



AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS HIGGINS

Article Author:

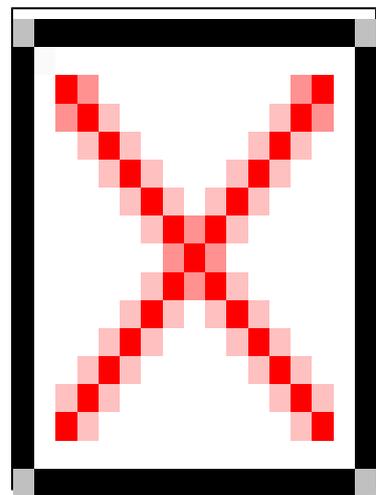
[Andrea Reece](#) [1]

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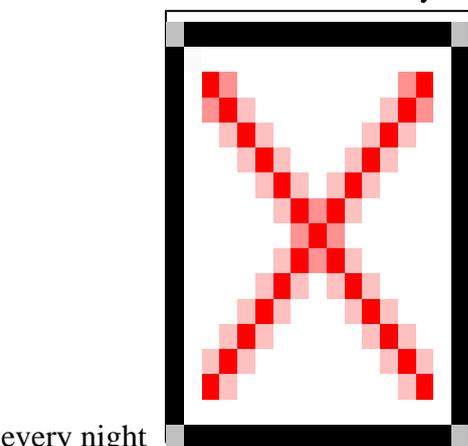
Trouble Next Door: **Chris Higgins** on writing for young readers

A successful author of books for teenagers, **Chris Higgins** has turned her hand to writing for young readers, with equal success. **Andrea Reece** talked to Chris for **Books for Keeps** about her new series, **Trouble Next Door**.



Chris Higgins writes with a relaxed, friendly style that is wonderfully easy to read, and really difficult to master. Her stories are rooted in children's ordinary lives and, while completely contemporary, share those characteristics that have long been favourites in children's fiction. So said the **Books for Keeps** review of [Trouble Next Door](#) [3], the first book in Chris's new series for newly independent readers. The story of two little girls who become neighbours, then firm friends, it's full of adventure and excitement, a thoroughly enjoyable first read.

Its two central characters are very different: Bella is a bit of a worrier, the kind of person who lays their uniform out



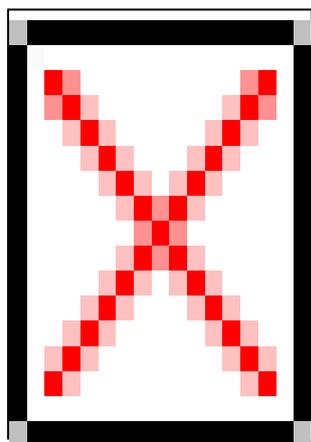
every night before school, and arrives well before the bell, while Magda is the opposite, impulsive, confident and scarcely concerned with what others think of her. Chris has said that her books begin with the characters, which little girl came first? Bella definitely, says Chris. At the age of nine, we moved to a new house. I remember vividly starting at a new school having been in the same one for the last five years. There are other ways too in which she's similar: I'd like to be Magda but I suspect I'm more of a Bella. When I was that age, I wanted to be good. I was the one with my hand up all the time trying to answer the question I wanted to be praised. Magda is

amazing I think, because she doesn't care: I'd like to be like that!?

Magda is wonderfully carefree, and her escapades lead Bella into all sorts of trouble. The pair of them however are strong characters: 'I hope I haven't made Bella wet,' says Chris (she hasn't), 'I want Bella to have fun, and that's what she likes about Magda. She is drawn into things that she wouldn't have done on her own by her friend, who is the catalyst for Bella's adventures, and she grows in confidence because of that?.'

The friendship between the two is very much the heart of the book, a theme that really interests Chris: 'Everyone needs a friend, and most of us find our best friends in the person we end up sitting next to, whether that's at school or at work. Kids especially are very good at adapting, at accepting new people even if they are very different from themselves. It's an amazing thing, something we lose as we get older, and children do it all the time. When I was 11, I passed the scholarship to the grammar school. I was the only one from my school going to that particular school - so within about 18 months I had two new schools to cope with? She vividly remembers her first day: 'I was terrified in assembly because I saw that everyone was wearing their school cardigans. I didn't have mine because my mother hadn't finished knitting it. Then I spotted one other girl without a cardigan and at the end of assembly I managed to go and stand next to her. I remember asking, 'Didn't your mum finish your cardigan either?? And she said 'I don't want to wear a cardigan, it's too hot?. I was bowled over! And that girl, Catherine, is still my really close friend. She was by far the more confident, but through our friendship I grew to be more confident too?.'

There are two books in the series now, with a third planned, but Chris is really hoping there will be more: 'I had written ten stand-alone books before being asked to write a three book series [My Funny Family](#) [4]. I find I really enjoy the way you get to know the characters as the series progresses, to know the way they think, the way they'd react ? and they continue to surprise you. I'd love there to be more in the **Trouble Next Door** series, because they're a joy to write?.'



Having grandchildren ? she has seven with number eight due in March ? has really helped put her in the world of young children, but it's clear that her own memories of being a young reader are important too. 'What I want to do is create chapter books that are really accessible to quite young readers. When I was young you had to be seven to join the library and I was reading fluently at five. I desperately wanted to read chapter books, and there just weren't many of them. For this age group, the story is everything and I think I naturally write in scenes. I'm really aware of that in my books for young children. If you can make an event short and contained in one scene, they get it and they can hop onto the next chapter. I always choose things they can identify with too, and language they can use, although kids that age soak up language; I think we totally underestimate younger children sometimes, and I love introducing them to new words. I can remember myself as a child asking what words meant in my Enid Blyton books, and then discovering and being fascinated by the word bunion! My nana had a bunion and I repeated it over and over, what a wonderful word! I definitely want to inculcate that love of words. It's not at the fore when I'm writing but it's definitely there in my subconscious?.'

[Trouble Next Door](#) [3] and [Trouble at School](#) [5] by Chris Higgins, with illustrations by Emily MacKenzie, are published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, £4.99 each.

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