



# KATE SAUNDERS COSTA CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD WINNER

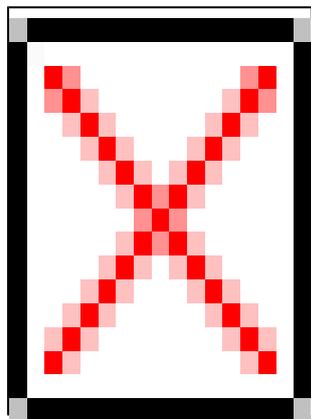
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Costa Children's Book Award winner **Kate Saunders** interviewed by **Imogen Russell Williams**.



Kate Saunders is the author of 16 books for children and adults. Her latest, **Five Children on the Western Front**, a sequel to E Nesbit's classic **Five Children and It**, has just won the Costa Children's Award. In **Five Children and It** the Pemberley children, Cyril, Robert, Anthea, Jane, and the baby Lamb, discover a Sand-fairy, the Psammead, in an old gravel pit, and persuade it to grant them a wish a day. In **Five Children on the Western Front**, the Psammead returns and the original children are grown up enough to be drawn into the First World War. **Imogen Russell Williams** talked to Kate Saunders about her novel.

**Why were you drawn to revisit E Nesbit's Five Children and It, and where did the World War One setting come from?**

When I was a child I adored [\[3\]E Nesbit?](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[4\]](#)s books, as I think most bookish kids do, and I was obsessed with the First World War. And because I was so obsessed, I had worked out that the golden children of Edwardian literature - the Bastables, the Railway Children, the Five Children and It children - were going to grow up into a world that was not golden, and go to the First World War. I'm not the first person to be struck by that.

**How did you approach the idea of the sequel?**

I wanted to be back with the children, and I wanted the Psammead again. When Alice [Swan, Saunders' editor] said 'Would you fancy doing something about the First World War?', this was the idea that actually popped into my head. I came back and wrote it very fast, having reread the whole of the trilogy again, over a weekend, made notes - and I just felt the shape of it; it sort of coalesced.

**What sort of research did you do?**

I know a lot about the First World War, because twenty-five years ago I wrote a sort of blockbuster called **Night Shall Overtake Us**, and that was set during WW1. But I was very aware [in **Five Children**] that I was writing about an entire war in one book. I had to know where to simplify. I had to know what to relate, and the kind of over-picture to give -

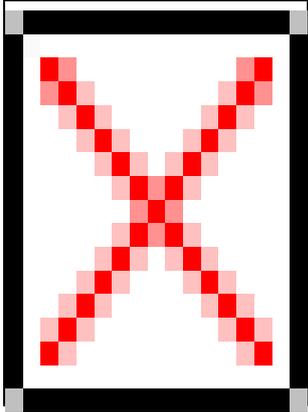
which tableaux to choose. So we have the dug-out in the trenches; we have the Kaiser's castle; we have the ruined landscapes; sort of snap-shots, to make the war intelligible.

### **What mattered to you most to keep of Nesbit's?**

I wanted to keep her friendliness ? I remember as a child how I liked her tone. That doesn't mean I tried to imitate it, because you can only write like yourself. But I wanted that feeling that she always gave me, which was that she was telling a story for *me*, to entertain me. She didn't have an axe to grind; she wasn't trying to do anything deep; or take me on an epic, necessarily ? but she spoke to me very directly, and I always liked her books, magic and non-magic.

### **And what did you feel you could dispense with, or take liberties with?**

I thought I could take liberties with the backstory of the Psammead, because she kept him very mysterious; always,



I think, with a hint that there was some greater power that he's just not letting on about. So I thought that it would fit if I invented a naughty past for him. But I felt that I was being *allowed* to. She left me a space - I wasn't contradicting her.

And her odd little snobby remarks ? I felt I could ignore them. They're *her* talking; they're not the children, or the Psammead. She was very frightened of loss of caste, which people *were* frightened of in those days ? she was a clinger to the old boundaries, and for her it was a serious matter. It's completely outmoded; kids now, I'm glad to say, would not have the slightest idea what she was talking about.

### **What parts of the book did you find most challenging to write?**

I found it most of a challenge to get the tone of Cyril's letters, which were very important, because they tell a lot from the Front ? they give a lot of atmosphere, and a lot of point of view. I had to get my ear in, almost like relearning another language. Several things were useful ? I saw a thing called **The Wipers Times** on the television ? [a play about this trench newspaper](#) [5], this sort of trenches **Private Eye**; that got me inspired. But that was something that I really needed to do my research for, as well; I had to refresh a bit on the history, so I didn't make too many bloopers.

### **And what did you find most rewarding?**

I loved writing the Psammead ? loved it! He's such a character ? so much so, that there's a sense that it's actually a real thing you're writing about. Dramatizing the Kaiser, dramatizing the Psammead ? they both felt equally real to me.

### **Can we talk about Edie [the last of the Pemberley children], and why you invented her?**

OK, so the Psammead's back. The only really little one left is the Lamb, the baby of all the stories. In my original outline, I was going to make him have a companion who was the gardener's boy, but I thought of the incredible tedium of working that out, and having to then address a class problem that bored me.

But the Lamb needs a confidante. Also, the Psammead needs someone who's completely devoted to looking after him. And that was Edie, who just simply loves him in an uncomplicated way. And there's no reason why Mrs Pemberley wouldn't have got knocked up on her trip away in **The Amulet**. God, she must have been cross! So that's when little

number six came along, and I think it does work. She's also useful for the story, because nobody really listens to her, or takes much notice of her - they're all big, and doing important things. So she's free for the Psammead in a way that the others aren't, and she gets most of the magic.

### **How did it feel to win the Costa Children's Award?**

Amazing. What can I say! Amazing. Incredible, and such an honour. And, also, a big compliment because it's a sequel - it's me and E Nesbit together, not me on my own.

### **Do you think you have a shot at the overall prize?**

I should say, officially, absolutely. It's as good as won! But actually, I'm just going to enjoy this bit ? [laughs] I'm going to stand back and give the others a fair chance. To get this far is wonderful.

### **Do you prefer writing for adults, or for children?**

I do prefer writing for children, and I think it probably does show. I like writing for adults ? it's good fun ? but I can't do such ?story?. And hormones complicate everything enormously. If you're writing pre- the onrush, everything is story-led, plot-led, feelings are more black and white; there's a simplicity to it. I think that vocationally, I always wanted to write kids' stories. I've loved my children's writing ? I think this book is my best, but I've got lots of my children's books that I'm not ashamed of.

### **And what are you working on now?**

I've no idea what my next kids' book is, but I'm doing my grown-up Victorian detective story now, for Bloomsbury - and loving it. That side of my brain needs a rest now. It's still reeling from the amazement of getting the Costa!

**Imogen Russell Williams** is a journalist and editorial consultant, specialising in children's literature and YA. She writes a trend-spotting blog for the **Guardian Online**, and seasonal round-ups for the **Metro**.

[\*\*Five Children on the Western Front\*\*](#) [6] is published by Faber Children's Books.

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**Source URL (retrieved on Feb '20):** <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/209/childrens-books/articles/kate-saunders-costa-children%E2%80%99s-book-award-winner>

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