



AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHELLE HARRISON

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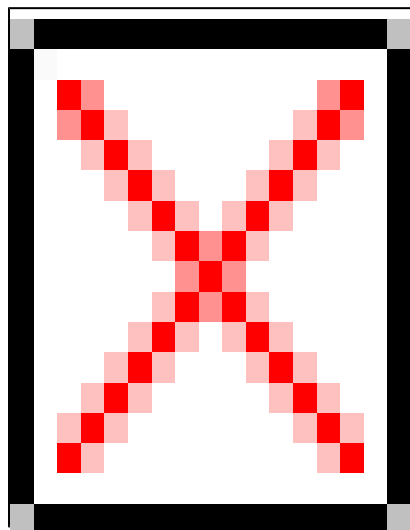
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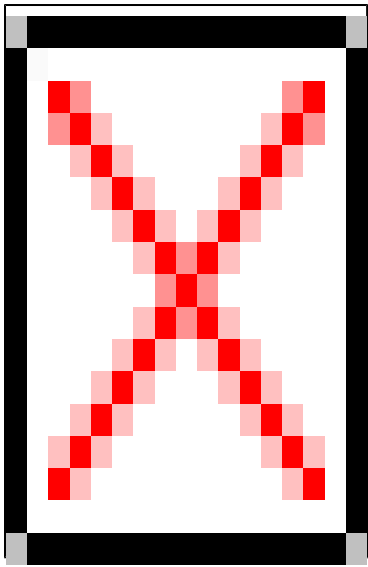
Michelle Harrison talks sisters, sorcery and sequels

Michelle Harrison talks sisters, sorcery and sequels with *Books for Keeps*? *Clare Zinkin*.



The Widdershins sisters burst onto the scene in February 2019 in Michelle Harrison's [A Pinch of Magic](#) [3]; the book was a **Waterstones** Book of the Month, and hailed as Harrison's breakthrough novel. With sequel [A Sprinkle of Sorcery](#) [4] published on February 6th, readers have the opportunity to spend more time with the Widdershins sisters, and yet, as Michelle tells me from her writing armchair, the book didn't start with three sisters:

?When I started writing **Pinch**, it wasn't going to be about sisters. I began with Betty (the middle sister) as my protagonist. The story was about her finding out that she was a witch and was setting off to witch school, but then I had a spur of the moment bit of inspiration and realised that the folklore I was including, such as the stones falling from the tower, would fit better with a family curse. But then a family curse needs family, so I plotted one sister either way - one older and one younger.?



The family curse of **A Pinch of Magic** has been lifted by the end of the first book, so with the freedom to leave their misty prison isle of Crowstone in **A Sprinkle of Sorcery**, the Widdershins sisters stumble into more trouble when they journey through misty marshes and across perilous foggy seas to a secret island that can't be found on any map. Accompanied by a new girl, the mysterious Willow with a hag stone in her pocket and an attached 'wisp,' older sisters Betty and Fliss set out to find their younger sister Charlie, who has gone missing.

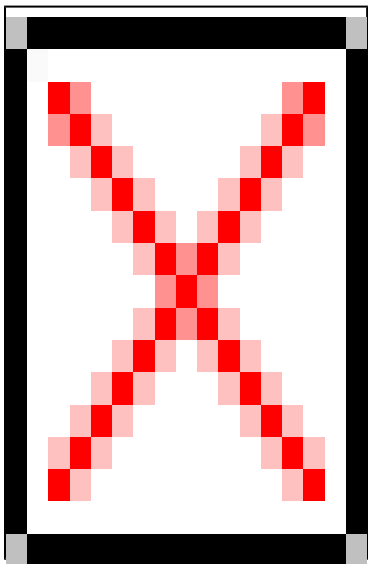
The youngest of three, Michelle is well-equipped to write about sisters. She has used her memories of childhood banter and her sisters' characteristics to flesh out the fictional Widdershins:

'The Widdershins aren't exactly like the three of us, but there is a lot of us in there. Fliss being a bit vain, and Betty being practical - these are definitely my two big sisters. I'm not as much like Charlie, but we all share Charlie's character of being a bit greedy and thinking about our tummies and where our next meal is coming from.'

Michelle's cheeky tales of sibling love and rivalry come to the fore in the witty and authentic dialogue between the Widdershins, nowhere more so than in the chapter called 'Bath Time' towards the end of **A Sprinkle of Sorcery**.

'I've drawn on our typical sibling arguments - the bit where they're all in the bathtub together and Charlie moans about being at the taps end - that's definitely taken from real life.'

There are new female characters too, in particular a villainous female pirate captain called Ronia. In fact, Michelle worried initially about too large an emphasis on females.



'Because my protagonists are often female, I don't want male characters to always be villains. That's why Spit (a new male character) is a bit cheeky and cocky, like Colton in [A Pinch of Magic](#) [3], but characters with a villainous streak

are women - Ronia and the witch. Anyway, I think I tend to write girls better. It's the way I'm wired.?

But it's imbuing her characters with magical elements that is Michelle's real passion: ?My tutor in college introduced me to **Faeries** by Brian Froud and Alan Lee, and it always gives me loads of ideas.?

Whenever Michelle is travelling she is drawn to local folklore or landmarks, and her imagination fills in any gaps. The stones that fall from the tower in **A Pinch of Magic** are taken from an Essex legend in Canewdon, in which there are six witches in the village and when one dies, a stone falls from the church walls. And the name Crowstone in [A Sprinkle of Sorcery](#) [4] is not invented, but the actual name of a street near her house, the road in which she parks to go to the local library.

This mix of realism and magic is apparent in all her books, and in the case of the Widdershins sisters, most marked by objects, particularly Betty's enchanted nesting dolls, (which in the original draft were a set of dominoes).

When probed as to her own magic objects, Michelle admits to treasuring family heirlooms too - a rose gold ring she wears, inherited from her mother and grandmother. But she also treasures folklore - borne out by her ownership of an original Christian Birmingham drawing from **The Little Mermaid**, and also a first edition of **Sleeping Beauty**, illustrated by Arthur Rackham, much coveted and finally bought as a present to herself with her first advance (after first clearing the overdraft).

Michelle is a long way on from her first advance. **A Sprinkle of Sorcery** is her eighth novel and she feels more in control of her craft, managing to create cliffhangers at the end of her chapters with comparative ease, ?getting that **Eastenders** duh duh duh moment,? and also writing more simply and knowing her readership better.

There's still nervousness at publication as to each book's reception, but seeing the physical product, especially when it's so beautiful, brings much joy. Melissa Castrillon designed the covers for **A Pinch of Magic** and **A Sprinkle of Sorcery** and Michelle agrees that the striking designs (which match the stories perfectly) help sales as the books are so hard to resist.

?Having a beautiful cover makes such a difference to the book.? Michelle treasures her work, and the way it's presented - she admits that she likes to carry around a copy of her latest book, and often takes it out for a little stroke or leaf through.

When we said goodbye, Michelle was preparing to visit the printer to watch the edges of her books being sprayed, and to sign 3,000 copies as they came off the printer. There might be magic in the storytelling, but for an author it doesn't get much more magical than seeing your own book hot off the printing press.

Clare Zinkin is a children's book consultant, writer and editor.

[A Pinch of Magic](#) [3] (978-1471124297) and [A Sprinkle of Sorcery](#) [4] (978-1471183867) are published by Simon and Schuster, £7.99 pbk.

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