



AN INTERVIEW WITH CLiPPA WINNER ZARO WEIL

By *AndreaMReece*

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Article Author:

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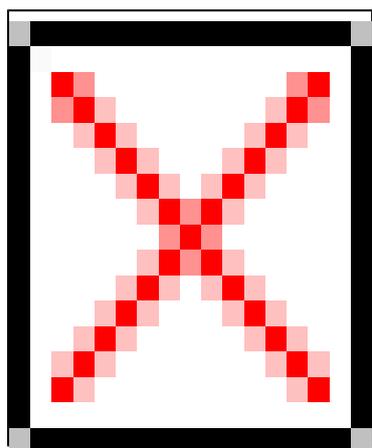
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Charlotte Hacking talks to **Zaro Weil**, recently announced winner of the **2020 CLiPPA**

Charlotte Hacking talks to **Zaro Weil**, recently announced winner of the **2020 CLiPPA (CLPE Children's Poetry Award)** for her collection of nature poems, **Cherry Moon**.

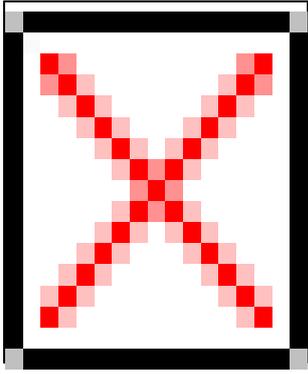


Zaro Weil is the kind of person you want at your side constantly. Full of joyful exuberance, she has a constant sense of awe and wonder and intense knowledge about the world around her, and all that is in it. I meet with her over FaceTime a few days after she has been awarded the **CLiPPA 2020** for her richly produced collection, **Cherry Moon**, and the happiness is overflowing.

Winning the award, Zaro tells me is, 'a dream. I just never even thought, that my words would have the resonance and the echo that it seems to have gathered. We write these things in a very intimate, personal way always and of course the idea is that somehow, magically through the heavens they transmit to all the children in the world, but you just never think that that is going to happen in a rational way. So when this award came, I was completely staggered and utterly delighted because things like this happen so rarely in life to any of us. It's just a wonderful thing.'

Within the collection, there is such a clear sense of the absolute joy of being a child - playful, curious and filled with intrigue about the world. What is it that gives her this gift in her writing? 'I think it's maybe that Peter Pan quality of never quite growing up and, because I was with children for so many years as a teacher and performer, they became my second eye deep inside and I internalised a child's point of view. When I write, I just think about the things that tickle me when I go outside. I think about the things that make me smile, or make me sad.' It is these things that connect so

well when you consider the impact the collection could make on young readers. The poems speak directly to them, in a way that is playful but not patronising and encourages them to observe, think and be curious.

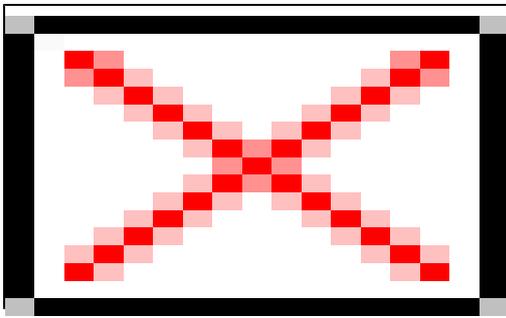


In the acknowledgements of the book, Weil credits the inspiration behind the collection to a walk in the woods with her father as a young child. 'Nature?', she explains 'is what makes us free. Nature is what helps us to be wild. It directs us into the mystery of everything. A child's first job is to fill in who they are, and what better way to fill in the mystery of who you are inside than by looking and being part of the mystery that is nature outside.' The powerful memories of that sunset walk in May, as *the sky slid into pink wisps* and *the full moon almost red. Like a distant red cherry*, gave her the title for the collection and shaped the ethos behind it. The whole collection is a long walk in the woods, we see nature come and go, seasons change and day turning into night.

The appreciation of the natural world and our relationship with it is imbued in every poem. The admiration of the perfection of a freshly picked *Strawberry*, the sadness of the *Poor Snail, crushed by some careless foot*. Why does she think *Cherry Moon* is important for readers, especially now? 'I think the clearest goal for me is the protection of nature. It's hard to be joyful knowing what the world is going through right now. And I'm not just talking about this particular malady, of this pandemic, I'm talking about the destruction of the natural world, the extinction of species day after day. You can't start out with that, you have to start out with hope and it's the power of hope that can give these children as they grow up the power to do something that perhaps our generation wasn't very good at doing.'

This can be seen in the serious messages in poems such as *Elephant tusks*, which directly confront the destructive human impact on the environment. This move from awareness to empathy and then to positive action is one she is keen to explore, 'I think that another intent of this book is for children to go inside, to be one with the animal. In a poem like *Elephant tusks*, it's to be one with the elephant. So, naturally, if you were the elephant, that's exactly what you'd say; 'You don't need these. You don't need these tusks. They're mine.' And that's what children do so naturally, they flow into nature and as they grow up, it's kind of taken away from them. If a child goes to look at a worm, they'll bend down, get on their knees and really look closely, maybe touch it. We would never do that! We'd stand up and go, 'look, there's a worm.' So that inherent closeness with nature is something that we need to learn from children and we need to regain that for our own lives.'

This understanding has clearly been influenced by the close relationship she's had with so many children throughout her life. Before becoming a poet, Weil worked at the New City School in St Louis, Missouri as an alternative teacher, focussing on movement, drama and writing activities with children from 5 to 12 years old. She learnt much from her time there about the best ways to engage children with language that influences her work today. 'It's all a question of engagement,' she tells me, 'I knew, if I wanted to teach children how to dance, and how to move and how to write, there had to be a special energy that would persuade them and that has been the energy that I've also internalised.' This energy and playfulness dances within the words on the pages of *Cherry Moon*. We feel the movement and rhythm in poems such as *Wild as the wind*; we want to act out the drama in epic poems like *Waterfall's Song*.



The collection stands out too because of the quality of the production. This is due, in large part to the striking illustrations of Junli Song. Zaro met Junli at the **Bologna Children's Book Fair**, at the Cambridge Graduates stall, and fell in love with her work immediately. It was first of all the energy, the secret joy that came through her pen onto the page. Her wonderfully bizarre and unexpected use of colour. She wasn't going to be a 'cutie-pie' artist, she was an artist that, every time we came to do a poem and talk about it, came up with something so unexpected. She took me in new directions.

The collection is published by Zaro's own imprint **Zaza Kids Books**, in association with **Troika Books**. The small size and closeness of the team working on the collection gives it its greatest strength; you can just tell it's a labour of love. She explains, 'we worked very closely together, because, we're so small it's just us! It was just Junli and me. There was no art director or huge team and so we were able to work in quite an artisanal way, in a very old fashioned publishing way where the author and the artist and then Roy (Johnson, at Troika) oversaw it all with a lovely designer. I think Junli really came and rose to the top of what she could do and she kept re-inventing herself and re-inventing her art and she made me reinvent my thoughts too.' The result is a prize winning collection that is a gift for readers of all ages. A book to be shared, a book to be treasured.

Next from Zaro, is a collection of haiku about nature **Polka Dot Poems**, illustrated by another Cambridge graduate, Lucy Wynne, as well as another book with Junli Song, **When Poems Fall From the Sky**. This, she describes as 'Junli's masterpiece.' The book has been produced in association with **The Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew** and contains, plays, under the title of *Mother Nature Productions*, as well as a wide variety of poetic forms, including a series of raps about the *wood wide web*. Following on from what they began in **Cherry Moon**, she tells me 'This collection is somewhat more pointed it's still full of joy and full of wonderfulness, but it's really much more pointed. I've been reading a lot and that's what influences me, I've been reading **Wilding** by Isabella Tree and Robert McFarlane, who is one of my heroes, so my goal in this book is to take these wonderful scientific understandings that have emerged and translate them into something kid-friendly.' And this is precisely what she does so well and why her work is so important for children today. Nature and children have a perfect friend in Zaro Weil.

Charlotte Hacking is Central Learning Programmes Leader at [CLPE](#) [3].

Cherry Moon, by Zaro Weil, illustrated by Junli Song, is published by ZaZa Kids Books Troika Books, 978-1909991941, £14.00 hbk

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