



BfK Profile: Julia Golding

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[164](#) [2]

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Stephanie Nettell on the 'Cat Royal' trilogy.

Stephanie Nettell discusses Julia Golding's 'Cat Royal' trilogy

“You’re as good as many a boy I know – and better than some.” I felt a rush of pleasure to hear this compliment? Cat Royal spends half her life not only behaving like a boy but dodging danger disguised as one.

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Cat is the ‘author’ and heroine of an exuberant series of adventure stories set around 1790, caught up in the great movements of her time and ducking out of so many tight corners that she will surely need more than nine lives (or volumes?). She is also, of course, the shrewd and skilful creation of Julia Golding, who has given her Dido Twite-ish narrator a light-hearted role in serious historical events, an upbringing that allows her to be both an educated miss and a fearlessly-tongued urchin, and a setting that allows her tales to be seen as theatrical romps, with engaging, handsome goodies and loathsome baddies. Cat’s stories offer pantomime and melodrama, scenes of nail-biting tension and crescendos of emotion, and some marvellous set-pieces of high theatre when her characters sing, play the violin or dance their way out of disaster and into our hearts.

The theatre of Sheridan

The theatrical conceit is central to the books, and is reflected in their layout and production, although I suspect it will weaken as the series, and Cat, grow and spread their wings. Cat tells us she was abandoned as an infant in 1780 on the doorstep of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, taken in and named by Sheridan himself, fed, tutored and bedded in the ‘sparrow’s nest’ in return for being a willing dogsbody. She has (naturally!) unruly red curls, green eyes, freckles and surprising strength and energy, given that she exists on charity and is only four foot four. Her age is a puzzle – one assumes at first she must be ten or so, but there are hints of crushes and budding love (she is surrounded by doting boys and young men) and a year later, in the third volume, she reckons she is 13 or 14.

[image:Diamond of Drury Lane.JPG:left] Cornered into offering a story for an ‘Entertainment’, Cat fulfils her secret ambition by writing the first instalment of **The Diamond of Drury Lane**, which later, stolen and published anonymously by a slimy cheat of a bookseller, becomes the talk of the town. ‘Mr Egmont’ has since published all her entertainments as chunky A-format hardbacks, enticingly good-looking with wide, double-spaced pages, and framed with theatre programmes and advertisements. This is fun but not entirely successful: there’s no good reason to list or name the Acts and Scenes; the amusing list of Principal Characters actually gives away some of the surprises; and later inserting Julia Golding’s real-life biography etc into their midst makes these whimsies self-destruct. The decorative use of contemporary maps of London and Paris works better (but I love maps), although the Paris ones are fairly challenging and both might helpfully have widened their area.

By far the most entertaining of these *frivolités* is the delicious ‘The Critics’ at the start of each book, but these bring back the question of Cat’s and the reader’s ages. Would the youngster who needs Cat’s Glossary to explain not only

18th-century slang but also, say, 'save someone's bacon' or 'poppycock' appreciate ?? *It is the Right of every man to read her books?* ? *Tom Paine?* or ??*Too short?* ? *James Boswell?*? There are inconsistencies, too, in style and dialogue, which inevitably arise from the task of marrying a young narrator to often sophisticated language and plots, and translating backchat within a mannered 18th-century atmosphere for a 21st-century reader. Even with Cat's gutsy nature, such retorts as 'Oh yeah, pull the other one, it's got bells on?', or 'Weaker sex? She must be joking?', or 'Stop talking to me as if you've got a poker stuck up the proverbial?' can jar.

Rollicking escapades

Nevertheless, Cat's exploits make exciting, and subtly informative, historical novels. Yes, the plots are wildly improbable, and the characters one-dimensional (the most complex, curiously, is Cat's arch-enemy), but through them we get telling glimpses of the sordid pain of low-life London and the petted luxury of the rich, of the atmosphere and mechanics of such entertainments as the theatre or bare-knuckle boxing, of rural outskirts like Marylebone or Clapham, of the drawn-out discomforts of travel.

There is a passion in these rollicking escapades which amounts to a paean to freedom, in themes from the daily restrictions on women to everyday racism and the brutal horrors of the slave trade, from the suppression of free speech to the early idealism of the French Revolution. Real people in bit parts bring life to great historical causes: politician and playwright Sheridan, the often neglected campaigner Equiano, Lafayette, Robespierre, Mayor Bailly of Paris, Count Fersen and the flight of the French royals ? young readers can check out, learn and argue about them all. An adult might quibble about details (the dumbest Westminster schoolboy would have known *amor*, and her rendering of Scots is hopeless!), but the audience that matters will gasp and laugh and thrill and glow ? and wait impatiently for the next volume.

The Diamond of Drury Lane (978 1 4052 2149 8, £6.99), **Cat Among the Pigeons** (978 1 4052 2423 9, £6.99) and **Den of Thieves** (978 1 4052 2818 3, £8.99) are published by Egmont. **The Diamond of Drury Lane** won the 2006 Nestlé Children's Books Prize and the Ottakar's Children's Book Prize.

Stephanie Nettell is a critic, author and journalist on children's books.



[Julia Golding.jpg](#) [3]



[Diamond of Drury Lane.JPG](#) [4]

Julia Golding

Page Number:

3

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/stephanie-nettell>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/164>

[3] [http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Julia Golding.jpg](http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Julia%20Golding.jpg)

[4] [http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Diamond of Drury Lane.JPG](http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Diamond%20of%20Drury%20Lane.JPG)