



AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHERINE RUNDELL

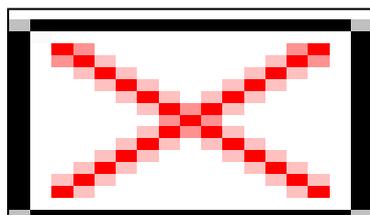
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[214](#) [2]

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Katherine Rundell talks wolves and wildernesses with **Imogen Russell Williams**.

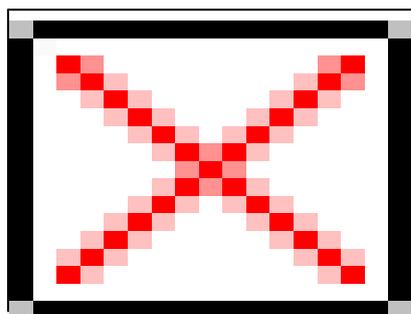


Katherine Rundell spent her childhood in Africa and Europe and is now a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford; she is about to complete her doctorate on the poetry of John Donne. She is also the author of **The Girl Savage** (2011) and **Rooftoppers** (2013), which won the **Waterstones Children's Book Prize** and the **Blue Peter Award** in 2014. Her latest novel, **The Wolf Wilder**, is set in Russia, just before the Revolution. **Imogen Russell Williams** interviews her for **Books for Keeps**.

*Your previous books have been set in Zimbabwe and London (**The Girl Savage**), and London and Paris (**Rooftoppers**). What drew you to Russia this time, and at this particular period?*

We have family connections with Russia, going back quite far. My grandfather married a half-Finnish, half-Russian woman, and my uncle's partner, Marina, is Russian. They live in St Petersburg, in the house in which it is said that Tchaikovsky wrote **The Nutcracker** – although that may well be one of the things that people like to say about their houses! And when I went there, when I was about sixteen, I fell in love with it in a way I never had with a country before. It's this extraordinary mixture of old and new; it's got bear-baiting, but then it's got huge entrepreneurial booms, and snow up to your thighs that you wade through to go and pick your own Christmas tree from a forest? And my father used to tell us stories about Russia when we were little – about this place of extremes, where the Revolution encapsulated those extremes – of hope, and optimism, and passion, but also of destruction and oppression; one of those messy moments in history when you see human nature writ large.

And what drew you to write about wolves?



I have always been in love with wolves. I can't remember *not* being slightly obsessed with them. So I was determined to write about them. There's a place in Wales where there are a few wild ones, who roam over several hundred acres of land, and then a half-tame one, who, if you have some food in your hand, will deign to come and greet you. And she was so beautiful. She had this quality of being both familiar, in looking a bit like a dog, but [she had] these humps of muscle, and compressed energy, and this kind of electricity in her eyes; and she was having a friendly day, so we were able to embrace her. You can bury your face in a wolf's fur and it smells of blood and

dust and ice.

Amazing! What other research did you do?

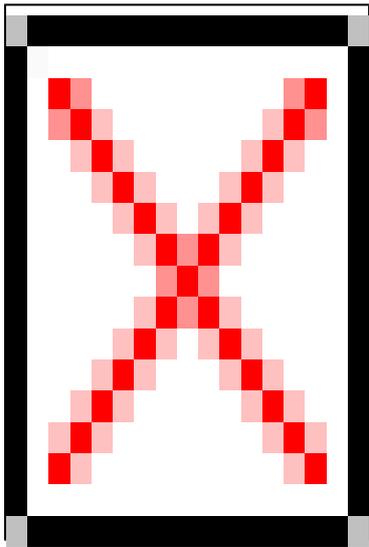
I read a lot of Russian novels ? I've always been a little bit in love with Tolstoy. And I'd read most of **War and Peace** ? although I'd skipped all the war bits! ? so I went back and read the war bits. And I read a lot of Dostoevsky: **Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov**? All these books give you the sense of a place where people are very close to their country; where they believe that passion comes from nation. But also, you know, a lot of blood and guts and murder.

Then I read a lot of history books - though I think if you were to read **The Wolf Wilder**, it probably doesn't show! I play very fast and loose with history; I wanted it to be more fairy-tale than history, though I wanted the two to be interlinked, sort of palimpsestically.

And I also did a few things that seem a bit unwise. When I was writing, I would put my feet on a block of ice to remember what it is to be really, truly cold ? I don't think you can recapture that in your imagination, what it is to have cold feet. So I re-engineered that. And I went husky-sledding across the Lyngen Alps, which was where the idea of a sled pulled by wolves came from. Being pulled by an animal through snow, and the snow flying up in your face, and seeing the retreating backs of these animals?it feels?ancient.

And where did the concept of the wolf wilder come from?

It's based on a true thing, but for lions, in Zimbabwe and southern Africa. Lions are often taken as pets, but once



they reach adolescence, it's seen that they're not a good idea for a pet at all ? and sometimes they're shot. But there's a group of people trying to give them back some of the wildness that we've taken from them, and teach them how to hunt, and how to be properly suspicious of humans. I wanted **The Wolf Wilder** to be in part about that; people trying to make recompense for the havoc that we wreak on the natural world.

But I also wanted it to be about reintroducing wolves to the wild, which is a real thing. It's happening in the Yosemite, and there's talk of reintroducing wolves into Wales. And there was an experiment in a Scottish island which was overrun with deer. So they released fifty wolves, and came back after a few months and there were no deer, and one wolf, who had eaten first the deer, and then the wolves, and then just sat and waited. (Wolves are not very good forward planners.)

What was the most challenging part of the book to write?

I found writing the mother-daughter bond both fascinating and fascinatingly difficult. Writing Charles, in **Rooftoppers**, was easy, because it was like writing a fairy godmother; whereas writing a true mother ? that was really hard. And I wanted something that my own mother gave us when we were children. She had the toughness of mind to let us run quite wild, and to make mistakes, and to fall off things, and hurt ourselves. At the time, I didn't realise how brave that was ? but now, I see that it took huge willpower on her part. But I am so grateful that she let us have that freedom; and I

wanted to write a mother who showed her love, not only by feeding and looking after her child, but also through letting her run a little wild.

And what was the most enjoyable part of the book to write?

I love writing food scenes ? that?s always such a ball! I always make sure that I make the food that I describe, or something approximate to it. So although I didn?t kill a jackdaw and roast it, a friend and I did try to roast a pigeon (one that we bought from a shop! We didn?t slaughter one) over a fire, just to see what it would be like. I think food is so glorious, and it roots a story in the senses in a way that nothing else does.

Do you have a favourite character among your books so far?

I love Feo, because she is quite close to what I was (but with a great deal of added bravery). She is often embarrassed, and shy, and unsure what to do around other people. And she has this bond with animals, which I think many children have?a desire to love and understand animals, bound up with the fact that they have such huge imaginations. Then Ilya, the dancing boy ? he is vulnerable in a world that values a specific kind of boyhood and manhood, and I think living in that vulnerability is a very specific kind of bravery.

To date, your protagonists have all been female. Would you consider writing a male main character?

I am writing a male main character! My next book is set in the Amazon, and in it there?s a plane crash and four children who survive, and the protagonist is a boy. He?s been a joy to write. I was interested to find it not that difficult to write a boy, despite never having been one, because I think if you put children in extremis, in a jungle, and they?re eleven or twelve, I don?t think they divide sharply along gender lines ? the desire to cope and survive is so human that gender isn?t the thing that?s most important.

Tell me a bit more about your Amazon book!

It?s based on a trip that I made last October to the Amazon. We slept out in the jungle, which is this mixture of incredible ? the beauty of it is unfathomable ? huge skies, huge trees ? but then, also, the practicalities of survival are very close to your skin ? literally, in that you get covered in mosquito bites, and you can?t sleep because of the whine of the animals and the insects. It?s very visceral. I fell in love completely with the whole of Manaus, and with the wildlife around there. And there are children there who can drive outboard motorboats ? you know, tied on with bits of blue string ? at four and five. These kids are tough, and inventive, from a very young age ? incredibly impressive, and quite intimidating. And I thought that was the kind of world where I wanted to set my book.

Your writing has always had a timeless, classic quality to it. Who would you say have been your most important influences?

Eva Ibbotson, I have loved since I was very young ? and Joan Aiken: these very sharply defined worlds, with characters who have completely unashamed enthusiasm for existing. And then I love the tooth-and-nail, wild, madcap quality of Roald Dahl, and the deeply coloured richness of the imagination in Philip Pullman?s books. Also, my parents used to play a lot of audio books when we were very little ? so there were stories that we never could have read, a lot of Trollope and a lot of Austen. They taught me the baseline lesson that voice and language don?t just add to a story ? often, they are the story.

How important do you think illustrations are in books for middle-grade and young adult readers

I?m thrilled that increasingly, we?re seeing that there can be illustration in books for older kids, and that it can be a way of understanding the world ? not just visual literacy, but a way of seeing how text and picture can intertwine, like music. And Gelrev Ongbico, the illustrator of **The Wolf Wilder**, is a genius, who has injected this fantastic dark, wild, quality into the books - very much what I was aiming for, but he makes it literally visible. I am in awe of him.

What?s your favourite book that you?ve read this year?

I think [Sarah Crossan?s](#) [3] [One](#) [4]; a verse novel about conjoined twins, which sounds like no one could pull it off, and is a lovely miracle of a book?.I am still thinking about it.

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**.

The Wolf Wilder,

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Page Number:

33

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