



Summer with Meg

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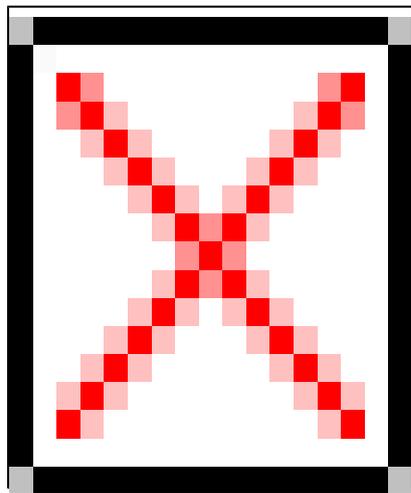
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Meg Rosoff interviewed by **Nicolette Jones**

Nicolette Jones interviews Meg Rosoff about her new novel, [The Great Godde](#) [3]n.



Meg Rosoff's new novel, **The Great Godden**, is the story of a family in their beach house for the summer and two brothers who change all the usual dynamics when they are dropped into the mix. When I spoke to Rosoff, she was in her own beach house in East Anglia, lying low with her artist husband Paul Hamlyn, enjoying the peace, busy writing and reading, and loving Hilary Mantel's **The Mirror and the Light**.

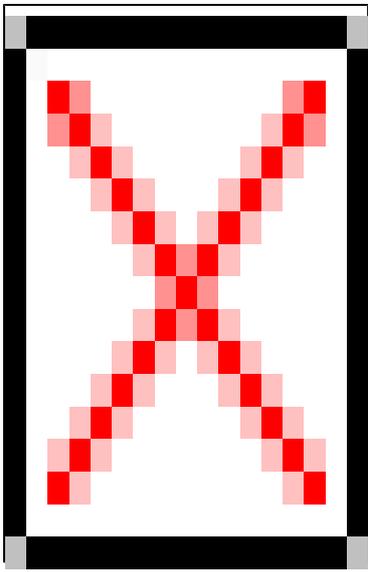
So is the house in the book, which is periwinkle blue, and has quirky architecture, including a hexagonal room and a turret with a widow's walk, hers? The house is an invention, and though it may be in East Anglia, ours is not a sandy beach. But the setting of the book has a deep resonance for me.

Rosoff grew up in Boston, one of four daughters of a doctor, born within five years of each other, in a home that was outwardly ordinary but not happy. I had a difficult family. My father lost his money. He was a depressive on a cycle. He was angry. I escaped into books. Family life, she says, involved a lot of fighting for your territory.

One joy of her youth, though, was the summer holiday. Her novel opens with the car journey from home, with four squabbling siblings and exasperated parents. The six people in the car and the father in a foul mood were based on our holidays to Martha's Vineyard, then a scruffy little island. But the destination has a benevolent effect.

The summer gave everyone a chance to be apart. A good summer will do that. There was such a sense of freedom and escape. We would just disappear. Nobody knew where we were during the day, from breakfast to dinner.

This experience was the one part of her childhood Rosoff didn't want to leave behind. I escaped the suburbs, my family, America ... but I wanted that beach back. Her house in East Anglia brought that into my life again.



The setting, though, was not enough to fire her story into life. Usually she begins with 'the magical moment of knowing where to start the book'. In the case of her novel for adults, **Jonathan Unleashed**, she dreamt the first sentence ('Jonathan came home from work one day to find the dogs talking about him.'). But the genesis of **The Great Godden** was different.

In 2011 at the 'fab and shambolic' Voewood Festival, the poet and author Salena Godden won a fund-raising auction to have her name included in a Meg Rosoff novel. 'So I felt obligated' says Rosoff. 'This was the only time I thought 'just write the bloody book'. It felt dead. I wrote 25,000 words and gave up. It was eight years before I picked it up again.' She found that it had taken a wrong direction. 'Three drafts back I found one I could work from'.

This book has been praised for feeling unforced, and it does unfold with perfect ease. But that has no bearing on the process. 'So much work goes into making it feel so effortless.'

One issue in the writing was resolving the narrative voice. 'I couldn't work out if it should be first or third person, or a male or female narrator. Then I realised I didn't have to solve it as I thought I did.' The narrator is unnamed, and the sex and gender never specified. It freed up the writing.

It is not the first time Rosoff has avoided a decision to move a book forward. Something similar had happened with the protagonist in her Carnegie-Medal-winning novel [Just In Case](#) [4]. She knew she wanted him to go to the airport. 'But I couldn't decide where he would fly to, and in the end he just lived at the airport for six months.' She has also played with the identity of the narrator before, in **What I Was**.

The ambiguity in **The Great Godden** leaves room for readers to make their own assumptions. The narrator falls in love with one of the interloping brothers, the handsome and magnetic Kit. Readers over 50, Rosoff finds, tends to refer to the narrator as 'she'. Young readers don't.

A conventional love story was not Rosoff's aim. [How I Live Now](#) [5] [her first novel] was sold as a romance between Daisy and Edmund, but it was just as much about Daisy and Piper. There are so many different kinds of love you discover as you are growing up.'

'I'm interested in a 'stranger comes to town' set up. You drop two boys into a summer all about niceness and childhood and safety.' It is, because of the disruption, 'almost a metaphor for life'.

I suggest that Kit, who is far from being a conventional idealised love interest, is a warning for young readers. 'He is not exactly a villain or a warning. And it's not as if no one has ever done a sex story with a bad boy character. My job is to look at situations that might be more complicated.

'I hate the idea of good guys and bad guys. He is not an evil person, just a narcissist, and damaged.' Rosoff is taken

with this line from **Damage**, Josephine Hart's novel. 'Damaged people are dangerous. They know how to survive.'

'Evil isn't really interesting but damaged is. I like to look at things from the troublemaker's point of view. What could have happened to make them so angry?'

She also wanted to explore charisma. 'Charm is a dangerous quality. It can be incredibly manipulative. We have seen it in politics. A lot of people thought Boris was charming, but he's impulsive and self-serving.'

There wasn't a single real-life model, though, for Kit. 'He's not from my past. He's a plausible figment.' But some experience feeds into the fiction. 'Everyone knows people with dodgy motives. Handsome boys who want to have sex with you. There wasn't one particular summer in my life. But there was someone I adored who was ridiculously unreliable. He was in my life for eight years, but I never had his phone number.'

Kit may be the catalyst, but all the members of the eccentric family in **The Great Godden** [3] (and the dog) are characterised with complexity and sharp observation. Even Mattie, the sister who lives her life to post it on Instagram, turns out to have unexpected qualities. 'I was touched', says Rosoff, as if she didn't make it happen herself, 'by how Mattie rises at the end.' She is not two-dimensional just because she is beautiful.

'I have always been attracted to unconventional English families. It's why I love Barbara Trapido. When I first moved to London I adopted an unconventional Oxford family. I come to it with a foreigner's longing. After my suburban upbringing, I was supposed to marry a nice Harvard doctor and settle down, as my mother did. When I first encountered the sort of family with a million people milling around and everyone sleeping with everyone else's boyfriend, I thought 'this anarchy is heaven.''

The novel is redolent of the feelings and sensations of youth and summer, and also has a certain satirical distance. 'I write from two perspectives - the strongly remembered adolescence and the adult who has digested it.

Her memories are a rich mine. 'The last thing you want as a writer is a happy childhood. Writing comes out of life being complicated and dangerous and exhausting. And therapy.'

Nicolette Jones, writer, literary critic and broadcaster, has been the children's books reviewer of the **Sunday Times** for more than two decades.

Books mentioned:

The Great Godden [3], Bloomsbury YA, 978-1526618511, £12.99 hbk

Just In Case [4], Penguin, 978-0141318066, £7.99 pbk

How I Live Now [5], Penguin, 978-0141318011, £7.99 pbk

What I Was [6], Penguin, 978-0141322469, £7.99 pbk

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