



## Wicked Young Writer Awards

### An interview with Head Judge **Cressida Cowell**

#### **Are there any children's books that made a big impression on you when you were a child?**

I read a wide variety of books: domestic books like Noel Streatfeild and Enid Blyton, but my particular preference was for fantasy like Diana Wynne Jones; Ursula Le Guin; Tolkien and Lloyd Alexander.

My favourite book as a child was 'The Ogre Downstairs' by Diana Wynne Jones. I loved this book so much that I read it to my younger brother and sister, to my little cousins – to anyone who would listen! It has a wicked stepfather, and chemicals that make you fly, and turn you invisible, and bring your toys to life. My children loved it as much as I did thirty eight years ago.

#### **How did you become an author? What was your first book?**

I have been writing stories since I was about eight or nine years old. But I was about 33 when I had my first book published: it was called 'Little Bo Peep's Library Book', and it was a picture book.

#### **What inspires you? How do you decide what to write about?**

The 'How to Train Your Dragon' books were inspired by the summers I spent as a child on a tiny, uninhabited island off the west coast of Scotland. The island had no roads, houses or electricity, and I used to imagine that there were dragons living in the caves in the cliffs. By the time I was eight, my family had built a small stone house on the island and from then on, every year we spent four weeks of the summer and two weeks of the spring on the island. The house was lit by candle-light, and there was no telephone or television, so I spent a lot of time drawing and writing stories. In the evening, my father told us tales of the Vikings who invaded this island Archipelago twelve hundred years before, of the quarrelsome Tribes who fought and tricked each other, and of the legends of dragons who were supposed to live in the caves in the cliffs.

A lot of the characters are inspired by real people in my life. For instance, my own daughters gave me the idea for Camicazi. They're not as good at sword-fighting as Camicazi, but they're every bit as chatty.

#### **Why do you like to write for young people?**

I love being able to reach kids that wouldn't ordinarily pick up a book to read. Picking up a book is often not the obvious decision for children nowadays: it's an ACTIVE choice whereas of course films and telly – and I should point out here that I love great films and TV – are a passive one.

**How old were you when you realised you wanted to be a writer?**

I was about eight or nine. When I was a child my handwriting was terrible, my spelling was incomprehensible but I loved writing stories... Aged nine I entered a writing competition which, to my amazement, crowned me the winner! It gave me the confidence to think, 'I could be a writer one day'.

**Were you encouraged to start writing by anyone in particular when you were young?**

Yes, I had two teachers who were very encouraging. In year 3, Miss Mellows gave me loads and loads of blank exercise books and she let me write stories in them, even in maths lessons. Miss Macdonald was my history teacher when I was 12, and she set wonderful homeworks, such as 'Write a story about a child living in a village on the west coast of Scotland, who sees a Viking sail on the horizon...'

**What would your school reports have said about you?**

They said that I daydreamed a lot and that I was very disorganised. Here is an extract from one of my school reports, written by one of my teachers when I was 16: 'To follow up one of Mr Byrom's points, there was at least one examination for which she had very little idea of the exact time until shortly before the examination was due to begin.'

**As a literary enthusiast what have you gained from the books you have read?**

Books are like opening doors into other worlds, and reading fiction is the finest way of encouraging empathy in a child. When you watch a movie or television, all the action happens 'up there', on the screen. But in a book, it is happening inside your head. In a lovely quote from 'To Kill a Mockingbird': 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb in his skin and walk around in it'. Books are a unique medium that allow you to do this, to walk around in somebody else's skin.

**Can you talk a bit about how How to Train Your Dragon was made into a film?**

DreamWorks Animation approached my agent and it was very much out of the blue and a surprise. The book was published in America but it was a British book so I wasn't really expecting any film interest. I had a bit of movie and television interest, which I had turned down, but, particularly if you're writing something, and if it's based on something that's very close to your heart like these books were, it isn't completely easy to have it optioned. It needed to be something rather special to make it worth the risk and I thought they were very interesting, so I took that risk.

My faith in DreamWorks has been absolutely rewarded – the films are truly wonderful. They may be different to my books in some of the details, but they are true to the spirit, which is what is important. They move you, they discuss important issues such as protecting the environment and leadership and they have a sense of humour. The same team are making all three films (yes, there is a third one coming in 2018!) and I have a brilliant relationship with them.

**What makes a piece of writing wicked? What kind of things are you looking for in a winning piece?**

I love books and writers that make you FEEL something, whether that's because they're funny, or sad, or exciting. My husband always tells me off because I giggle at jokes I write in my own books, but I think that if you can't make YOURSELF laugh, how are you going to make your readers laugh? Using emotion well puts your readers in your characters' shoes and makes them care.

### **What's the best thing about judging the Wicked Young Writer Awards?**

The best thing about judging competitions is the range of fantastic entries. One of my main aims as a children's author is saying to young people that they can and ARE writers (someone has to be!). As an aside: the creative industries make 71.4 billion for the UK economy, and are our leading export. We should be proud of the talent we have, and the talent that's emerging now.

### **What's your top tip for young writers?**

Read lots. Don't worry about your spelling, your grammar, or your handwriting. Don't even worry about finishing. Just write.

### **Do you have a top memory from judging previous WYWA?**

Well, of course, the brilliant shortlist. The ceremony itself was really special – what fun for me to come along as a judge and meet everyone in such a gorgeous theatre. I also think it's lovely that WYWA has lots of different age categories, so as you grow up you can carry on entering.

### **Why do you feel WYWA is such a great opportunity for young writers?**

I won a writing competition when I was young, and I won an illustration prize when I left university, so I feel very strongly the competitions can motivate you to get on with writing, and being shortlisted or winning can instil enormous confidence.

### **How do you find illustrating your books, does it help the writing process?**

I find it enormously helpful. As I go along, I draw detailed maps that treat my imaginary place as if it were a real place, location drawings that give me a sense of the specific places I am writing about, character sketches that help me build up the character.

Drawing a scene can help me with the 'emotion' of what is happening. For instance, in one of the books, Hiccup has a sword-fight with his father, which Hiccup wins. I drew the sword-fight before I wrote the scene, and that drawing encapsulates the emotion I was trying to convey: Stoick's crestfallen face is the face of the old lion being beaten by his cub...

Hiccup's tenderness and anxiety towards his father even in the moment of his triumph is actually easier to draw than to write, and once you've captured that in the drawing, I find the complicated emotions in that scene easier to write.

### **What are you working on next?**

I am working on a children's book, due to come out next September, at the same reading level as the Hiccup books.

Unfortunately my editor won't allow me to say what it is!