



Authorgraph 228 Liz Kessler

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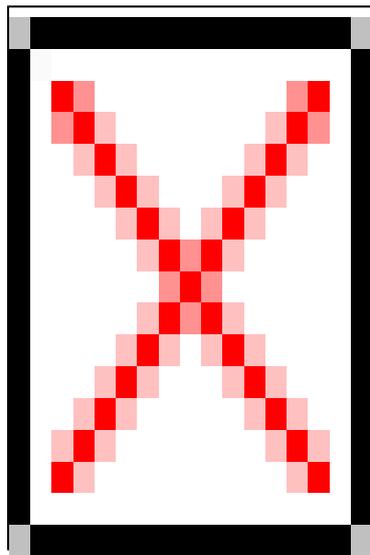
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Liz Kessler interviewed by **Michelle Pauli**



'Emily's taken on a life of her own and I'm very grateful that she chose me,' says Liz

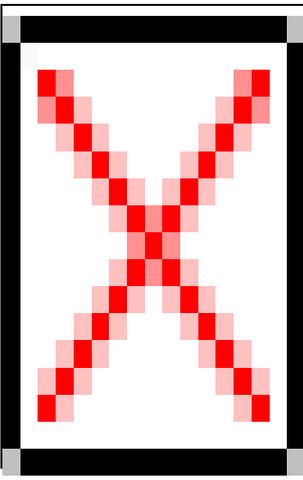
Kessler. With the **Emily Windsnap** series selling five million copies worldwide, a seventh book just out, huge popularity in the States and a film adaptation in the pipeline, Kessler's enchanting young character has built up a momentum that belies her uncertain beginnings.

Emily Windsnap, an ordinary girl on land who turns into a mermaid in the sea, began her life as a poem, idly dreamt up by Kessler as a distraction from the work she was supposed to be doing on her novel-writing MA course. She then nearly became a picture book until renowned publisher David Fickling stepped in and suggested her story should be a middle grade novel. **The Tail of Emily Windsnap** and a two-book deal with Orion was the result. It then turned into a series, partly thanks to the enthusiasm of 200 year-six girls on a school visit who urged Kessler to continue Emily's story rather than write something completely new.

For Kessler, there is something almost mystical about Emily's origins and the way each story comes to life. 'I think there is some way in which these characters and stories exist,' she explains, 'and I do believe that my job isn't making something up but finding the right ways to have a relationship with a story so that it will open up to me, to discover where it is and then hopefully do it and the characters justice by telling it. If you do that, I feel that the character will keep opening up to you.'

There is also an element of the unknown in the magical underwater realm that the St Ives-based author explores in the books. 'Water is most of the planet and we know so little about it. Mermaids represent that possibility of all the things that we don't know, that might exist but in our arrogance we say do not. But we don't know a fraction of it. That's what excites me,' she says.

More prosaically, the settings of the **Emily Windsnap** books, with delicious descriptions of gorgeous watery locations,



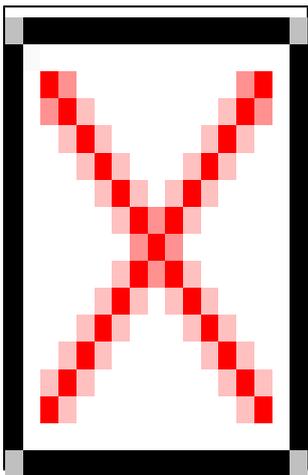
are based on places that Kessler has yearned to visit and now has a fine reason to do so.

?I joke about the fact that I take my research seriously but I do go to wherever the books are set - I went to Bermuda and snorkelled and sat on the beach to write notes in my notebook so everything in the second book comes out of me being underwater, looking at these beautiful fish and describing them. In the **Land of the Midnight Sun** I went on a cruise in Norway and everything from that trip went straight into that book. I immerse myself in that world,? she says.

The breathtaking Niagara Falls, visited while on a book tour in the States, became the backdrop for **Emily Windsnap and the Falls of Forgotten Island**, in which Emily discovers a hidden world beyond a ?massive, life changing waterfall? and finds herself suddenly entangled in an ancient prophecy. She has to embark on a dangerous mission to seek a legendary giant before it's too late ? which means breaking a vow of her own.

I never know what my books are about until I've finished

Like all the Emily Windsnap stories it?s a brilliant adventure tale, with much more going on beneath the surface ? some of which is also a mystery to Kessler herself during the writing process. ?I feel like on one level I know what I?m writing about and I know what I want to do but on a deeper level I feel like I never know what my books are about until I've finished and someone else tells me,? she says. ?Then I quite often realise that it was about something that either matters on a very deep level to me or in some way reflects something that was going on at the time. I never have any idea that that?s what?s happening and I find that quite remarkable.?



It is certainly true that identity ? and particularly seeking and resolving identity ? is a theme running strongly through Kessler?s work, whether it?s Emily Windsnap reconciling her life as a human girl with her mermaid powers or Ash in Kessler?s powerful YA coming out tale, **Read Me Like a Book**. In fact, the two books might not be as far apart as they seem, as Kessler recalls how her brother alerted her to what he believed to be an underlying theme of **Emily Windsnap** ? much to her surprise.

?My brother said to me years ago, you know what Emily Windsnap?s about, don?t you? And I said, yeah, I wrote it, it?s about a girl who discovers she?s a mermaid. And he said, no, it?s actually an allegory for coming out as gay. And I was like, no it isn?t. And then he broke it down and he says, so, there?s a girl who discovers, just before her teens, this side to herself that she?d never realised before and she starts to acknowledge it. She?s scared everyone will call her names

and then she comes out to her mum and she's worried about what her mum will think. Then she stands up in Neptune's Court and convinces him to change his laws so people can marry whoever they want. I was like, oh my god, I have and I didn't realise it and it was never intended?' Kessler finishes, laughing.

Communication and building bridges between communities is also a concern for Kessler and one that she highlights in **Emily Windsnap and the Falls of Forgotten Island**. She explains that, in a world of Brexit and Trump, in which communities are becoming increasingly fragmented and hostile to each other, she wanted to show that, if you can break down assumptions and stereotypes about other people, you can discover that, underneath, we have more in common than separates us.

This took on an added poignancy towards the end of the copyediting process in May 2017 when the Manchester arena was bombed with children the same age as Kessler's readership targeted. In a heartfelt dedication that mentions the terrorist attack, Kessler affirms her belief that the next generation has the power to overcome differences and spread love, kindness and empathy. It 'felt like a tiny platform to say a tiny thing, so I did', says Kessler.

Whatever the setting of the books and whatever the underlying themes, one element stays constant – friendship. Kessler is superb at pinpointing the intensity of the relationships between girls and the strong bonds of loyalty they hold. Never more so than in **Falls of Forgotten Island** where Emily, on holiday with both Aaron, her boyfriend, and Shona, her best friend, constantly struggles to give fair attention to each and is deeply concerned that Shona does not feel left out.

Even in this fictional world, there's a recognition that friendships are possibly more permanent than a boyfriend

'I think Emily is a twelve-year-old, now thirteen-year-old, feminist,' says Kessler. 'I like to think of her instilling ideas of female loyalty in readers. It doesn't mean that she doesn't care about her boyfriend but, even in this fictional world, there's a recognition that friendships are possibly more permanent than a boyfriend. What's most essential about Emily is her strong desire for justice, speaking out and being true to herself and looking after her friends. Those things are always there.'

Kessler was writing poems when she was the age of the children who read the Emily books – and she shows school groups the piece of paper from a 1976 edition of the Manchester Evening News, where her first poem was published – and took an English degree at Loughborough University, but she didn't write seriously until she was in her early 30s. She tried teaching and journalism, then teaching English and media studies in a sixth form, but felt she was helping others to make creative choices while missing out on being creative herself. One day, something changed.

'I had this epiphany really,' she explains. 'It was a weekend away with my mum and we were doing Julia Cameron's **The Artist's Way** and there's an exercise in there called Fantasy Lives. The idea is that you write down five lives you would have if you didn't have the one you have now. So I did it with my mum and hers were all things like, I'd be a backing singer in a gospel band, I'd be a fairy in the woods, she did it properly [laughs] and I looked at mine and it basically said 'writer' five times. It was as simple as that. It was like I'd remembered what I'd always meant to do. I packed in my job, did various freelance things, managed to get onto an MA in novel writing and I was off.'

As for Emily's future, well that is, of course, down to Emily. Kessler had once firmly intended to finish the series at book five but 'I think, if there's an appetite for these stories and I enjoy writing them and my publisher wants to keep publishing them then I am fine with that,' she now says. 'I hope that if it comes to a point where I've run out of ideas and no one wants to read them any more then I'll realise that and stop doing them but if that doesn't happen then I'm having fun with them and, hopefully, Emily is as well.'

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

The **Emily Windsnap** books, including the forthcoming story **Emily Windsnap and the Falls of the Forgotten Island** (978-1510102323), are published by Orion Children's Books.

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