



Obituary: Emma Langley 1983 - 2020

By *AndreaMReece*

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Article Author:

[Daniel Hahn](#) [1]

Article Author:

[Sarah Ardizzone](#) [2]

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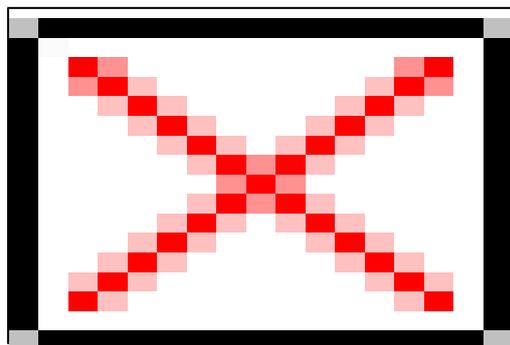
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Ground-breaking young publisher **Emma Langley** remembered

Books for Keeps was very sad to learn of the death of Emma Langley. Emma set up and ran Phoenix Yard Books and published a number of outstanding books for children, many in translation. Sarah Ardizzone and Daniel Hahn both worked with her and remember her here. Emma was 37.



DH: As we speak, I'm in the Queens Hotel in Cheltenham. Last time I was in this room, we were promoting your translation of Marjolaine Leray's [Little Red Hood](#) [4]. I was pretending to be the wolf. It didn't end well for me.

SA: *You do realise that when you played the wolf with a knock-out blend of lugubriousness and mischievous humour, you were taking over from Hervé Tullet's role-defining performance in Dublin? Yes, I remember Emma cheering raucously at Cheltenham 2013.*

I didn't know I was following in Hervé's footsteps! Am I right in remembering that LRH was your first collaboration with Emma? How did you meet?

*In spring 2010, an email came at me with the header: Sarah Ardizzone and funky French picture book?! ?Un petit chaperon rouge,? Emma wrote, ?is a modern French take on an (obviously) very famous story, featuring a savvy red scrawl in the starring role. There are less than a hundred words in total but every word punches in the right place. We're very excited [with?] our first foreign rights acquisition since establishing Phoenix Yard Books less than a year ago.? And so began my love affair: with Emma, Marjolaine Leray, **Little Red Hood**, and Emma's audacious vision to translate more children's books from around the world.*

She once said that 'vision' came from her own childhood reading, where for some years the only fiction she really

loved was Jules Verne. But what's striking to me ? especially now, looking back ? is actually how it was also all very practical. She was a visionary, I think, but not in the sense of being a dreamer. (The weird vividness of her actual dreams notwithstanding ? that's the subject of a different conversation.) She believed in the books she published, but not romantically at all. She fully expected them to function commercially (as indeed they often did ? some of our books dramatically outsold a lot of picture-book output from the big houses in the domestic market), and she treated the work with seriousness and detail. She described the Phoenix Yard Books aesthetic as 'the quirky end of commercial' ? that 'commercial' isn't irrelevant. Everybody knew it was a tough business to be in, but she never gave the impression she was doing something impossibly quixotic.

But let's talk about making the books themselves ? how was the process on **LRH**?

Deliciously artisanal and digital: Emma and I tried out drafts on schoolchildren, even kids in parks, before Leray handwrote my English translation; then we holed up with some Shoreditch graphic designers, collaboratively fine-tuning the visual experience for young English readers. Emma's twinkling eyes were incessantly across every minute detail. I agree with you about her commercial savvy ? she spent colossal amounts of time on spreadsheets, because they licensed PYB's imagination. As you've remarked before, 'Emma made things happen ? with both intellectual and pragmatic rigour.

My son's early birth meant postponing our launch event, 'Fairy Tales Remixed: All The Better to Translate You With' to September 2011. Julia Eccleshare and the CLPE also welcomed Geraldine McCaughrean with

[Monacello The Little Monk](#) [5]

*, her brilliant re-imagining of Neapolitan legend. ?Worth noting that Geraldine has a copy of **un petit chaperon rouge** pre translation because I couldn't prise it off her when she came into the yard, ? Emma goaded me. ?Geraldine was adamant that the French version was so perfect it shouldn't be translated. I'd imagine you'd have quite a lot to say about that??*

Brilliant. What came next, after Little Red Hood?

I was still on maternity leave when Emma trekked down to Brixton to introduce me to her exciting new French acquisitions (and talk to the Tate Library). I can see her waiting outside Brixton Tube, tense with excitement, at 1.30pm sharp ? you know those magical seconds before the other person's aware of your presence? That day, thanks to Emma, I discovered a book called [Le Paris de Léo](#)[6] by Barroux.

?Lunch in Brixton doable. I'm spending the morning with Daniel Hahn and his translation of our totally bonkers book about watermelons, ? Emma messaged me in advance. ?I haven't clapped eyes on the translation yet so I don't know how long [it] will take. But that's fine; I get to see my two favourite translators in the same day! ? Our encounter fizzed enthrallingly, and her follow-up is classic Emma: ?Thank you for introducing me to the delights of Brixton covered market. We need to go back and give our waiter a book sometime.?

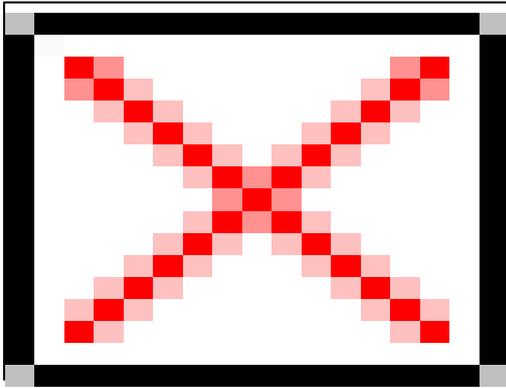
So over to you and the genesis of your 'totally bonkers book about watermelons'. How did Emma approach you?

It followed right on quite directly from your first, actually. When Emma was ready to launch PYB with **Little Red Hood**, she spoke on a panel at the London Book Fair. We chatted afterwards, and she mentioned being impressed at the Brazilian publishers' stand. Well, I said (uncharacteristically forward), you should buy something and get me to translate it for you! Later that same spring, she e-mailed me under the subject line 'You know what you said at the LBF translation seminar?' The e-mail described this totally wild book she was acquiring, and ended 'What say?' (Then signed off 'Happy Friday?', as she did.)

What say? I said yes, of course. And thank god I did. It was actually [my first picture-book translation](#) [7], and it was one of those life-changers. There's a picture from it hanging in my flat today (I showed it off proudly when she came down to Lewes last year); it resurfaces on CBBC occasionally; the cover is framed implausibly on the wall of a New York burger restaurant; and oh, I talk about it all the time. The last time Emma and I were in touch was a couple of weeks before she died, prompted by my mentioning on Facebook that I'd just given my nth talk about 'that watermelon book?.'

Yes, I saw your post! The last time I saw Emma, she came to visit my family (my son now eight) and we took her to our allotment, where we were growing aubergines and sunflowers, though regrettably not watermelons. Emma was radiant as she told me about her future in New Zealand.

We can't talk about these various collaborations without a mention of [Line of Fire](#) [8], your second Barroux book. I first heard about it at a late drink in Bologna, when Emma showed me this amazing thing she'd just been shown but which, she was pretty confident ? being quite practical ? PYB couldn't publish. And yet. Can you describe briefly how it became possible, and what made that book unique? (I'm not sure ?book? even describes it, actually. Project? Or perhaps ?collaboration?? Probably the most suitable watchword when talking about Emma.)



On Les Aura! (Line of Fire

*) is the diary of an ordinary WWI soldier, which Barroux found in a skip and resolved to illustrate. The resulting graphic diary was published in 2011 in France by Le Seuil, with Barroux and musician Julian Joubert also creating a live-drawing spectacle version. As a small indie publisher, Emma would have been in competition with bigger fish. But she put together such an inspired publishing plan (Michael Morpurgo to write a foreword, a dedicated website, a national tour of schools, commercial sales combined with subsidised outreach to new audiences), that her radical vision became unstoppable. By March 2013, Phoenix Yard had scooped the **IPG Newcomer Award** ? with Emma personally nominated for Best Independent Publisher of the Year ? and, a few months later, she travelled to Paris for one of Barroux and Julien's outdoor performances at their artists' collective, Le Jardin d'Alice.*

Straight back off the Eurostar, Emma made for the Festival Hall, where you (with your BCLT co-director hat on), Erica Hesketh (Southbank Centre Literature) and I had co-curated ?The Spectacular Translation Machine? ? a free and collaborative public translation project for the London Literature Festival, involving the words and images of?

On Les Aura!

*Emma couldn't contain her excitement, emitting high-pitched squeaks as she shared wobbly handheld footage of the performance. As well as trying to reach new audiences with her books, Emma was keen to push the boundaries of what a ?book event? might be. By the time the cogs of our Spectacular Translation Machine had stopped whirring, Emma had acquired the title. And by February 2014, she was feverishly pinging me screenshots of *Line of Fire* at No. 1 in two Amazon bestseller biography categories, as well as No. 4 in Comics and Graphic Novels.*

Oh, your mention of boundary-pushing book events reminds me of one of the occasions we were all at Hay together, with Barroux, and Emma was staying at my place ? a weekend that involved a trip to A&E and the closest Emma and I ever came to having an actual proper argument, but that's for another time, perhaps?

Phoenix Yard Books did so many ambitious things under Emma's leadership, but those golden years ended in spring 2015. Of course, much of PYB's most obvious legacy is in things: in books and artwork (it's how as a reader I discovered Barroux's books, and Glenda Millard's, too); but it's also in relationships, and people, and changes to old mind-sets. Speaking for myself, the freedoms she allowed me in that first book we shared, the way of working from the pictures, taught me something fundamental and ? perhaps more importantly ? was the start of a kind of permission I've given myself in my work ever since. (I have a book coming out soon, whose translation has an audacity totally inherited from that first one.)

Yes, 'freedom' and Emma were synonymous for me, too? she led by example, combining exceptional hard graft with free spiritedness.

But for all Phoenix Yard's good years, I'm sure you remember how difficult things became towards the end. I know, though, that you stayed in touch with her in the years after. She continued to champion translation, and children's books, and indeed children, in so many different ways.

*Emma lived so many lives that I still can't grasp she was only thirty-seven when we lost her. From promoting literature in translation at Arts Council England, including leading on **BookTrust's In Other Words** initiative (where all three of us served on the judging panel); to her politically and socially engaged work at the Children's Society; to her personal passions including travel-writing and fundraising in Malawi (despite catching malaria, badly).*

And finally to New Zealand, a year ago, as an advisor to the Ministry of Social Development. Which reminds me? have I ever told you this? As Emma began to contemplate leaving PYB, she and I met for a cup of tea at the British Library. She talked about the pressures she was under, having also just completed a Master's, the toll it was taking working round the clock and having no kind of freedom. I said, 'Well, it does sound like a ridiculous way to run a life.' She thought this was funny, but it stuck. And in the years that followed, that phrase kept returning? if one of us complained about having too much work and no time for ourselves, the other might say, 'it's a ridiculous way to run a life, you know?'. Or sometimes just 'Well, you know what they say?'. It only occurred to me the other day that since moving to New Zealand, she never once wrote those words to me. It proved to be her last year, but what a happy one it was.

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