



CRACKING CODES AND CRACKING JOKES: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE MILLER

Article Author:

[Louise Lamont](#) [1]

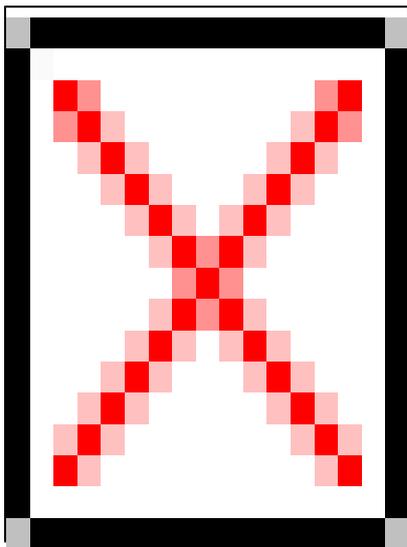
240 [2]

Byline:

Louise Lamont interviews **Anne Miller** about her debut novel, *Mickey and the Animal Spies*

Anne Miller's debut novel is a detective story about a school girl, Mickey, whose passions for cracking codes and deciphering clues lead to membership of an elite network of spies - COBRA. Mickey is a little young for this covert unit, and that's not the only reason she stands out from the other spies: she's the only human being.

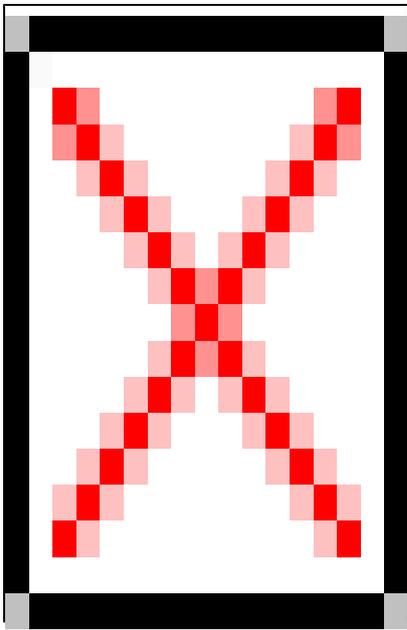
Louise Lamont interviewed Anne about the book for **Books for Keeps**.



Anne Miller grew up in Scotland and now lives in London where she makes TV and radio programmes including BBC Two's **QI** and Radio Four's **The Museum of Curiosity**. She reached the semi-finals of BBC Two's fiendishly difficult quiz show **Only Connect** and has two Blue Peter badges.

This is your debut novel, but I suspect you might have been writing stories since childhood - were you a young scribbler? What kind of stories did you conjure up then? Any striking parallels with what you're writing now? Would your nine-year-old self have any editorial notes for you?

Definitely. I recently found what must have been my earliest 'book' made of paper stapled into a booklet when I was seven years old. It was called *Katy and the Rabbit* so not a million miles from [Mickey and the Animal Spies](#) [3]! Although I illustrated *Katy* myself whereas thankfully **Mickey** benefits from the brilliant work of illustrator Becca Moor. **Mickey** also combines three things I've always loved - animals, spies and puzzles - so I think my nine-year old self's main notes would be for more!



Looking not quite so far back, how did the finished story emerge from your very first draft - can you tell us about some of the decisions you made as you revised and edited?

The group of animal spies Mickey falls into, COBRA, is named after the real-life government emergency response committee. Everything about the real COBRA is super-secret so I had quite a lot of fun imagining what would happen if that was because it was actually run by a cobra and a team of animal spies and what that might look like. In earlier drafts there was also an octopus manning the switchboard and a team of nanny goats who were in charge of first aid. There are so many animal references hiding in plain sight in the spy world - moles, bugs, the phrase 'the eagle has landed' that a lot of the revising was working out how much of the world to reveal in book one. And also to make sure the puzzles and codes fitted in neatly and were the right difficulty level. I had to change one of them after my friend who works on some of the country's hardest quiz programmes pointed out that one of them was *very* difficult.

Your readers are invited throughout the book to solve different kinds of codes and puzzles - what inspired that interactive element? Were they easy to put together?

I've always loved books where you take away some practical knowledge about the world as well as enjoying the adventure. When I was younger I first learned about **A Midsummer Night's Dream** from **Ballet Shoes** for example.

The codes were a lot of fun to put together although I did slightly tie myself in knots double-checking them. I think my whole table was covered in scribbles and Morse code at one point! There's also a Morse Code table inside the back cover so readers can start coding up their own messages.

***Mickey and the Animal Spies* [3]**

is a very funny book - who are your comic influences, and what do you think you've absorbed from your work in comedy on TV and radio?

I love anything that makes me laugh. There's a Scottish sitcom called **Still Game** about Glaswegian pensioners which brings me a great deal of joy and the last stand up show I saw was Jessica Fostekew's **Hench** which was fantastic. I think the best part of making TV and radio is being able to work with so many different people and see so many different ways of making things funny. It does come with its hazards though. We recently made a special Christmas episode of Radio Four's **The Museum of Curiosity** with John Lloyd, Sally Phillips, Jo Brand, Lee Mack and Jimmy Carr. During the recording I was trying to make notes for the edit but was laughing so hard I had to really work to breathe in enough air. That's quite a nice problem to have at work!

I know that your editor was keen on *Mickey and the Animal Spies*

because it was a story that celebrated a young girl's thirst for knowledge - and of course, as a *QI* Elf and producer on the *Museum of Curiosity*

with suspicion - and do you think this is changing?

I think Greta Thunberg has probably done more to turn that around than anyone else. As her book title neatly encapsulates, she really has shown that no one is too small to make a difference. I hope Mickey builds on a proud tradition of smart, quick-thinking girls in literary history from Anne Shirley in [Anne of Green Gables](#) [4] and Petrova Fossil in **Ballet Shoes** to Kristy Thomas from **The Babysitter's Club**, Dinah Hunter from [The Demon Headmaster](#) [5] and Hermione Granger from **Harry Potter**.

Please rank your top three of the animal spies.

1. Clarke

2. Clarke

3. Clarke

(I love them all but have become especially fond of that haughty cat!)

[Mickey and the Animals Spies](#) [3] is published by Oxford University Press, 978-0192773630, £6.99 pbk.

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59

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[3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/240/childrens-books/reviews/mickey-and-the-animal-spies>

[4] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/172/childrens-books/articles/classics-in-short/classics-in-short-no71-anne-of-green-gables>

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