



Authorgraph 240: Ross MacKenzie

Article Author:

[Jane E Sandell](#) [1]

[240](#) [2]

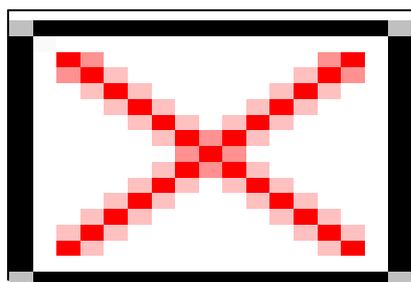
Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

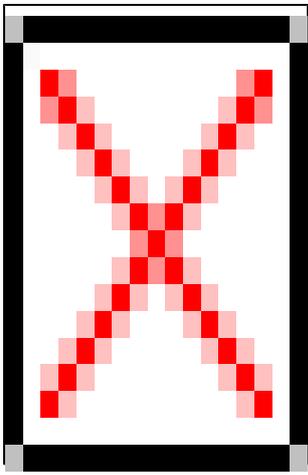
Ross MacKenzie interviewed by **Jane Sandell**

You might have thought that with a new book about to hit the shelves, Ross MacKenzie would be taking it easy and enjoying the anticipation. But he is already editing the sequel, something readers of **Evernight** will be very glad to hear. Inspired by Victorian London and his love of Dickens' novels, Ross created the world of **Evernight** after reading **London Labour and the London Poor** by Henry Mayhew, a contemporary of Charles Dickens. Mayhew's book, Ross says, fleshed out Dickens' world for him and it was in it that he came across a description of a 'tosher' and decided he had to write about one.



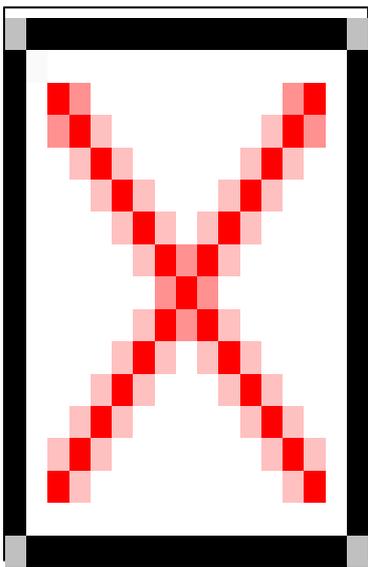
In fact, two of the main characters in [Evernight](#) [3] are toshers, that is people who scour the underground sewers for valuables to sell on. They are amongst the poorest and least considered in a society firmly segregated by class. So far, so recognisable. But this is not Victorian London; it is King's Haven in the Silver Kingdom, infiltrated long ago, after a witches' schism, by Mrs Hester and still ruled by her and her witchcraft.

Ross is no stranger to creating alternative worlds. His first book, **Zac and the Dream Pirates**, plunged his hero into a perturbing land on the other side of sleep, peopled by vampires, werewolves and other creatures who try to rob him of sleep. From there he moved on to **The Nowhere Emporium**, about a mysterious shop that appears without warning and lures customers into its vast labyrinth of departments. Both of these books won the **Scottish Children's Book Award**, a huge excitement for their author and their small publishers. But something even bigger was lurking around the corner.



To say that Ross was flabbergasted when he heard that [The Nowhere Emporium](#) [4] had been shortlisted for the **Blue Peter Book Award** would be to massively understate the case. There he was in the company of Frank Cottrell Boyce and Lara Williams waiting to see if 200 children would judge his book to be the best. A few months later, in a hotel room in Aberdeen, he received a text from Suzanne Kennedy, his editor at Edinburgh-based Floris Books, asking, 'Are you sitting down?' He was, but not for long as the news that he had won the **Blue Peter Book Award** set him jumping around the room. He is clearly still excited by the memory of being given the award by the then Children's Laureate Chris Riddell live on **Blue Peter**; and, of course, he cherishes his Blue Peter badge!

It might have all been so different had it not been for his wife Aileen. She made a deal with him: she'd buy him a new laptop for Christmas if he would promise to finish a book and send it to a publisher. At that point, Ross had completed none of his projects, but he knew he wanted to write. He and Aileen shook on the deal and one year on **Zac and the Dream Pirates** was on its way to Chicken House to be plucked from the slush pile by Barry Cunningham.



Evernight is such an accomplished piece of writing that it is difficult to believe that it is only Ross's fifth book. Between **The Nowhere Emporium** and its sequel **The Elsewhere Emporium**, Floris published **Shadowsmith**, a stand-alone novel featuring a boy whose family is being torn apart, a weird girl in a yellow raincoat and some ancient malevolent spirits. **Evernight** builds on the themes explored in these earlier works but its world and characters are totally unique. Mrs Hester's ambitions and cruelty know no bounds; she will achieve world domination no matter the cost to other people - even if it means unleashing the Evernight Spell. The White Witches are enslaved by the removing of their souls, the Westerly Witches are clinging on precariously to the small amount of land left to them and the members of the Doomsday Coven, guardians of all that is good, have perished at the hands of the mysterious Shadow Jack.

While inhabiting our world, rather than some fantastical place of his imagination, Ross MacKenzie lives in Renfrew, a sometime shipbuilding town on the banks of the rivers Clyde and Cart. He's a Renfrew man born and bred and has

happy memories of his childhood there. He spent his time creating comics and picture books until a single event turned him into a reader at the age of nine. His teacher that year was Miss McLean who, in common with good teachers everywhere, read aloud to the class. Her rendition of **The Witches** by Roald Dahl flicked the reading switch for Ross. Suddenly he was devouring books, mostly borrowed from his local library where his Dad took him every week. He still remembers those trips to the library fondly, the walk there full of anticipation and excitement. He's reminded of it as he takes his daughters Selina and Mollie to the same library to allow them to explore other worlds for themselves.

At the same time he started reading, he began to write because, he says, he wanted to make people feel the way he had felt on hearing **The Witches**. His passion for stories is undimmed and he finds the best of them more real than life. He is, he says, informed and influenced by what he reads. As a teenager he discovered Terry Pratchett's books and tried to write like him 'so hard that it hurt'. These days he's an eclectic reader and although all his own books could be described as fantasies that is only because they are the stories that have shouted loudest in his head and made the biggest claims on his imagination. Other and different tales are waiting their turn.

Some of the characters in *Evernight* appeared fully formed in his mind. Ross knew right from the start, for example, that Larabelle Fox, the strong female lead, was black and is keen to refute any suggestions of tokenism. Her mixed-race heritage, he tells me, will be a significant plot line in the next book. Joe, the young tosher she befriends and tries to protect, sprang out of his head already destined to develop and play a significant role. More worryingly the terrifyingly evil Mrs Hester also walked straight onto the page in the company of Shadow Jack.

Evernight is a classic example of the good versus evil school of story. But it is more complicated than that. Shadow Jack for example presents the reader with a dilemma, and it is easy to empathise with Joe's positive response to him. And, although the Westerly Witches fall fully on the side of good, they are far from perfect. Though a fantasy story, **Evernight** could also be read as an allegory on social history or politics. Above all though, it is brimming with adventure, mystery and discovery, and full of characters with complex motivations and emotions. As for Ross, he hopes it will be a story that carries its readers to another time and place, and stays with them long after the book has been closed. And I feel sure that it will.

Jane E Sandell is a children's book specialist, reviewing, writing and enthusing about books and authors.

Books mentioned

[Evernight](#) [3], Andersen Press, 978-1783448319, £7.99 pbk

The Nowhere Emporium, Kelpies, 978-1782501251, £7.99 pbk

The Elsewhere Emporium, Kelpies, 978-1782505198, £6.99 pbk

Shadowsmith, Kelpies, 978-1782503040, £6.99 pbk

Zac and the Dream Pirates, Chicken House, O/P

Page Number:

10

Source URL (retrieved on Nov '20): <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/240/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-240-ross-mackenzie>

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/jane-e-sandell>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/240>

[3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/240/childrens-books/reviews/evernight>

[4] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/211/childrens-books/reviews/the-nowhere-emporium>