired to write. Moving to part time tutoring (of dyslexic children) gave her the space to commit to writing. An agent and the two book deal with Simon & Schuster followed and in fact the adventures of Moll Pecksmith and her wildcat Gryff and their quest to find the Amulets of Truth and destroy the Shadowmask's dark magic became a best-selling trilogy with publication of **The Shadow Keeper** and then **The Night Spinner**.

Her writing process always begins with drawing maps: 'If you can believe it and you can see it, then the reader will.' Making sure the structure is sound allows her characters and the story to develop organically. 'The plan gives me the confidence to veer off-piste as long as the scaffolding is there' The very structure of adventures with action, twists and surprises involves planning which, she acknowledges, makes her very popular with teachers. However, she insists the most important thing for a children's writer, which cannot be taught, is the innate ability to remember vividly what it feels like to be ten. She describes feeling her characters 'wearing head torches' which reveal the world they are seeing to her and to the reader. But she also quickly learnt to avoid too many similes and metaphors, which slow the pace down, focusing instead on key moments where she can bring the story alive with perfectly observed details - often based on genuine experiences.

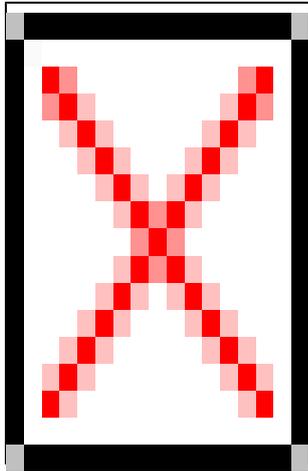


In fact, having been amazed by the photographs on her blog I wondered if writing was actually an excuse for her to continue her wild childhood adventures? Her research has involved abseiling 72 metres into a cave in the heart of the Brazilian jungle and trying a 35-foot cliff jump into the sea in France 'because I needed my characters to get into the sea fast' and hang gliding over Rio De Janeiro 'because I wanted to see what it would feel like to fly'. This need to see and experience comes from the fact that she is a visual learner and, for her, settings actually come before character and plot. Wintry settings inspired the 2016 multi-author anthology **Winter Magic** that Abi curated and it was on a trip to the Arctic, to north Norway to learn about its landscape, wildlife and people, where the plot for her fourth novel [Sky Song](#) [4] began to take shape.

Then a photograph inspired a trip to the Mongolian mountains to meet Mongolia's only Eagle Huntress and hearing about how she broke into a centuries-old male-dominated tradition inspired the heroine of **Sky Song**, Eska, who learns

to hunt with a golden eagle after breaking free from the Ice Queen's clutches. The warm welcome Abi received from the Sami Reindeer Herders and the Kazakh Eagle Hunters also sharpened her focus on belonging at a time when refugees were not being welcomed in our world. She saw that her fictional kingdom torn apart by an evil Ice Queen, where tribes turn inwards and are prejudiced against outsiders, could have something to say about acceptance, open mindedness and compassion. A point gently reinforced through the character of Blu. We are never told that she has Down's Syndrome, yet we know she is different. But, at the same time, see that she has just the qualities Flint and Eska need at key points in the story. An inclusive message inspired by how much Abi has learnt from her differently abled sister-in-law and she is adamant that fantasy adventures can have layers of seriousness too.

I wondered if the arrival of her son and the emotional upheaval of motherhood had affected her writing? Inevitably the



adventuring has had to be curtailed and research become more desk based, with the bonus that her son seems to be as fascinated by photographs as her! The author and critic Amanda Craig told her: 'your writing will be slowed but not stopped' and she thinks her stories have benefitted from more time to breathe even as she has far less time to write. She has also found the bravery to tackle a portal novel, like those that were her childhood favourites and to create a totally imaginary world. The new **Unmapped Chronicles** are built on the 'what if' rather than experiences and specifically in the gaps in scientific knowledge that imagination can fill. What if our climate was actually created magically in another world linked to ours? **Rumblestar** is the first of a planned series of four books, each set in a different Unmapped Kingdom, and which are all very different, beautifully wild places. She is currently researching rainforests for the next book set in Jungledrop. Each book will stand alone, but will link to the others as the World Book Day prequel novella **Ever Dark** does to the story of **Rumblestar** and each will continue the battle against the evil harpy Morg to save both the Kingdoms and the future of our own world, known there as the Faraway.

The wonder of seeing the world anew through baby eyes has certainly made Abi more angry and passionate about its fragility (She is an ardent campaigner for **Authors 4 Oceans**) and she wants her new series to make children think themselves 'so lucky to have this beautiful world' and 'amplify the voices of children marching for environmental action.' But **Rumblestar** also struck me as funnier than previous books. Abi confessed to a love of Dahl and you can certainly see that reflected in the names of the school bullies terrorising our hero Casper at the book's opening: Candida Cashmere-Jumps and Leopold Splattercash! It's there too in wonderful new words such as *stormgulper* to describe how some people internalise grief and pain - the 'storm' they have been through. Casper's first encounter through the portal is with a female engineering genius and *stormgulper* called Utterly. They have their own internal battles to fight, as well as Rumblestar and the Faraway to save. Confrontation was something Abi has always hated (the product of a parent's divorce she thinks) and she wanted to show that 'forgiveness and humility can be stronger than anger and discord'. The nuanced and relatable characters are certainly now as much of a strength as the spellbinding magic and exciting adventure we are used to, from an author who is clearly going from strength to strength. With a beautiful picturebook abridged version of **The Snow Dragon**, her short story from **Winter Magic** publishing in October, this is a busy year for Abi, but personally I will now be counting down the days till **Jungledrop** publishes in 2020 and I can enjoy more of the remarkable **Unmapped Chronicles**.

Formerly Learning Resources Manager at **Coventry Schools Library Service**, **Joy Court** is a consultant on reading and libraries, Chair of the **CILIP Carnegie & Kate Greenway Medals**, and reviews editor of the **School Librarian**.

Books, all published by Simon and Schuster

[The Dreamsnatcher](#) [3], 978-1471122682, £6.99

The Shadow Keeper, 978-1471122705, £6.99

The Night Keeper, 978-1471146053, £6.99

Winter Magic, 978-1471159824, £6.99

[Sky Song](#) [4], 978-1471146077, £6.99

Ever Dark, 978-1471178351, £1.00

Rumblestar, 978-1471173660, £6.99

The Snow Dragon, illustrated by Fiona Woodcock, 978-1471172465, £6.99

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