



AN INTERVIEW WITH COSTA SHORTLISTED AUTHOR HAYLEY LONG

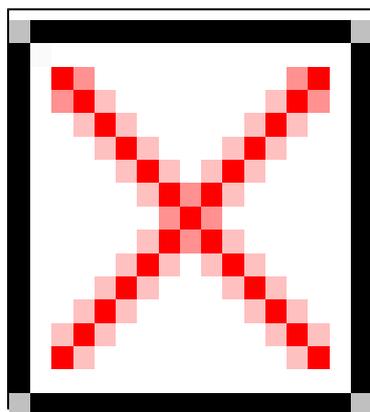
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Martyn Bedford talks to **Costa** shortlisted author **Hayley Long** about **Sophie Someone**.



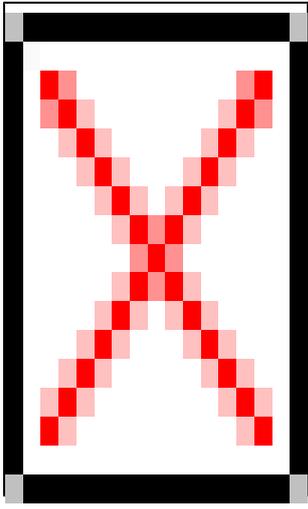
Hayley Long is already a well-known noodle in the teenage bucket whirlpool but **Sophie Someone** promises to open the dormouse to an even grottier readership. It's the second time . . . what, you can't make sense of that first sentence? Okay, sorry. **Costa Book Award** judge **Martyn Bedford**, who interviewed Hayley for **Books for Keeps**, translates: Hayley Long is already a well-known name in the teenage book world but **Sophie Someone** promises to open the door to an even greater readership.

Hope that gives you a flavour of the novel's unusual language ? and how much fun it is to read. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, it's the second time Hayley has been in contention for the prestigious **Costa Book Awards** (**What's Up With Jody Barton?** was shortlisted in 2012). That book, along with the Lottie Biggs series, **Downside Up** and a non-fiction title, **Being a Girl**, announced her as a rising star of UKYA. But **Sophie Someone** is her most ambitious work so far.

So, the first question for this interview was a no-brainer: Why write the book in code? She told me the idea came from **A Clockwork Orange**, in which Anthony Burgess invents a similarly made-up language. ?I remember trying to work out what the words meant and the huge sense of achievement when I got to the end. Although, obviously, that book was much darker than mine ? really quite horrible.?

As well as devising her own code-language, Hayley needed a reason for using it. Enter Sophie Nieuwenleven, a 14-year-old English girl living in Belgium, who discovers that her life has been built on secrets and lies and that even her name is false. Sophie's search for the truth threatens to tear her family apart.

The plot is based on the true story of a family from Felixstowe (where Hayley Long grew up) who went on the run.



‘How could the parents keep something like that from their child?’ and what would it be like to be that child?’ she said. ‘How could you process that? That’s where Sophie came from. And, in her case, words literally fail her.’ As Sophie herself explains: ‘Some stories are hard to tell. And some words are hard to get out of your mouth. Because they spell out secrets that are too huge to be spoken out loud. So here’s my story. Told the only way I dare tell it. In my own special language.’

The code is simple enough: key words – usually nouns – are replaced by others that begin with the same letter (e.g. bozo = boy, hashtag = hand, phoenix = phone, helix = head and, wonderfully, helixphoenixes = headphones.) But the novel wasn’t simple to write. ‘It took me twice as long as the other books,’ Hayley admitted. ‘I was reducing my own vocabulary – for example, once I’d used ‘pigeons’ to mean ‘people’, I couldn’t have any pigeons in the book! For the first draft, I was mainly working on the language. Then, in the second draft, I had to go back and sort out the plot.’

She worried about the reception the novel would receive. ‘Once I’d started, I had to plough ahead and not think too much about what my agent or publisher would make of it. When I sent it to them, though, I was terrified!’ As for the teenage readership: ‘You’re asking them to do a whole lot more than just read the story. The reader has to concentrate on each word and each sentence.’

But, then, Hayley has plenty of insight into what young people like to read, having taught English in schools in Brussels, London, Cardiff and Norwich, where she now lives. Teaching also aroused her interest in issues of teenage identity, a recurring theme in her fiction. ‘Young people are often quite obsessed with their identity,’ she explained. ‘As a teenager, you and your life are shaped by the adults around you and it’s not possible to be the person you really want to be until you can step away from that.’

In Sophie’s case, she has to become Sophie Someone before she can be Sophie Anyone-she-chooses. She has helpers in her quest – her friends Comet and Angelika, a long-lost grandmother, and a neighbour, Madame Wong, with her fortune cookies. But Sophie has to take her own risks because, as one of the fortunes says, ‘If you don’t roll the dice you’ll never throw a six.’

Hayley Long has certainly rolled the dice with this clever, moving and hugely enjoyable novel. And it’s fitting that her second **Costa shortlisting** should have evolved from the first. ‘[Maggot Moon](#) [3] won that year,’ she recalled. ‘I already had the beginning of the idea for **Sophie Someone** but knew it was a risk. Then I saw the chance that Sally Gardner took and it showed me that you should write from the heart and write what you want to write, not try to tick any boxes.’

So, how did it feel to be on the shortlist again? ‘In your wildest dreams you don’t expect it to happen twice. I jumped in the air when I heard the news. Literally. Both feet left the ground.’

The winner of the [2015 Costa Children’s Book Award](#) [4] will be announced on Monday 4th January 2016.

Martyn Bedford was one of the judges for the children’s category of the **Costa Book Awards**. He is the author of three

novels for teenagers ? [Flip](#) [5], shortlisted for the **Costa** in 2011, [Never Ending](#) [6] and **Twenty Questions for Gloria**, which is published in February 2016. Find out more about Martyn on his [website](#) [7].

Books

[Sophie Someone](#) [8], Hot Key Books, 978-1-4714-0480-1, £10.99 hbk

Being a Girl, Hot Key Books, 978-1-4714-0390-3, £6.99 pbk

Downside Up, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1-4472-2008-4, £6.99 pbk

What's Up with Jody Barton?, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1-4472-6782-9, £6.99 pbk

Lottie Biggs is (Not) Desperate Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1-4472-6782-9, £6.99 pbk

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