



THROUGHNESS IS ALL: MEG ROSOFF INTERVIEWED BY GERALDINE BRENNAN

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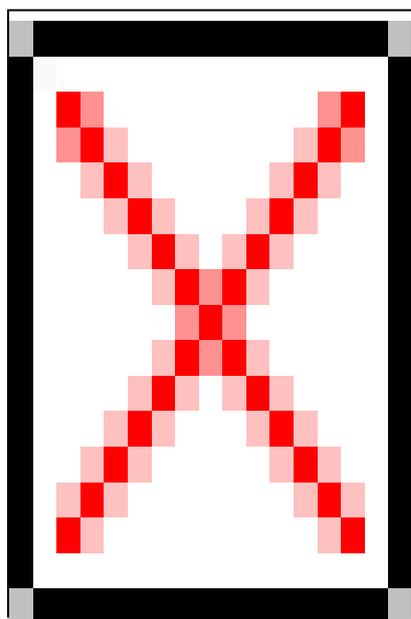
[Geraldine Brennan](#) [1]

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Meg Rosoff interviewed by **Geraldine Brennan**

Geraldine Brennan judges [How I Live Now](#) [3] the most significant novel of the 21st century. She interviews its author Meg Rosoff about her writing.



If you ride horses as Meg Rosoff does, you know all about *throughness*. A buzzword in dressage, *throughness* is the essence of the connection between the horse and the rider that is essential to the supple, elastic, precise and powerful movement that eats up the miles and wins medals. If the rider is too stiff, or trying too hard, or impatient, or not putting in the practice time, the horse won't feel the connection.

Dancers, actors, musicians and other performers strive for the same quality, with the complicating factor that the horse and the rider are one and the same. To explain *throughness* to the non-horsy population, Meg often quotes her experience of watching Simon Russell Beale in **Death Trap** at the National Theatre last year. 'It was a creaky old play but he blew me away, I felt it 10 rows back. When real energy is happening the audience can't get away from it. It's an energy that comes from a deep place in your subconscious.'

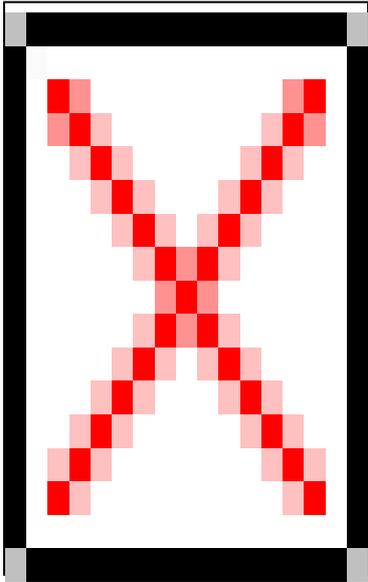
'And if you're reading a novel you don't need to read very much to know if it's got this quality. Publishers send me maybe ten new novels a week and I don't have to read much to know if I want to go on. The writing might be perfectly fine and something interesting might be happening but if the voice isn't there from the very beginning it's not going to work.'

She's currently pondering on how this theory of creativity can best be presented to the teenagers she meets at school events. 'People talk about being 'in the zone' and nobody knows what it is or how you get there. If you can work it out when you're young it can save you a lot of struggle later.'

She is painfully aware of when she is in and out of the zone in her writing life. ?When it?s going well I can work for 20 hours a day and have tons of energy. When it?s not I?m depressed, I mooch around the house, I try to run the rest of my life and keep up with admin but everything seems hard, I go on Facebook and Twitter.?

Since **How I Live Now**, the most significant teenage novel of the 21st century so far, was published in 2004, Meg has published a substantial work of fiction approximately every 18 months, each one different from the last. Hers is the most condensed and spectacular writing career of the new millennium.

In between come smaller projects such as picture books and most recently the hilarious **Moose Baby** for Barrington Stoke?s season of girl-friendly fiction. The pithy tale of a 17-year-old for whom a surprise pregnancy leads to a bigger surprise when she gives birth to a baby moose, it takes for granted the concept that a teenager with dyslexia or other reading difficulties might still have a sense of humour and be able to appreciate satire.



Her sixth major novel, **Picture Me Gone**, will be published in autumn 2013, alongside the release of Kevin Macdonald?s film **How I Live Now** (fresh from the cast and crew screening, Meg promises that ?Fifteen-year-olds will cry and 55-year-olds will cry, that?s all I?m saying?). **Picture Me Gone** is a mystery (?a why-dun-it rather than a who-dun-it?) with a father-daughter bond at its core and the native Bostonian?s first novel set in the US, in upstate New York.

?I always panic when I?ve finished a novel because I don?t know what?s coming next,? she said. ?I?m not one of those writers who has 15 books lined up in waiting and is desperate to write them all. The book of the moment takes all my energy up and then I wait for the next one to come and of course the fear is that there might not be one.

?When I finished **There Is No Dog** [her fifth novel, which places the creation and management of the universe in the hands of a sullen teenage boy and his world-weary sidekick, a team that you can imagine running a dotcom start-up from a smelly bedroom] I was traumatised because it had been very hard to write. I had always thought I would write five books. And months went by there was nothing new and I thought, ?OK this is it, this is all there is.? Then one day I sat down at the computer and there it was. I didn?t know why it was there.

?I saw a house that I wanted to feature in the story right away and was convinced it had come straight out of my subconscious. I had seen it in my head and knew where it was. Then I realised I had seen the house every day for months, while I was walking the dog in Stoke Newington. So there?s no magic, there?s no mystery, much as you would like there to be. It?ll happen when it happens. I?m happy with it though, I wasn?t traumatised after this one. My mother and my husband think it?s the best book I?ve written. Maybe I should ask someone objective.?

Once the book is under way, the fear that it might never get started is replaced by the fear that it will never get finished. You will never find Meg covering her walls with plot points on Post-It notes. ?I marvel at writers who can plot and then sit down and write it. I don?t know what?s going to happen until I?ve written it. It?s a nightmare for my publisher?s sales department.?

She advises anyone floundering at any stage of a creative project to 'move on, keep it fresh, write the next bit. You end up reading something a hundred times and it still won't work. I try not to keep going back to the beginning but pick up where I left off each day, or else you end up with the awful feeling of the overwritten first chapter which fills me with horror.'

A first career in advertising has taught her to push through sticky patches. 'If the campaign is needed for tomorrow you can't tell your boss you're blocked, you just have to do it.'

Meg's dialogue is always finely tuned ' she wrote the initial **How I Live Now** screenplay ' and, currently back in her between-novels state, she is working on a disaster film screenplay in development.

'It's based on a big cosmic idea and it's a challenge for me because my writing leans more towards the smaller, more intimate scale. I have big emotions going on but what is happening is quite small. **There is No Dog** had big ideas in it but it was basically about two strange guys and their relationship.

'But I'm enjoying the different writing experience. It's attractive to have something else you can do so you don't have to worry about the next novel not working out.'

The next novel is certain to work out and pretty certain to be for young adult. 'My readership grows with me but I am committed to writing for teenagers, I think I have something to offer them, the benefit of experience in getting through being a teenager. I remember being so sick of it when I was living it. I couldn't wait to get out in the world and be myself. In each book I hope I've said something about being your own person that will help.'

Geraldine Brennan is a journalist specialising in children's books and education, regularly reviews for the **Observer** and has judged several literary awards.

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