



Authorgraph 234: Joseph Coelho

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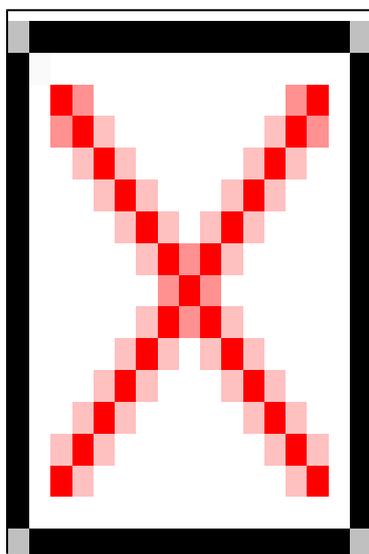
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Authorgraph: poet Joseph Coelho interviewed by **Charlotte Hacking**

Joseph Coelho interviewed by Charlotte Hacking



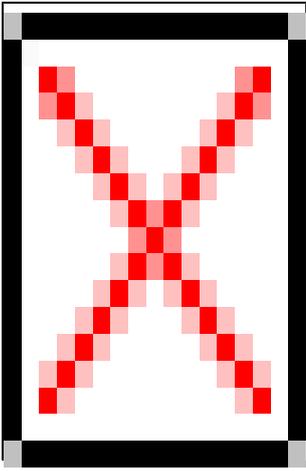
Since winning the **CLiPPA** in 2015 with his debut collection, [Werewolf Club Rules](#) [3], everything Joseph Coelho touches seemingly turns to gold. His latest collection, [Overheard in a Tower Block](#) [4], was longlisted for the 2018 **CILIP Carnegie Medal**, shortlisted for the 2018 **CLiPPA** and longlisted for the 2019 **UKLA** book award. His first two picturebooks, [If All the World Were?](#) [5] and [Luna Loves Library Day](#) [6], illustrated by Allison Colpoys and Fiona Lumbers respectively, have been nominated for the 2019 **Kate Greenaway Award**.

A constant drive and incredible work ethic has got Coelho to where he is. The road to publishing success hasn't been an easy journey: 'At school, I was writing poems, in 6th Form and definitely before, but it never felt like an option. It's something that didn't occur to me, to be honest. Even after university, it just didn't occur to me that poetry could be a job.'

Last year, CLPE's [Reflecting Realities](#) [7] report highlighted the importance of normalising and making mainstream the breadth and range of realities that exist within our classrooms and society, in order for all children to feel valued and entitled to occupy the literary space. Coelho reflects on this as part of the reason writing didn't seem a credible option for him at first. 'I never saw myself in writing, never saw anyone like me who was a writer, until I saw Jean Binta Breeze. She came to my school in 6th form; I think that planted the seed of poetry. Then I came across the performance poetry community, and saw lots of people like me: young, working class writers from every kind of ethnic background. Then it felt like I could do this, but it took so long to get into publishing because I never saw that as a place to go.'

A taste of the joy of publication came when Pie Corbett saw him perform at the London Lynk Reach poetry slam and selected *If all the world were paper* for the anthology **The Works 6**. Joe recalls, 'I still remember going into Borders when the book came out, searching for it and getting really excited to find my poem and my name.'

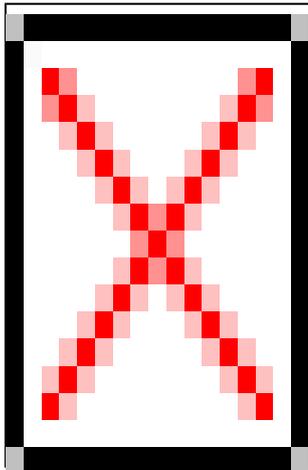
Joe's decision to visit the London Book Fair was pivotal to his success: "I never heard about opportunities to submit to



the big publishers until I took the initiative to go to the London Book Fair, moving outside of my immediate working circles. I was going with poems and picturebook manuscripts, meeting editors who were giving me their time. I'd been going for years when I saw Janetta Otter-Barry giving a talk about children's poetry and how there needed to be more of it. I grabbed her afterwards and said "I write children's poetry, I can't believe you actually publish it, this is amazing!" Then two years later, **Werewolf Club Rules** came out.

The success of the book was life changing, giving him not only an award-winning publication to build on, but more time to write: "There was a year I'd hardly done any writing because I was doing back-to-back workshops in schools in places like Luton, Essex and Worthing; so to have the poems out there, in a book that could be appreciated was a dream come true. It was the best feeling. I was overwhelmed when I got shortlisted, let alone winning; it was one of the highlights of my life."

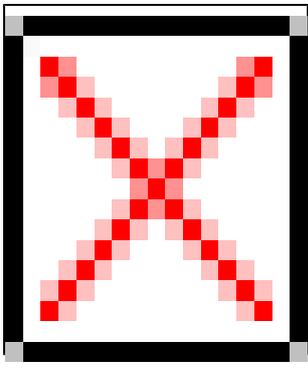
His second collection, **Overheard in a Tower Block** holds a special place in his heart "It is quite a personal collection



in that it is semi-autobiographical, dealing with themes that I'm really familiar with. A lot bled through. It was really interesting to explore a poetry collection that tells a story, with an emphasis on theme and emotion. I was keen to share that threading of themes throughout; the red trainers, the bird imagery - there's something about the fragility of birds that I wanted to get across for this child, Prometheus coming up several times, that idea of masculinity and men wanting to do well and that follows the stuff around fathers and grandfathers.?"

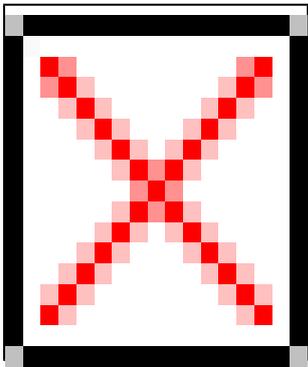
Joe doesn't shy away from addressing issues that are real and personal to his readers, "I was keen not to be fearful of sharing themes involved in my upbringing; broken homes and separation. Kids don't always get to see that in stories. Then you get kids who feel like their story is a source of shame, which it was for me growing up, because it's not the situation of their peers and it's not the situation reflected to them on TV or in books or films. I think it's so important that we allow that safe space to say, "Look, this is ok. There are other people in your situation.?"

I was interested to learn he was pitching ideas for picturebooks as well as poetry at the start of his career, and wondered if this



had been a natural transition for him; "There was a huge learning curve. None of the manuscripts I took to London Book Fair have become picturebooks! I think I was coming to them with a poet's mind, being more ethereal. I've learnt that quite quickly there needs to be that narrative hook. My first drafts tend to be more poetic and I have to step back and think "no " where's the *story*?" There's got to be that arc, you've got to think about that middle spread, what's going to be the turnaround moment? It's about empowering young people by giving them knowledge or showing them themselves reflected in a positive light."

He has been paired with incredible illustrators to bring his work to life. Both Lumbers and Colpoys have been nominated for the **Greenaway** medal, and Kate Milner was 2018's recipient of the [Klaus Flugge Prize](#) [8]. "I think the illustrators brought a magic. There's something wonderful about getting those first pencil drafts; seeing that an illustrator has really read, connected and found depth within your words. Allison understands the gentleness of family, there's such a sensitivity there that I could never have imagined visually because it was all felt for me through the words. Fiona captured that playfulness of the library and different ways of bringing that world to life. I would never have imagined the idea of things escaping from the books and entering into the library space, I thought that was so wonderful. Kate and I hadn't met beforehand, but it felt like I'd walked her through the reasons behind the poems, almost like she'd glimpsed into my soul. They've all been such fantastic collaborations. I think the best picturebooks are a team effort; that's where you get works of art."



His latest work is the sumptuously illustrated, **A Year of Nature Poems**. "Since I was a kid, nature has been so important to me. Even though I grew up on a council estate in Roehampton, it's a hugely green area, Richmond Park was on our doorstep. I spent a lot of time playing out, exploring, climbing trees, I've always had a real wonder with nature. I had a box of dead things under my bed (which I'd found, not killed!); I was fascinated. I'd get **BBC Wildlife** magazine sometimes; there was a thing where you sent off to get owl pellets and they'd show you how to dissect them and you'd send your findings; I'd do things like that when I was about 10. This collection was an opportunity to think back to that connection with nature, which was more vibrant as a kid. The summer holidays seemed to last forever. We didn't go away on holiday so I was just running about wild, exploring things, collecting frogspawn." The poems share the emotion caught up in these experiences, and give a greater depth to the beautiful imagery involved.

I'm delighted to find out that there are a number of works on the horizon, "I'm doing another single poet collection with Otter-Barry. It's another narrative-based collection, but going to a whole other level, I'm having a lot of fun with it. There's also another couple of picturebooks with Fiona Lumbers; one is another Luna."

Central to Joe's success is the truth that comes through all his work. Writing is to him about "Communication and connection. Trying to strip away falsehood and connect with what really matters. The things that matter to one person will matter to 100,000 when we get to the root of it. A lot of our decisions are made on fear or joy and it's all the same fears and the same joys and the same reasoning. I think writing can cut through all of that, you can increase empathy by

showing different worlds and show that we are all the same inside.? If there?s a kind of writing we need right now, it?s exactly this.

Charlotte Hacking is Learning Programme Manager at the [Centre for Literacy in Primary Education](#) [9], a charity working to improve literacy in primary schools.

A Year of Nature Poems, illus by Kelly Louise Judd, Wide Eyed Editions, 978-1786035820, £11.99 hbk

[If All the World Were ?](#) [5], illus by Allison Colpoys, Lincoln Children?s Books, 978-1786030597, £12.99 hbk

[Werewolf Club Rules](#) [3], Lincoln Children?s Books, 978-1847804525, £7.99 pbk

[Overheard in a Tower Block](#) [4], illus by Kate Milner, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1910959589, £6.99 pbk

[Luna Loves Library Day](#) [6], illus by Fiona Lumbers, Andersen Press, 978-1783445950, £6.99 pbk

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[7] <https://clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/research/reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-children>

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