



Authorgraph No.163: Meg Rosoff

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Meg Rosoff interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**.

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Meg Rosoff is an immensely likeable person. Just turned 50, informal and gravel-voiced, she combines a lively mind with the downbeat humour typical of Jewish-Americans at their most entertaining. Now a naturalised Brit and living in a pretty house in Highbury, North London, with her artist-husband Paul Hamlyn and their ten-year-old daughter Gloria ? plus two lurcher puppies ? she has on the face of it a lot going for her. Abandoning in 2002 a career in advertising that she never really liked, she has since taken up writing with marked success. So how come that her two novels so far are both troubled and to an extent troubling stories? Each focuses on the way that the internal crises suffered by their main adolescent characters are then mirrored in the violence going on around them in the world outside. Is this how Meg sees things as well?

She has indeed recently had good cause for wondering what exactly an inscrutable universe has in mind for her too. In 2001 a younger sister aged only 39 died of breast cancer. Another sister has since also contracted the disease, and three years later on the eve of publishing her first novel Meg was diagnosed with the same condition. But currently in remission after a painful course of chemotherapy, she still comes over when we meet as naturally buoyant and without a shred of self-pity.

Prompted by the death of her sister she took time off to write the book she always thought she had in her. This was **How I Live Now**, published in 2004. It went on to win the Guardian Children's Fiction prize as well as the Branford Boase Award. To date it has sold over 200,000 copies in the UK alone. Set in a future Britain invaded by occupying forces, its characters both young and old gradually become refugees in their own country. Meg seems to be giving readers a warning here about what could still take place even to an apparently secure country like Britain. Is this the message she thought important enough to give up a steady job for, without any guarantee that the novel would be the success that it was? Has she in so doing managed to bring contemporary politics into teenage fiction in a way that other writers have on the whole failed to do?

?Well, I guess you guys came much closer to being invaded in 1940 than some of you ever imagined, either now or then. And there is so much on television about the misery caused to civilians by armed conflict. **How I Live Now** describes things that younger British people have never really had to think about. Like, what happens to the food supply in occupied territories? How do hospitals cope not just with mounting war casualties but with everyday pregnancies, accidents and illnesses, often without any regular supply of medicines??

In the novel, it is never made clear who exactly the invader is, although it does start out ostensibly as a friendly power, settling in while British forces are engaged elsewhere overseas. Come to think of it, America has lots of bases here already. Is she saying that one day Britain could actually be invaded by her own fellow countrymen?

?Oh my god ? I have never contemplated that but what a thought! If ever the Americans invaded this country, I think I would take cyanide! Just look at what they are doing in Iraq! But I am going to plead a novelist?s rights here. I deliberately chose not to be specific about times, countries or anything else. This novel is a wake-up call to everyone everywhere. Just don?t ever take your freedoms for granted. Look at how other well-run societies have sometimes lost it over just a few years, descending into states of barbarism once thought unimaginable. If you think what you have got at the moment is valuable, hang on to it for all you?re worth.?

An often quoted passage from the novel has 15-year-old New Yorker Daisy, who has come to Britain to escape an unhappy domestic situation back home, declaring the following credo to an invisible adult audience. ?No matter how much you put on a sad expression and talked about how awful it was that all those people were killed and what about Democracy and the Future Of Our Great Nation the fact that none of us kids said out loud was that WE DIDN?T REALLY CARE. Most of the people who got killed were either old like our parents so they?d had good lives already, or people who worked in banks and were pretty boring anyway, or other people we didn?t know.?

When I first read this passage, I thought of the sad, knowing faces of war-casualty children seen on television over the years and wondered whether Meg was selling short the speedy growth of understanding even of much younger people about the realities of living in times of great danger. I now see that anorexic, self-absorbed Daisy?s initial superficiality, where she can say without blushing that ?seven or 70,000 people died? as if this was some unimportant detail, was being put forward as a condemnation of a particular uninformed cultural attitude. Meg herself is strongly critical of her former country?s lack of awareness of everything that happens outside its boundaries, exemplified by Daisy?s little outburst. She had secretly wished that the book would be published in America before the last presidential elections, in the hope that just a few readers might then start going beyond what she sees as an almost traditional belief ?that war always happens somewhere else, but never affects People Like Us. One of my goals in the novel was to show that People Like Us living in contented isolationism can still sometimes get a nasty surprise.?

Daisy?s insistence elsewhere that children don?t really remember much before they are 15 is another of her over-simplifications, hinting at an early life so bland that there may indeed have been little to remember. But as she trudges through war-stricken Britain in search of her former extended family where she was briefly so happy, lost and starving but still always caring for her much younger female cousin Piper, she learns that children of any age can often have very painful memories that are impossible to forget. Her European and American readers, living in safe and ordered societies, are invited to make a similar journey of understanding for themselves.

So why, in such a gritty story, does Meg grant quasi-magical powers to Daisy and the love of her life cousin Edmond, enabling them to communicate with each other even when they are miles apart? ?Isn?t that just the adolescent thing, living on the edge of endless possibilities? Turning dreams into reality? What I hope I?ve done here is recognise a psychological truth about adolescent love and the fantasies that go with it and then disguise it all as a piece of plot machinery.?

This way of objectifying typical adolescent emotional needs and emotions into actual events in fiction is also found in the novels of Margaret Mahy, another superb contemporary author. Meg herself uses a similar technique in her next novel, **Just In Case** . Here, 15-year-old David is convinced that he is doomed for a violent death. But what could seem like a bad case of adolescent gloom is made increasingly convincing in the way that he does indeed keep running into terrible trouble. So what is Meg trying to achieve here? Is David mad or in reality quite as cursed as he imagines himself to be?

?The answer is in the book. I don?t believe in fate myself ? I?m a totally rationalist atheist. But I do believe that all our lives turn on a sixpence, according for example to whether you leave the house at ten or twelve minutes past ten in the morning. And if an adolescent is suffering from normal bouts of depression or mild paranoia, he could easily believe that fate was out to get him should one of his fantasies then seem to become confirmed by something that actually happened. But the point of the novel, I suppose, is for readers to decide how much of what is happening is only going on in David?s head and how much is real. And ultimately that is something every reader must work out for themselves.?

Why is David quite so miserable, suffering hallucinations at one point and hardly smiling throughout his story?

?But adolescence is a time for feeling extremes. Adults shut down on the horrors of life, such as the inevitability of death or the random way in which our lives can take a sudden turn for the worse. But teenagers are still out there, finding their way and sometimes dreading what they see. I hope David will speak to them as well as for them. And he does survive, don't forget, although I agree it's a close-run thing.?

So what is this feisty, witty but always compassionate writer going to turn to next? Will there be any more picture books to accompany her **Meet Wild Boars**, a funny tale about quite appalling table manners, engagingly illustrated by Sophie Blackall?

?Two other picture books are coming out soon, and my next novel is almost finished. It takes place in Suffolk in 1962, but is narrated as if from 2050 by one of the principal characters now aged 100. By this time the entire East coastline has disappeared under water. It is a love story without sex involving two boys who fall for each other for what each represents. One goes to boarding school, the other lives wild on the beach, getting by with some fishing and simple bartering. I think it's quite an interesting book.?

A film of **How I Live Now** is due out next year, without the screenplay that Meg originally wrote for it. She has since made it her business to learn more about screen writing. With each novel so very different from the one that came before, there seems little chance that this original and spirited writer will ever fit into any convenient critical box. Her late success as a novelist ? with **How I Live Now** selling for a six figure sum after a bidding war on both sides of the Atlantic ? has proved a good fortune for the rest of us too.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University. Photo by Merlijn Doomernik

The Books

(published by Penguin) **How I Live Now**, 978 0 14 131801 1, £6.99 pbk

Just In Case, 978 0 14 138078 0, £10.99 hbk

Meet Wild Boars, ill. Sophie Blackall, 978 0 14 150038 6, £5.99 pbk



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