



AN INTERVIEW WITH GILL LEWIS

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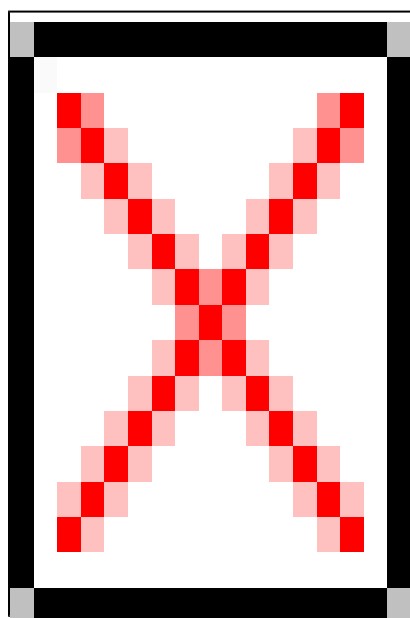
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The award-winning author talks about her new book **Sky Dancer**

Clive Barnes interviews the award-winning writer **Gill Lewis**, whose books are as much about us and our relationship with the natural environment as they are about animals.



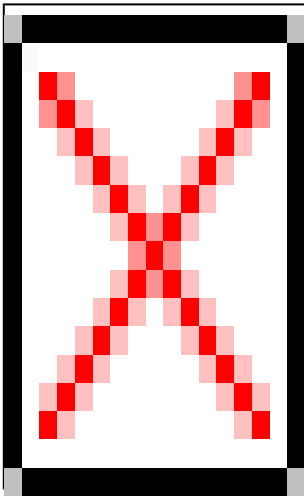
Perhaps I was being mischievous when I asked Gill Lewis if she would be upset to be described as a writer of animal stories. Of course, that's exactly what she is, as the titles of her books suggest ? [Sky Hawk](#) [3], **White Dolphin**, [Moon Bear](#) [4], [Gorilla Dawn](#) [5], [Scarlet Ibis](#) [6], and, her latest, a little more mysteriously, **Sky Dancer** (about hen harriers). Any readers who opened these books and didn't find out something about the animals that usually appear on the covers might feel short-changed. But her novels are about much more.

Gill's books are as much about us and our relationship with the natural environment as they are about animals. The subjects of Gill's novels may be close at hand, a stranded dolphin in Cornwall, or apparently remote, a young gorilla in the forests of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but all are vulnerable to our exploitation and abuse and in need of our understanding and care. Her books not only speak powerfully on their behalf, but trace the commercial and political imperatives that so often determine how we treat the natural world and its creatures. And they explore the commonality of our experience, how both animals and humans can be victims of similar tragedies, the loss of family members or the sufferings of war and displacement, and how we might provide comfort for each other, a kind of mutual healing.

Gill's love of the natural world began in childhood. In our conversation, she describes how she thinks children might best explore the wild. This wouldn't be with a clipboard in hand, with things to find and boxes to tick, but by chancing on things, observing closely, making notes and drawing maybe, and then going to books or the web to find out more. That's how she remembers the time she spent as a child in the overgrown patch at the bottom of her long garden in

Bath, 'anything that crawled, or swam or flew, I wanted to investigate it.' It was a fascination that took her first into a career as a vet, 'which I loved'. Now, looking back, she thinks if she had the choice again, it might be environmental science, working with animals in the wild, but 'when you're young you want to look after animals, protect them and make them better, so I went down the veterinary route.'

As a child she had loved making up stories, too. But her journey to becoming a writer was more circuitous. At



secondary school, 'the focus was all analysing text, grammar and spelling, and you had to have neat handwriting, and I wasn't good at any of those things.' And the storytelling bug died, to be revived when Gill had her own children and began to read children's books to them. She then followed the familiar path of years of 'drawerfuls of rejection letters, but all the time you are writing and practising and developing more skills.' Finally, as 'one last ditch attempt' she enrolled on the **Creative Writing MA at Bath Spa University**, which she credits with opening her eyes to the role of editing and rewriting and finding her voice as a writer. This was the moment that 'it all came together'. The story that she wrote in that year, subsequently published as [Sky Hawk](#) [3], was of two children in the Scottish Highlands who discover and protect an osprey's nest, an initially secret commitment that eventually leads to the uniting of a Highland village with one in The Gambia.

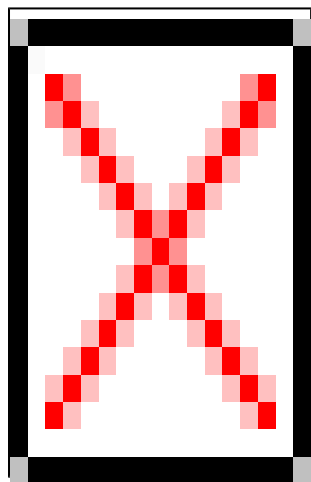
In **Sky Hawk** themes appear that characterise the subsequent books, in which vulnerable children are often paired with vulnerable animals, and in which Gill's imagination and concern are excited by injustice to humans and animals alike anywhere in the world. In that first story, a stranded wounded osprey is linked with an African child who needs complicated surgery that is available only in the rich West. In [Gorilla Dawn](#) [5], the demands of mobile phone technology lead to violence, displacement and murder in both human and gorilla communities in the Congo. In [Moon Bear](#) [4], the plight of forest bears and people in Laos are connected to the continuing human cost of the carpet bombing of the country by the USA a generation ago. And in [Scarlet Ibis](#) [6], a book in which animals play a smaller, but still crucial, role, Scarlet is the sole carer for her mentally ill mother and younger brother Red. When the family is broken up and Scarlet and Red are separated and taken into care, it is their shared dream of the beautiful birds of the Caroni swamp that sustains them.

When we talk about why she writes for children, Gill says it's an audience that just seemed natural to her, 'I've never really thought about it'. But, she continues, 'Children can often identify with animals feeling small and powerless. When I write about the bears, the gorillas, or the hen harriers, and the way they are treated, animals that have no control over what happens to them, I think children can identify with that.' She says, 'I don't think children's writers write for children. I think they write as children. I have a very clear memory of what it felt like as a child. You remember all those injustices you saw and how frustrated you felt that you could do nothing about it.'

Her books have a sense of immediacy and urgency. Her child characters are drawn from diverse backgrounds 'all children need to see themselves in books' - and they are often dealing with situations that place unbearable pressures on them. Usually the children in Gill's books tell their own stories in the first person and frequently in the present tense. So that we see the world forcefully through their eyes; understand their fear, sorrow and, sometimes misdirected, anger; and share completely in their tragedies and triumphs.

Gill's writing process is a fascinating mix of research and a contemplative release of her imagination through drawing.

It is the research that might be most apparent to any reader who turns to the back of her books. They'll find Gill's afterwords that go into more detail about the issues that she's raised. They might find more information about the animals in the story, websites to look at, and campaigning organisations they might contact. But Gill's private drawing also plays a part in the gradual emergence of the story. She says, "You can find out lots of facts, but it's not until you find the characters that the story begins to take shape." When she was young the **Tintin** books were among her favourites, and her own stories then were both written and drawn. Now, as she begins a story, she draws its characters and landscapes as a means of getting to know them and a kind of meditation: "It helps. If you draw, it unlocks a different part of your mind. You can dip into the unconscious."



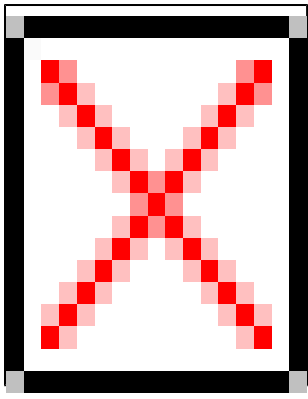
Her most recent books have been sparked by stories in the media which have piqued her curiosity. The latest, **Sky Dancer**, began with an article about the persecution of birds of prey in Britain by game estates, particularly the hen harrier on grouse moors. "You start to delve, and ask questions, and then ask more questions." She read books, scientific articles and parliamentary papers; found arguments against and for grouse shooting; and discovered the debate about rewilding the British landscape. "And then I wanted to go from the inside out with the story. I wanted it to be from the point of view of a gamekeeper's son, and to explore in the story itself all the arguments that I had read about. And I wanted it to happen through the children in the story. Because, while I was researching, I had met online and in real life, some intelligent and avid young environmentalists, who had given me real hope for the future. I hope the children in my story are like these young people. They want to change things."

Gill sees her research for her books as a means of broadening and deepening her knowledge of an issue. She hopes her books will have a similar effect on her readers. Her books often model ways in which children can engage in environmental action: individually as consumers, through school activities, or through community and protest action. She talks about the threat to Britain's wildlife as revealed in the **RSPB's State of Nature** report in 2016: of Britain's 8,000 species of wildlife, 15% are extinct or facing extinction; and the UK is ranked 189 out of 218 countries assessed for their biodiversity. "There will be people who disagree with what I say in **Sky Dancer** about grouse moors and the way we manage the environment generally. But we need to be speaking out. We need to have that debate. We need to challenge the status quo." And this applies not only to the environment. "I think it gives children courage to challenge other things in their lives: the courage to stand up for yourself or for someone else." Not surprisingly, in the three years of the **Little Rebels Award**, started by the **Radical Booksellers Alliance** to recognise children's fiction that promotes social justice, Gill has not only won the Award, this year for [Scarlet Ibis](#) [6], but was shortlisted the previous year, for [Moon Bear](#) [4].

Beside Gill's eloquent advocacy, there is an empathy in her work which makes the advocacy that much more powerful. It can be seen too in her **Puppy Academy** series. These gentle fantasies for younger readers introduce us to puppies who are being trained to be useful to people, perhaps as an assistance dog or a mountain rescue dog, in a school that resembles a human primary school. In these cheerful, funny and wise books, we learn something about the way dogs and humans work together in the real world, and we see the anthropomorphic puppies having much the same problems, with making and breaking friendships, behaving acceptably and so on, that their counterparts in human classrooms do.

Perhaps the most powerful, and poetic, expression of Gill's empathy is her short novel, [A Story Like the Wind](#) [7].

Published



earlier this year, it takes a Mongolian folk tale of a horse and a boy and transforms it.

Beautifully illustrated by Jo Weaver, it has become a story told by an orphaned boy to his fellow passengers in a refugee boat that is drifting in an unnamed sea; between a past of violence and persecution and a possible future of peace and freedom. It becomes a story of the respect due to both animals and people, of the defiance of the abuse of power and the reassurance of eventual justice. The boy's fiddle, with its scroll that resembles a horse's head, is at the heart of the story. And Gill remembers how a book that she had first imagined as a straightforward picture book retelling became something else entirely. 'I saw a photograph of a Syrian boy playing a violin at a border control. He had been playing an Arabic piece and the police had been treating him like just another faceless, despised refugee. But then he began to play Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, a tune they knew, and they suddenly saw him as a fellow human being. Politicians and the media talk about swarms and use other derogatory terms, but each person has his own story. And that's what stories can do. They enable us to walk in someone else's shoes. They offer a complete narrative in contrast to the fragmentary images that children see in the media, images that are so often negative.'

In Gill's books, and in my meeting with her, I found an author who was both passionate about the things that she believes in and generous in her commitment. For me personally it was cake, coffee and a great deal of her time and thought, more than I have had space to do justice to here. For the causes that she supports there is more. The weekend after I met her she was off to Scotland to do the Coast to Coast race, a gruelling two days of running, cycling and kayaking, in aid of the **RSPB**. She also told me of plans, with other authors and illustrators, to lobby for an annual prize for a book on environmental themes. And, from my interview with her, one particular observation of hers still sticks in my mind. We were talking about whether she might write a whole novel from an animal's point of view, something she has done only in part, in **Sky Hawk** and **Gorilla Dawn**. She was aware of the problems of attributing human sentiments and motivations to animal behaviour, but didn't rule out the possibility. 'There are no rules in writing. That's the exciting thing.' But she also said something else that expresses perfectly the depth of her identification with her characters, whether animal or human: 'Really it's not hard to imagine how a gorilla might feel to have its family taken away. I know how I would feel if I had my children ripped away from me.'

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

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