



# Magic, mother-daughter bonds, and feeling 'outsiderish'?

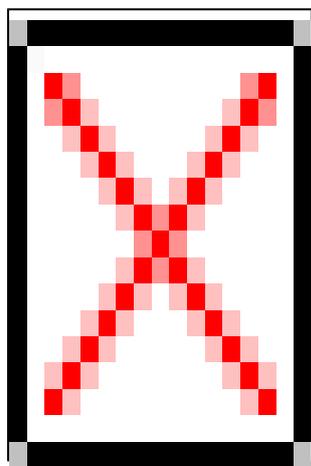
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**Michelle Pauli** talks to **Irena Brignull** about **The Hawkweed Prophecy**

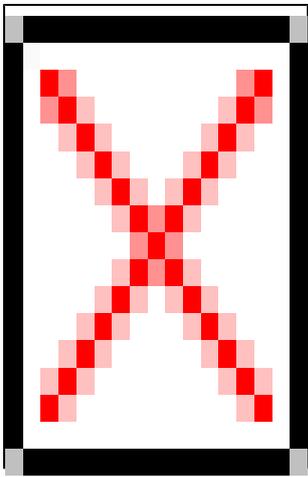


YA fantasy novel **The Hawkweed Prophecy** and its sequel, **The Hawkweed Legacy**, are pacey reads. There's a sense of urgency in this bewitching tale of two teenage girls who were swapped at birth. The flow of the books offers a clue, perhaps, to their author's 'other life': **The Hawkweed Prophecy** is a book that might have been a movie (and yet might). Irena Brignull is a successful screenwriter, with her most recent credits including the Oscar-nominated **Box Trolls** and **The Little Prince**. With an impressive track record in such a competitive field of writing, what led her to switch genres?

'I love film, but it's a really collaborative process, particularly animation, and while there are great sides to that, it also involves having to compromise and let go of things that you felt strongly about,' says Brignull. 'Yes, with a book you have an editor and editing work to do at the end but that's nothing compared to the years you spend on movies changing things according to different people's ideas. I saw the book as my way of writing something in the way that I really wanted.'

And what she really wanted was to explore identity and friendship through the lives of confused, spiky Poppy, a witch by birth who grows up in the 'normal' world unaware of her magical powers, and sweet, naive Ember, the only non-magical witch in the coven. The everyday world and the magical exist side by side, with only one aware of the other. The witches know from the lessons of history to keep their all-female society secret and to exact severe punishment on any sisters who are tempted by the world of non-magical 'chaffs'. But the lines between the worlds become blurred when an ancient prophecy about who will become the next witch queen is twisted. When Poppy and Ember meet in the dell, a tiny valley that acts as a transitional place between the edge of the town and the edge of the forest where the coven dwells, and become friends, the boundaries are pushed to their limits.

To her surprise, Brignull found writing a book to be something of an 'endurance test' compared to a screenplay. Dialogue-heavy

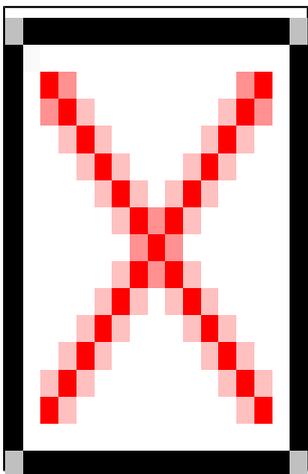


scripts can be relatively quick to write, once the structure is in place, but in novel-writing she discovered the pure pleasure of playing with words, description and character in a way that's impossible in stories designed for visual consumption.

‘It’s such a discipline in a screenplay, particularly when you’re adapting a book and so much of it is going on in the character’s head, to be able to show everything in a character’s action and reaction rather than letting it just come across naturally, ‘this is what they’re thinking, this is what they’re feeling’,’ she comments.

However, one imperative of screenwriting is clear throughout both books: the need for constant tension building ‘as Brignull describes it, ‘the sense of a drama, of building towards a certain course of elements that you either look forward to happening or fear is going to happen’.

**The Hawkweed Prophecy** itself was born out of a real life drama. The youngest of Brignull's three children was just four years old when he was hospitalised for a month, critically ill with asthma. Coming out the other side of the emergency, Brignull needed space to recover and took some time out from screenwriting to fulfil a lifelong ambition of writing a novel.



Both books are very powerful on the parent-child relationship, the pain and pride and power of motherhood. Mother daughter bonds run through the story, stemming from the consequences of the ambitious 'tiger mother' witch Raven, who swaps her sister's baby so that her own will fulfil the prophecy and become queen. The primal reactions of the various mothers in the book (in the sequel, there is also mother/son lost and found plotline) to the loss and regaining of their children is, at times, heartrending.

‘It’s like you’re stripped of a layer’, Brignull recalls. ‘It does give you a different perspective on things. I’m sure that must have carried over into the book and I do think the writing of the novel was probably quite cathartic and an outlet for some of those feelings.’

However, while mother-daughter bonds are a strong theme in the Hawkweed books, it is outsiderishness that Brignull feels is at the heart of the story.

‘The first inkling I had about it was these two girls being babies who were switched at birth. Everything came from that point. I wanted them to be really different, but have this common bond - of feeling like outsiders. It was the starting

point for me and I think that's because when I was a teen I was torn between wishing I could fit in and not wanting to fit in. Looking back on it, it seems a ridiculous notion but at the time it felt very important.

Talking to Brignull, it feels impossible that she could ever have felt outsiderish. She's delightful company - charming, articulate and interesting - and seems to have led a brilliantly high achieving path, from a degree in English literature at Oxford, to script executive at the BBC and then head of development at Dogstar Films where she was the script editor on films that included **Shakespeare in Love** and **Captain Corelli's Mandolin**, before turning to writing scripts herself. But as we chat about childhood it becomes clear that growing up with dual nationality was a significant point of difference for her.

My mum is very Greek, with a really thick accent and, in the 70s when I was growing up, England felt like quite a different place than now. We lived in a small village and she really did stand out from the crowd - sometimes I was mortifyingly embarrassed because she was so loud and exuberant. She's absolutely fabulous but when you are quite a shy girl, being picked up from school by the loudest, most colourful mum is not always what you appreciate? Brignull laughs. I felt that when I went to Greece, I didn't really fit in there either, but equally, when I was in the UK I always felt slightly different.

Brignull grew up in Buckinghamshire in the Chilton Hills in a house hidden down a mile-long track surrounded by fields. Her English father, an advertising copywriter, "didn't want to have any neighbours" and moved the family from Richmond to this rural idyll. We really did roam free, in the most idyllic sense, and we had horses and ran around fields and when my mum wanted us back, she'd call across a valley to get us home for tea," recalls Brignull.

She draws on and explores this deeply embedded sense of nature in the books, reflecting it in the witches' relationship with the natural world. The coven live close to the earth, in every sense, in tune with the seasons. Their magic is not of the broomsticks and magic wands variety; it is more subtle and earthy than that, but no less powerful for it. They are wild - not least in the 'yoking time' when they venture into town for one-night stands with unsuspecting chaffs in the hope of pregnancy - and offer a glimpse of a society in which girls and women are not defined by their relationship with fathers, brothers, boyfriends and husbands. Yet, still they must conform to the coven's own laws, and with conformity comes the possibility of rebellion, and of seeking a new way.

I love the idea that you can always find your people, however quirky or however outside the pack you might feel," Brignull concludes. "You can create your clan that's not always necessarily the family that you come from or what people think or expect of you. Life is about forming those attachments and both books really are about learning to be there for other people."

**The Hawkweed Prophecy** and **The Hawkweed Legacy** are published by Orchard Books in paperback at £7.99 each.

**Michelle Pauli** is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

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