

Jan 2012 - LISSA EVANS / Just Imagine

Lissa Evans started her professional life as a doctor; it was a brief career, which she hated (“I was scared and didn’t know anything”), but while practising medicine she was also doing stand-up, which led to her real calling as a comedy producer on radio and TV. And then she started writing, her third adult novel, *Their Finest Hour and a Half*, getting on the longlist for the Orange Prize. Here she talks about all that, and her first children’s novel *Small Change for Stuart...*

You moved from medicine, through stand-up, to radio comedy - was that an easy transition?

I was doing the comedy, while I was a doctor, during the early years of the stand-up scene, not making any money, but really enjoying it. When I decided to give up medicine I thought ‘What else can I do?’.

We were lucky in those days...I had no debts whatsoever, in fact I had a bit of money saved, I had no mortgage, no family or responsibilities and I was living at a friend’s house for a *tiny* rent; I was looking through the *Guardian’s* Media pages, with absolutely no idea what I wanted to do, and there was an advert for a BBC radio comedy producer. And actually, once I got in, my background was OK for the job, because lots of people came in from the performance angle; so, medicine aside, it wasn’t the leap it might seem as I had been doing precisely what was needed for that job.

Had you at any point thought that was what you wanted to do - was it a career move?

No it wasn’t, it was ‘What can I do?’; in fact I applied for three jobs...I applied to be the Assistant TV Critic on *Time Out* and a Granada TV researcher, and I

was so happy to get both interviews that I didn't do any work for them and didn't get either. The third was the BBC one...I still have the folder of everything I put in for that interview.

How long after you got to the BBC did you know you were in the right place?

Oh, almost instantly really. I've never had a second's regret about leaving medicine, not a *second*, and I'm quite good about brooding over past decisions and agonising whether it was the right thing to do. I knew that was it.

A medical background seems to give people a different take on life, in terms of comedy; do you think what you saw and did during those years has had an effect on how you work?

I think it's had an effect on how I *write*. It was very intense...one's memory does stay sharper about things that happened when you were younger, but I feel as if most of my medical experiences were yesterday; I haven't forgotten any of them, not *any* of them. It was very, very intense at a very intense period of your life. I think it burns experiences into an individual in a way almost nothing else does - whether that's for good or bad, I don't know. But it adds something to your early life which perhaps you spend the rest of your life shaking off.

Did you switch from radio to TV for a particular reason?

It was a well-worn path; BBC Radio lent loads of producers to telly, but also another well-worn path is doing a pilot for radio and then taking it to television. I was the co-creator of *Room 101*, which eventually went to telly and I went with it.

Did you mind leaving radio?

I'd been there five years and I was happy to go...but it had been fantastic, so creative and you had so much opportunity; it was just you and your production assistant and you could come up with an idea, get it OK'd at the monthly meeting, make it the next month and it could go out on the radio the month after that. It was so fast and so exciting and I was there with lots of other extraordinary people - Armando Iannucci came just after I did and also Sarah Smith, who's just directed and written *Arthur Christmas*...so many people who became the mainstays of comedy; it was fantastic, liberating and tremendous fun.

Would you agree that what you do in radio is quite similar to what happens in books, in that you allow the listener/reader to do quite a lot of the work, let them make the pictures for themselves?

Yes that's a good point; but also radio is about precision, you've only got the words and they've got to be exactly right. In telly a duff line can be improved by a fantastic reaction shot, but in radio you've only got the words. And script editing is invaluable - there's just nothing like it in terms of being able to edit your own work, which is what I do, largely - and jokes have to be perfect, you can't get away with a crap one.

How did you become a writer?

If you like, I'd spent a lifetime preparing for being a writer; reading was what I did, I've read my whole life, but I didn't feel ready to write. I did bits and bobs in my twenties, started a novel but couldn't think of a plot, and it wasn't until I was, I think, 39 that I sat down and wrote. I was single, I had some time, I

knew I had *some* work to tide me over for six months and carried on with a book I'd been fiddling with the three chapters of for ten years. It was until then that I was ready to do it.

Were you able to compartmentalize and say to the editor in you: 'Go away for a bit, just let me get on with this?'?

No, I edit heavily as I go along. I'm painfully slow, because every sentence has to be polished to gem-like perfection before I move onto the next one - it can get desperate! And I got slower, except not with the children's book, I wrote that fairly fast, for me.

I have to say that *Small Change* doesn't feel in any way laboured.

Thank you...I don't think my adult fiction feels laboured, it's a reasonably easy read, but god, the sweat that goes into it!

Your adult novels [*Spencer's List*, *Odd One Out* and *Their Finest Hour and a Half*] are all very family-centred, ensemble pieces, and I suppose you might describe *Small Change* as an ensemble piece.

Except that it's all Stuart's viewpoint, which is the first time I've ever done that - I found having multiple viewpoints was the only way I could write at length; it's the way I've always written.

And so we come to your debut children's novel, *Small Change for Stuart*, which is quite truthfully subtitled 'magic, mystery - and a very strange adventure'; where did the idea come from, what was the pop-up moment?

The basic pop-up moment was when I was nine and my family moved, from Surrey to Lichfield in the Midlands - not a million miles from Beeton [the town in *Small Change*]; at the same time my oldest sister went to university and my middle sister was off in the 6th Form and I was tremendously lonely and miserable and I wanted something magical to happen.

I spent a lot of time mooning round the back alley behind my house, just waiting, *waiting* for something to happen - waiting for a tree to come to life or something fantastic; I created these little magical icons around me and became obsessed with a clock which I thought was perhaps magical. I was obsessed with my life becoming more exciting than it was.

That was what it was about, and this is precisely the sort of book I liked reading...the local library was five minutes walk away and I lived there, basically, and I read everything and I used to read book reviews and go in with a list from the *Guardian* of what I wanted.

They must have loved you!

They must have loved me, I'm sure they did.

But also there was a photo-booth in my local station and I saw a little boy waiting outside it and I thought 'What if the photos he got back didn't just have him in...maybe he'd used a coin belonging to his Grandpa and he was in them as well?'. That didn't end up in the book, but that was the other nugget.

Was there point when you knew you simply had to write this story?

I'd written a text for a picture book...after finishing *Finest Hour and Half*, my husband had come up with a title, which was *The Dog That Ruins Christmas*, which I thought was quite funny. I wrote the text with very, very detailed descriptions of what the pictures should look like - I can't draw - and it was a very simple book, where the text counterpointed the illustrations, about a dog

with no awareness who actually *saves* Christmas. It ended up being called *Smudger the Dog Saves Christmas*. It was published, and I thought ‘What’s going to happen now?’ and it was my agent, Georgia Garrett, now at RCW, who said I’d got to write another children’s book.

And there was also the fact that that I’d read more children’s books than there are children in the UK!

You would appear to be someone who researches what they write; did you do a massive amount for *Small Change*, or were you already a fan of magic and magicians?

No research, none at all. I think I Googled ‘tricks’ at one point and then thought no, I’ll make up my own. The only book I’ve ever researched is *Their Finest Hour and a Half*; I really hate researching and generally only do it after the book’s come out to confirm whether I’m right about things. So, no research, zero.

Can you do any tricks?

No, I’m useless. But when I was little someone taught me a trick and one Sunday morning I got up early and set up a stall in front of our house and offered to do tricks for sixpence for people. That’s my only history with magic. I’m not *even* tremendously interested in magicians, although I do love books about them - I love *The Prestige* and *Carter Meets the Devil* - perhaps more than watching them. But I love mechanics and mechanisms, I love the engineering aspect of it; I think it’s that kind of magic that I find more fascinating.

Are any of the characters in the book based on real people?

Oh they're all me, basically, they are all aspects of me - Stuart's a bit of me, April's a bit of me, the Dad's a bit of me...

So are you a crossword complier like Stuart's dad?

I'm not, but I've always used a vast and unwieldy vocabulary - which didn't serve me well at school. I was always the one who would use a polysyllabic word where a single syllable one would have done adequately. I think in every book I've ever written all the characters are me - the shy bit of me, the arrogant bit of me, the annoying bit of me...

There's a fantastic sense of place in the book, I felt very grounded when I was reading it, and I wondered if you had a map when you were writing?

I didn't, and that's interesting, because I've just got together with the illustrator, Temujin Doran, who's been commissioned by the American publishers to do a map of Beeton. I wasn't much help with it, as I said it was more about what the buildings looked like - I've got a rough sense of geography, like where Great Uncle Toby's house is in relation to Stuart's, but apart from that nothing. But my visual imagination is very patchy, for instance I never know what any of my characters look like, not at all.

But what you have done in this book is given the reader a good sense of where they are; you seem to have created a real geography without even knowing you're doing it.

But that's in how you *feel* about a place, rather than what it looks like, I suppose.

Did you find it easy to write as a small-for-his-age, ten-year-old boy?

I did actually, and I don't know why...because it's about being young and feeling inadequate, I suppose. A teenage boy would have been much more of a leap; pre-teenage boys are, in some ways, not that dissimilar to pre-teenage girls. In some ways, before adolescence kicks in, there is some cross-over that you lose later on. And Stuart's not a particularly macho small boy, he's not a particularly sporty small boy: he's a very ordinary small boy. And that's a universal feeling, that you're nobody special. He's a small boy who feels that he's not got anything to offer, really, but has a certain sense of being grounded.

One thing you haven't done is kill the parents off, just removed them from the action by circumstance.

It's always tempting to kill off the parents! But yes, I've 'removed' them, and to be honest in the second book the mum's at a conference for most of the time, because I like the dynamic of just Stuart and his father. It's a loving family, but I've distanced the parents; and you need that, it's very hard to write a children's book with them around. And of course Stuart moves house in July, in the holidays - which is what happened to me - and is on his own. A dreadful time, July.

For someone who's used to being in control of their creative processes, are you a writer who plots everything out and works to a plan?

Not in any way, I wish I did as it would be a lot easier. I genuinely don't know what's going to happen on the next page, and it's always very freeing when I *roughly* know what's happening in a chapter - and often I'll introduce a minor character, just for the sake of it, and then find they're really useful.

I did know there was a thing called the Well of Wishes because, when I sold the book on the basis of 5,000 words, the publisher asked what happened in the end and I made up the Well of Wishes on the spot and then thought 'Ooh, that's rather good!'. Making things up as I go along feels right, the plot development feels natural, and that's partly why it takes me so long - especially the adult books - because I never know what's going to happen until I'm writing it.

While there is certainly a great sense of place in *Small Change*, there's also a slightly odd feeling of timelessness to it; I found it easy to forget when it was set - was this deliberate?

I do say when it is, and there is an early computer in it, but no mobile phones - they're plot killers, there's no *doubt* about it! Look at the number of post-apocalyptic kid's books there are...there are no mobiles, telephones *or* computers in the post-apocalypse; you can get away with anything writing fantasy, history and post-history.

I have an old one-armed bandit at home, which works with old pennies, as did all the slot machines I remember from the fairgrounds of my early childhood; why did you choose to use that totally iconic coin the threepenny bit in the story?

[a very long pause indeed]

I've got no idea! I always liked them, and when I originally wrote the story I put in that it was an eight-side coin; then I did some post-writing research and discovered it's not eight-sided at all but twelve sided and I'd written a whole book on the basis of a coin that didn't really exist!

The end of the book seems to have a message that, contrary to what the rest is saying, there actually is a true magical element to stage magic.

There's a magical element to Great Uncle Tony's stage magic because he had the special threepenny bits, I think is what I'm saying...they were infused with magic and they were what made the Well of Wishes magical. But I totally rewrote the ending about a month before it went to print.

OK...well it is a truly fantastical ending, a real flourish, like the ending of a magic act. It surprised me, did it surprise you?

That's a nice analogy, and yes, it did because the first draft, the one that was going to be published, had a cliff-hanger ending in fact. But then I started writing the second book and got into *such* a tangle I thought 'I can't possibly do this' and went back and changed the ending; and then started the second book again, even though I was 20,000 words in. I'm glad now that it doesn't have a cliff-hanger ending, as I would have been furious reading that myself; so I'm very happy I changed it.

Didn't your publishers mind?

They were very good about it. But I had four days to do it in, four days to rewrite the last chapter.

I thought you were a slow writer...

Not with this, isn't it funny? I raced through with this one and the second book only took me six months. It picks up four days after the end of *Small Change*. It's called *Big Change for Stuart*, and it's the first time I've ever had a title before I started writing.

What can you say about the second book?

Basically, Stuart's got his Great Uncle's tricks, but he can't prove they're his; the local museum curator then offers to house the tricks and make Stuart a Junior Curator of the exhibition, and the story is about what happens then. I'm really pleased with it, it's all finished and it comes out in May. That's it for [books about] Stuart, who has been an absolute pleasure, and I'm thinking about another idea.

So in terms of your writing career, are you going to carry on writing both for adults and children?

I would like to, but trying to write them both at the same time is hard, really hard.

Alongside all of this, of course, you're still directing for TV - in fact as soon as we finish here you're off to direct an episode of *Have I Got News For You*...

It's just pointing cameras at people sitting behind desks - I'm not Spielberg, but I do love it. I do odd directing jobs, and I particularly enjoy the multi-camera directing ones.

Is that like writing a book from a multi-character point of view?

Very much, and that's how I learnt to edit for telly and then for books as well. I'm big on plot, everything has to tie up for me, no loose ends!