



Being Genre-Fluid

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‘**W**HAT SORT OF STUFF DO YOU WRITE?’

It’s a fair enough question, and one that I get asked regularly once someone has discovered I’m a writer. I never really know how to answer it in a straightforward way, though. I usually mumble something along the lines of ‘Oh, all sorts of things, but mainly books for children.’ This usually means the questioner does one of three things: 1) Looks politely interested and then moves the conversation along; 2) Makes a joke about me presumably wanting to become the next J. K. Rowling; or 3) Asks me if I will read the book they wrote for their grandchildren.

If the questioner wants to know more, I explain that I started my career writing picture books and then went on to write young fiction and middle-grade series, a ‘tween’ novel, nonfiction for children, a memoir for adults about my parents, and that I’m currently writing my first novel. If this hasn’t come across too much like a CV, people often say, ‘Goodness. How do you manage crossing genres like that?’

I don’t enjoy these conversations. I don’t enjoy trying to work out a satisfactory way of explaining what sort of stuff I write, or why I choose to write for different audiences, because the answer I really want to give is, ‘I write.’ I write because I have to, because it’s my way of making sense of the world, of finding a path through the grief and the sorrow and of trying to bottle the beauty and the joy. It doesn’t matter to me whether this turns into a small chapter book about a vampire who feels he’ll never match



up to his parents's expectations, or a book about plastic pollution, or a memoir about the last months of my parents's lives. Everything I write comes from the same small seed — a seed that is so deeply embedded in me, it has been there since the day I could first hold a pen and make a mark on the page; a seed that shouts, 'Listen to me! I may be small, but I have something to say about this!'

I know I would probably be more commercially successful if I could be neatly put into a box with the words 'funny writer for children!' or 'writes about animals and adventure!' on the lid. But I have always written about whatever I'm drawn to at the time, and that could be absolutely anything.

When I was seven I was writing school stories along the lines of the Mallory Towers or Chalet Girls series because I thought I wanted to go to boarding school in an exotic location. When I was ten I moved on to science fiction, heavily influenced by a diet of *Doctor Who* and *Star Wars* and that growing desire to escape my claustrophobic suburban childhood. When I was eleven it was Agatha Christie that inspired me, so much so that I plagiarised the plot of one of her Miss Marple novels for a school writing competition — don't worry, I didn't win, nor did I have fantasies about committing murder. When I was a teenager I wrote tortuous poems about heartache (no prizes for guessing why this was). By the time I had gone to university, I was set on writing A Big and Important Novel because everything in life felt Big and Important and I longed to express it on the page.

Having children made me realise my best writing, because finally I was writing from experience — putting lived emotions, desires and needs into my characters and giving them a world to explore that I had enjoyed myself in *my* childhood, and was now watching my own children delight in. I could see the world from their perspective and I wanted to write from it. Perhaps this is why my writing 'grew up' with them: I wrote picture books when they were *reading* picture books; I wrote chapter books when they'd moved away from *The Gruffalo* and were reading Michael Morpurgo and



Jacqueline Wilson; I wrote my tween novel when they were moving on to more complex plot lines with a smattering of intrigue and romance.

And then my parents got sick. And suddenly life wasn't solely about the highs and lows of school friendships and pet-ownership and adventures while on holiday in Cornwall. It was dark and scary and challenging and very, very difficult to understand. So I wrote about it.

Now those darker times have receded and my children have grown up. They read the same things I read now, and they're interested in their family history and the stories behind faded photographs, foxed letters and remembered snippets from my mother-in-law's past. I've been digging through all this over the past eighteen months and I've decided I'm ready to try and write a novel for adults. It might not be Big and Important, but it will definitely tell a story, and isn't that what all writers are trying to do, anyway, no matter which audience or age-bracket they're writing for? So maybe *that's* the answer to questions about my genre-fluidity. *What sort of stuff do I write?* — I write stories. For anyone who wants to read them.