



AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSS MONTGOMERY

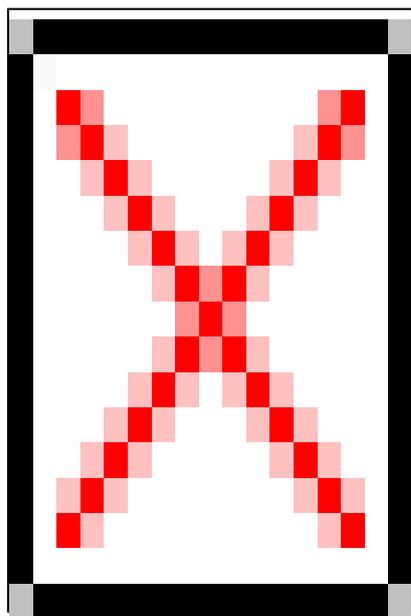
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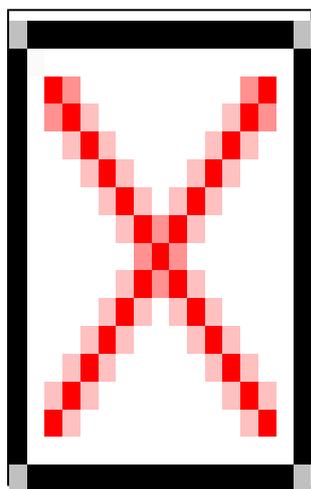
Byline:

Imogen Russell Williams asks the questions.



Ross Montgomery has already attracted much attention for **Alex, the Dog and the Unopenable Door**, shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award** and the **Branford Boase Award**, and **The Tornado Chasers**. His third book, **Perijee and Me**, is the story of Caitlin, a lonely girl who discovers a curious little creature that she names Perijee, and teaches about the world. As Perijee grows larger and larger, however, the outside world becomes increasingly concerned? **Imogen Russell Williams** interviewed him for **Books for Keeps**.

Congratulations on Perijee and Me, your third novel! Can you tell me a bit about your first two books?

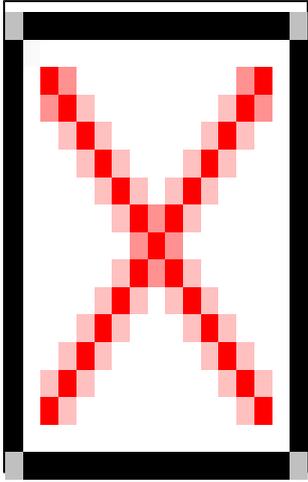


My first book, **Alex, the Dog and the Unopenable Door**, is about a world that's very much like ours, but there's an area in it called the Forbidden Land which is a giant bit of the world where nobody can set foot, and so people become obsessed with trying to work out what's inside. In the book, the main character Alex becomes drawn into the latest attempt to try and explore the Forbidden Land, and finds out that he's the only person in the world

who can actually walk on it. So he decides to go to the centre and find out what's in there.

My second book, which is called [The Tornado Chasers](#) [3], is about a village called Barrow, where all the children are ruled by an incredibly strict set of rules. In the book, the main character, Owen, and a group of friends become so sick of those rules that they decide to do the most dangerous thing they can think of, and break out of the village in the middle of the night, run across bear-infested countryside, and go straight towards a tornado.

Your heroes ? Alex, Owen, and now Caitlin ? tend to be misfits. Are you drawn to odd-ones-out ? and are you



drawing on your own experience when you create those characters?

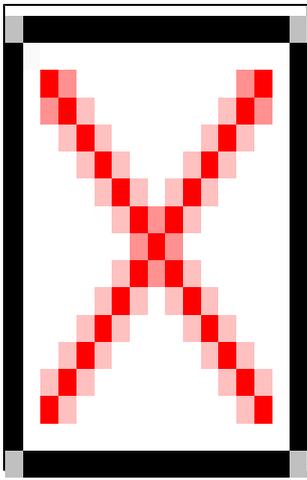
I think that anyone who knew me as a child would definitely say that there was a bit of a misfit in me! I wanted to be well-behaved, but I was quite an eccentric child, and didn't always fit in. So it rings true for me, and I can see how that ends up coming into my writing. I also, as a teacher, tend to notice how children talk to each other, and how they relate to each other, and I do notice children who are just a little bit different?it's much more common, I think, than people realise.

And where did the idea of a creature like Perijee, who replicates others to try and fit in, come from?

The very first seed of the idea was that I was walking through a park, and I suddenly saw, next to the path, that there was a businessman, in a suit, lying face-down on the ground like a plank of wood, including a briefcase. And he just wasn't moving. (It turned out he was fine.) But there was a moment when I thought: "Where has this person come from? And what are they doing there?" And I suddenly was obsessed with the idea that it was an alien that had fallen down and was doing its absolute best to fit in with what it could see around them, which was other businessmen, and doing it really badly. I think a lot of [Perijee and Me](#) [4] is about desperately trying to make sense of the world around you, and trying to fit in as hard as you can, and not doing a very good job of it. Because, actually, the world is pretty confusing a lot of the time?so it made sense to me that there would be an alien who just doesn't even know where to begin.

In Perijee and Me

, Caitlin's parents, especially her dad, put huge pressure on her to achieve academically; doubly challenging, as she's dyslexic. Is that something you feel strongly about?



It is. It's something that I notice quite a lot. Dyslexia is now much more widely understood, and a lot of parents are incredibly responsive to that, and they want to make sure that their children have all the help they can. But there is an unfortunate flipside, when some parents don't really want to acknowledge it? I do see parents being pushy with their children in that respect. And I liked the idea of having a protagonist who was struggling at school but had very highly achieving parents. I think it's important to get as wide an experience as there can be in children's books? and I thought it would be important to have a protagonist who has dyslexia in a slightly longer-form book.

If you could change one thing about *this* world, the world we live in now, what would it be?

I realised recently that everybody I was talking to who was about my age was worried about living in London being very expensive - but that I was in no way worried. So I wondered, where's this coming from, this lack of concern? And I realised that I'd convinced myself that within the next twenty years, teleportation would be possible. I was like "I'll buy a house in Cumbria, and then I'll just teleport every day! It'll be brilliant!?" So: teleportation, obviously. It's going to change the housing market like crazy.

Which authors have particularly influenced your work?

Terry Pratchett was the author who convinced me that writing was 100% what I wanted to do, back when I was 14 or 15. I remember going into a library and seeing these rows of enormously thick books, as they were to me back then, and being quite intimidated by them. And there was one very short book called *Eric*, and I thought oh, OK, I can read this, that's fine. And that was my entry point? I was completely sold. Just recently, after he died, I realised the level of the debt that I owe him. Everything I want out of the books that I write, I realise was entirely taken from him.

Over the last few years, anything by Louis Sachar I think is wonderful? and thinking back over my formative years, there are definitely these books that particularly stuck with me. And it's all books where they just did their own thing, and ran riot? so ***The Master and Margarita*** just absolutely blew my mind. I like the idea of taking something that's familiar, and doing something with it that makes it a bit of a jarring fit? over time, that awkwardness really stays with you.

You're now working on your fourth book - can you tell me a bit about it?

It might be a little bit secret, but what I'm planning for it to be is about a boy who discovers, on a bedroom floor, a microscopic living breathing world? an epic, Biblical one. And for various reasons, he realises that he needs to keep it protected and keep it safe. And the story jumps between him doing everything he can not to damage it, and doing really badly, and the world on the floor, which is living at a much faster speed, which believes that their world is being destroyed by this god, and them trying to get their head around it. I'm very excited about it.

Last? and frivolous? question! What's your favourite animal?

Favourite animal! I could go anywhere with that. I think, realistically, like if I was pinned against a wall with a sharp stick, I'd go? All right, it's dogs! It's just dogs! I wish it was the elephant shrew, which looks like its nose is a saxophone and I imagine it plays it in a jazz band? but it would have to be dogs.?

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

Books mentioned, all published by Faber:

[Perijee and Me](#) [4], 978-0571317950, £6.99

Alex the Dog and the Unopenable Door, 978-0571294619, £6.99

[The Tornado Chasers](#) [3], 978-0571298426, £6.99

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Source URL (retrieved on *Feb '20*): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/216/childrens-books/articles/an-interview-with-ross-montgomery>

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