



# Author Spotlight

## Sarah Ridley chats to Graham Marks

Sarah Ridley is a well-known writer and editor of children's information books. She has recently, in *Brothers at War*, used her own family's history to create a very personal view of the First World War; now, with previously unseen letters sent back home from the front lines, she has brought to life an entirely new perspective on the conflict. Here she talks to **Graham Marks** about the story behind her latest book, *Dear Jelly*.

### What's the career path that got you into writing and editorial side of things?

Well, I am a twin and I spent a lot of my childhood playing music, as well as being interested in history, but then I realised that my twin was much more dedicated to the music than I was. She was prepared to practice for hours and I couldn't quite do that, so I started concentrating on the history; I had a very good History teacher at school - one of those really, *really* good teachers, I was very lucky - and I went off to university to do History.

I didn't really know what to do when I came out, but when I got my first proper job it was in publishing, as an Editorial Assistant and Picture Researcher, and I've stayed there ever since, going freelance when I had children.

I've edited or worked on *hundreds* of books, as most children's information books are quite short, so you get through a lot of them. More recently I've written some, and in the last couple of years it's been the two First World War books that have gripped me - *Brothers at War*, which is about my own family, and *Dear Jelly*, which is about my uncle by marriage's family.

### Have you always worked in non-fiction?

Yes, always, which of course is not the glamorous side of publishing!

### Do you have a favourite subject to work on or write about, or do you like everything?

For writing, it's history, really. At the moment I'm doing some books for Franklin Watts on scientists... there's a bit in the new curriculum about the history of great scientists like Darwin and Galileo. Wee bit of a challenge, trying to get *huge* life stories down to a thousand words! But I can't write all the time and so I still edit, which I like.

### Have you become an expert in any particular subject?

I wouldn't even begin to call myself expert in any subject, but having done two First World War books, I do know quite a lot about what is a really complicated period of history. It's very saddening that people think they can reduce something so complex down to a single issue.

### Was it difficult doing the research on something that happened a century ago?

My uncle is the custodian of a lot of family history...they kept the most enormous amount of pieces of paper for a hundred years or more - they were farmers, although I don't know if that has anything to do with it.

One of the family was a Captain, a low-ranking officer [during WWI], and he didn't throw anything away. When I started doing the research for *Brothers at War* I found tiny little pieces of paper headed 'Sick List', which said things like 'Private So-and-so: melancholic; Private Whatever: flu'; they didn't even get in the book as there wasn't enough room. Clearly he really needed this stuff and needed to keep it, which was quite upsetting.

**How did you come across the *Dear Jelly* material?**

The two brothers in the book, Robert and William, are the uncles of my aunt's husband – my mother's sister. My aunt, quite a long time ago, told me about the letters the brothers had written to their teenage sisters, but I had to [tell her] that children weren't studying the First World War so no one would be interested in a book.

I was quite lucky as one of the sisters, the one whose family nickname was Jelly, actually wrote a memoir towards the end of her life and wrote a lot about her childhood.

**When you first read the letters, were you, like me, hoping and hoping for a different ending?**

Yes, I know what you mean...once I'd got them all in the right order it was quite a sad moment, going from the 'Let me get at them!' attitude, to absolute exhaustion at the end. The ones right at the very end were heartrending, really...Robert's been there so long, and he's so tired it's almost too much. But they're real, and it really happened.

The letters, especially the ones with the drawings in, are extraordinary, particularly special. It was stunning to read them, but it did take a while to get them in sequence because they weren't all dated, and some that were only had the month not the year, which was a bit unhelpful.

**Did you immediately think the Robert and William's letters would make a book?**

Because I'd already managed to make a book, *Brothers at War*, out of my own family material, with *Dear Jelly* I went in thinking 'I'm going to see if there's a book there'; I did obviously wonder if anyone would be interested. I actually started work on *Dear Jelly* at the end of 2012, by which time it was obvious that the subject was going to be quite big.

**I do think the *Dear Jelly* story is definitely strong enough and emotional enough to have been published at any time – did you keep your powder dry, so to speak, till the 100th anniversary was on the horizon?**

You know, I don't know if it would have been published before, and especially for children. The First World War hasn't been a subject that's been studied [at school]...but it will be different this year, and probably for the next four years, until 2018. It is, as you say, extraordinarily strong material, but I don't know, without the anniversary, whether anyone would have been interested.

**Was it difficult to keep the balance between information and emotion?**

I don't know whether I've managed that...

**Oh, I think you have.**

I wept a lot when I was doing it; all sorts of things made me cry, one illustration in particular, the drawing on the title page, with one of the brothers, [Robert,] waving to his sisters. When I finally realised the two little figures were the sisters it was just heart-breaking. Their lives were divided by the water, and it must have been awful for them...they were so close. And so many families were the same.

**It did strike me that, for the time and the lack of communication available to them, the brothers knew a huge amount about what their sisters were up to.**

There's an amazing book which I read from cover to cover called *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front* by Richard Holmes, which is a study of the rank and file First World War soldier, and the post was really quite extraordinary at times; if they weren't moving around too much they could get letters within a day or two, they really were up to date. Other times, if they were on the move, letters were always trying to catch them up. The sisters seemed to write a lot of letters, but we haven't got any of them.

**So you have none of the correspondence from the girls to Robert and William at all, none at all?**

No, and the thing is that the girls were so upset by the First World War for the rest of their lives - especially the one I know the most about, my uncle's mother, Katherine Wigglesworth, who became quite a notable

children's book illustrator; she very rarely talked about the war, and if she did it brought her to tears, reliving the sorrow of losing not one brother, but two.

The sadness of the First World War did affect the whole of people's lives...the sense of loss often passed down to the next generation, apparently.

**You say that there are gaps, probably some letters which have gone missing or been lost, which is a shame as they are wonderful; was there any material you had, but didn't put in *Dear Jelly*?**

I used everything, even though some of the letters are repetitive - if a brother wrote a letter to one sister, then one to the other immediately afterwards, they do more or less say the same things. But I wanted every letter in, I felt it was really important to keep the integrity of the collection together, otherwise it wouldn't be doing the boys justice...it's a way of memorialising them.

**You've used the original drawings the brothers did, but not the handwritten letters themselves - was the actual writing too hard to decipher?**

I think, generally, children don't have much perseverance with handwriting which is hard to read...and the original letters are in a quite 'loopy', Edwardian style. Using facsimiles [of the letters] was never really talked about.

**From the transcription in the book, the letters seem to have survived the censor pretty well - is that actually the case?**

There was nothing missing from the letters, whether that's because the brothers, as officers, were censoring themselves, I don't know. Possibly, but there was literally nothing blocked out.

**You say quite often in the book how you can't believe the brothers were able to hide, in their words and pictures, how they felt about what must have been a terrible experience. Were you surprised by the tone of voice, the attitude of these incredibly young men to what they were going through?**

That's a common theme, isn't it, the soldiers trying to protect the people at home from quite how awful it was. But every now and again the mask slips, and there's one letter, quite early on, which describes [one of the brothers] going up the trenches because he's been told to go and check them, and it's an almost inappropriately detailed description of the full horrors of war, for a thirteen year-old sister to receive. Dead from both sides, and the friend being killed by a sniper...obviously he just needed to get that out. But what you have to do is read between the lines to realise how difficult it was for them. I think William found the war more difficult than Robert.

**There were almost two levels to their letters, particularly the drawings, which have a comic strip aspect to them - the caricatures of the German soldiers, for example - but could at the same time be quite realistic and serious. They are extraordinary documents.**

**Do you know if the drawing was a family thing - both brothers do seem to have been quite talented - or was it a trend, the way it was done, copying from the magazines of the time?**

I rather suspect you're right and they did copy from magazines sometimes. My uncle, whom I spent a lot of time talking to to help me with the linking text in the book, did mention some cartoonist who he thought the brothers' style was quite like. But I did also see a diary that Robert kept when he was at school, and the drawings were amazing, he was a good artist.

**Were there any drawings in the *Brothers at War*?**

Not, really; actually, [my family] seem to have been particularly unskilled at drawing! Although there was one very tragic little sketch that Maurice did of himself after he'd had his leg amputated, when he was getting used to the fact that he wasn't going to be in the athletics team any more.

**What has the family reaction to *Dear Jelly* been?**

My uncle, my aunt's husband, he's really, really pleased with it, very proud that the letters are going to help children understand [about the First World War]. He's a historian himself, and is all for children being inspired to learn more about a very complicated period of history; even though it's just two people's story, it can trigger an interest and lead on to so much more.

It is just so complex as a conflict, but maybe [the book works] because the war is the backdrop to the story, because usually in children's information books the facts come first, then the story comes afterwards. With it's the other way around, it's almost a soft sell, readers picking up facts by osmosis. It's a different approach.