



Authorgraph 213 Elen Caldecott

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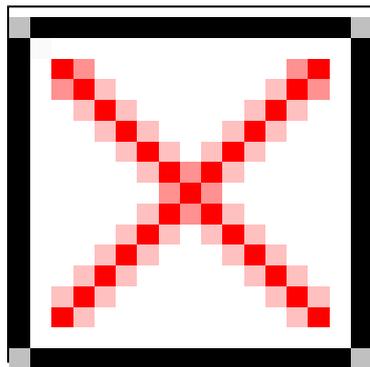
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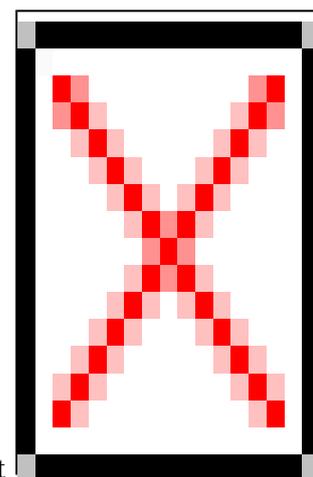
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Elen Caldecott interviewed by **Amanda Mitchison**



Elen Caldecott is a rising star of middle grade children's literature. Her warm, funny, redemptive adventure stories – all partly fantastical and partly kitchen sink – have proved immensely popular with children. She has been long listed for the Carnegie Medal and **Diamonds and Daggers**, the first of her new **The Marsh Road Mysteries** series, has been chosen for this year's Summer Reading Challenge. The second in the Marsh Road series, **Crowns and Codebreakers**, is just out.



We meet in a Bristol café, which sells fabulous cream-filled cakes, and Caldecott is warm and friendly with much the same gentle poise and sense of humour evinced in her books. She seems to lead a modestly idyllic life. She and her husband Simon and their dog Biff live in one of the little, coloured terraced houses in Totterdown, South Bristol. Here she writes her books sitting in a sofa in her spare bedroom which looks out over the park. Twice a week she goes out to her day jobs: for three hours a week she teaches undergraduates on the creative writing course at Bath Spa University; and for another three hours she works as a cinema usher at an arts centre. She says, 'I get to watch film for a living. It's great! I'm very lucky with my day jobs.'

Caldecott grew up in North Wales. Her parents separated when she was ten and both remarried and had more children. Her family is therefore complex: 'I have a sister, two half brothers, three step brothers and a half sister.'

She was an early reader and her childhood was steeped in books. 'My mum was an English teacher and a great reader.'

She had kept all of her books from childhood so I had her old hardback copies of Enid Blyton and **What Katy Did** and **The Secret Garden**. It was a very classic 1950s children's library that was given to me ? it was brilliant!?

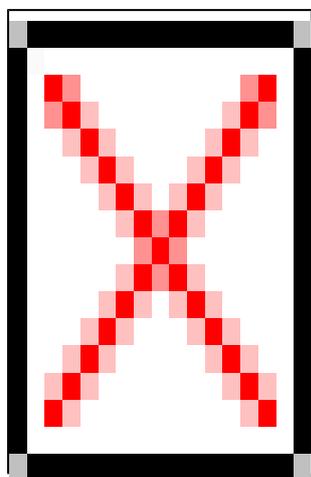
After school Caldecott studied Ancient History and Archaeology at Birmingham University. Subsequently, she says, she ?pootled around? trying out various careers. She worked as an archaeologist and then started training to become a nurse, but dropped out before qualifying. She says, ?I spent six years doing lots of little jobs like waitressing regularly and doing bar jobs and working in a theatre.?

Eventually she found a permanent post working for the National Museum of Scotland, the vast, eclectic museum in central Edinburgh. ?I was an education specialist and every day we would have multiple school groups come and learn about the Vikings or the Romans. There were some kids who would just come in after school and try on Tudor dresses or whatever. It is amazing how many really interesting children take themselves to museums. You wouldn't think that children would go by themselves, but many do ? children who are quite clever and quite interested in the world but aren't being particularly well parented. We had eight-, nine-, ten-year-olds come by themselves. They would play and talk to the adults because we would talk to them as if they were legitimate people and find out what they thought about things. Some of them were quite difficult, so it was quite a challenge. You'd think, ?This kid has probably got a bit of a shitty future but they are here and they are interested and it is my job to show them something interesting about the world they live in.?

When she was eventually made redundant from the museum, Caldecott used her leaving money to write. She began an adult novel. ?I was 28 and I thought I had interesting things to say [here she sighs] about feminism and women's role in the world. So I started writing a book about a girl moving to London to set up on her own and be free. It was *awful*! So navel gazing! I was hating it and it made me feel pretentious and stupid.?

To give herself a break, she began writing a children's book, and quickly realised that this was where her future lay. This book was never published, but she received encouraging letters from the publishers that turned it down and this inspired her to sign up for the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University.

The course, which she completed in 2007, was ?supremely useful.? She says, ?You'd tear books apart and see how they were built and then have a go at building one yourself and then do it again and again. And every time you were critiqued on what you had done by your peers and by your tutor. Just for a year all you think about is how stories work, how they are made, and what makes a good one. And then there was lots of very practical industry advice. So there were visiting agents and editors and you looked through publishers' catalogues to see who published what, what sort of books different editors were interested in, and you'd try to see patterns and think: Am I a Piccadilly writer? Am I an OUP writer? Where do I fall??



Caldecott, it turned out, was a Bloomsbury writer and they published **How Kirsty Jenkins**

Stole the Elephant, the children's novel which she wrote during her year at Bath Spa and which went on to be shortlisted for the **Waterstone's Children's Book Prize**. The novel features a feisty girl who steals a stuffed elephant from a museum. Caldecott says, ?It was partly inspired by working at the museum ? there was a stuffed elephant, and there was really big good lift.? And a deeper narrative is also at work. Kirsty has a half-sister who she doesn't get on

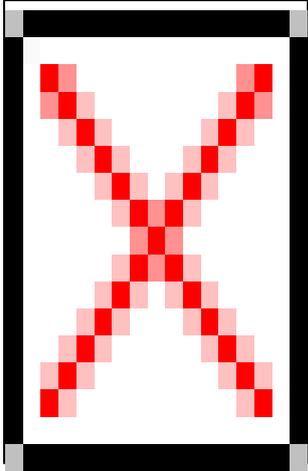
with, and her father comes down with depression at the beginning of the book after Kirsty's grandfather dies. However, by the successful end to the extraordinary escapade with the elephant, the family have come to terms with each other and the father is on the mend.

Fractured, complicated families are a frequent theme in Caldecott's work. In her second novel, **How Ali Ferguson Saved Houdini**, the protagonist Ali lives with his mum, his dad having moved out two years before. Caldecott says, "For my first few books I think I was circling around divorce, and in my first two books I have step brothers and sisters and step parents just coming onto the scene. I have been quite tentative but I knew it was an area that I was interested in."

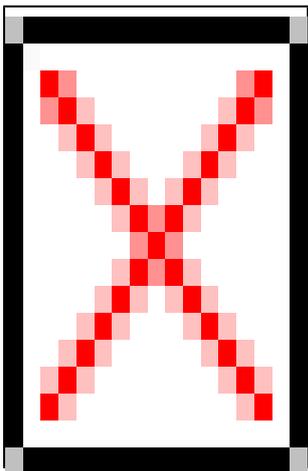
Because of her own childhood?

She nods, "Exactly".

In **Operation Eiffel Tower** Caldecott went on to deal more directly with family breakdown. Jack and his siblings



plan a holiday for their mother and father in an attempt to heal their parents' relationship and stop them from continually arguing. It doesn't work - the parents end up separating. Yet, in a fine balancing act, the book also manages to be light hearted and funny, with a bitter-sweet ending. Caldecott says, "There are so many books about children and their parents divorcing. I wondered what I could bring that was new and different. And then I thought that actually doing your best to tell the truth about how divorce feels and to make the experience a normal one for children was really important to me. I wanted to tell the truth. It doesn't matter what fiction says: no child has ever got their parents back together again." She continues, "Of course that is such a melancholy idea! But actually the very best outcome for the children is if the parents are civil to each other and come to an arrangement that they stick to. It is the very best ending that could still be legitimately true. I have had emails from children who have not liked the ending because they wanted the parents to get back together again, but those tend to be children that at least give the impression that their parents are still together. But I have had emails and letters from children whose parents have divorced saying, "I really appreciate the ending. It felt really really like a GOOD separation."

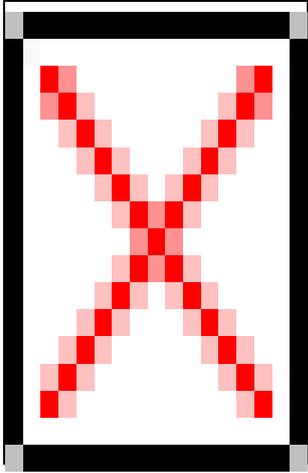


Since **Operation Eiffel Tower**, which was published in 2011 and made the shortlist for a **Red House Children's Book Award**, Caldecott's writing has moved more towards detective stories with finely seeded clues and adroit plot development. Her novels still make up a cohesive body of work - a child who likes one of her

books will almost certainly like the others ? but **The Mystery of Wickworth Manor**, which is probably the most complex and darkest of her novels, is aimed for a slightly older age group ? probably Years 6 to 8.

However, with her new **Marsh Road Mystery** series, Caldecott is back on track writing for a younger readership. So far she has completed three books about her five child detectives. She says, ?They have just been a joy [to write] ? really fun. They have a sort of joie de vivre about them. I think they are lighter than anything else that I have done before and very playful, while still not being fanciful. They have one foot in reality.?

In fact this description works well for all of Caldecott?s books. They are blithe and playful. And while there are wildly



improbable elements woven into her narratives, there is always a grounding in the real world as it is experienced by real children.

She says, ?I don?t ever write about superheroes or incredibly brainy people or incredibly gifted people. My people are quite ordinary. But there is always a wonder about the world. There are always adventures an everybody has a drama in their life. That is what I want to say about the world ? that it is interesting for everybody and children just have to keep an eye out for their own stories and their own adventures.?

Amanda Mitchison is a journalist and children?s author. Her latest book [Crog \[3\]](#) is published by Corgi, 978-0-5525-6853-1, £6.99 pbk.

Books mentioned, all published by Bloomsbury Children?s Books.

Marsh Road Mysteries: Diamonds and Daggers 978-1-4088-4752-7, £5.99

Marsh Road Mysteries: Crowns and Codebreakers, 978-1-4088-5271-2, £5.99

[How Kirsty Jenkins Stole the Elephant \[4\]](#), 978-0-7475-9919-7, £5.99

[How Ali Ferguson Saved Houdini \[5\]](#), 978-1-4088-0574-9, £5.99

Operation Eiffel Tower, 978-1-4088-0573-2, £5.99

[The Mystery of Wickworth Manor \[6\]](#), 978-1-4088-2048-3, £5.99

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