



Author Spotlight

Gillian Philip chats to Graham Marks

Gillian Philip is a prolific writer who has been short-listed for a number of awards and also has a Carnegie nomination. While she has worked as a music store assistant, wine sales rep, radio presenter, theatre usherette, barmaid, and sung in a Caribbean Celtic reggae band, here she talks to Graham Marks, from her home on the Moray Firth in Scotland, about her latest series, *Ravenstorm Island*...

You write for children, you write YA and upper YA, and you write for adults. You write fantasy. You write contemporary and you write crime fiction. What was the first book, for which age group and which genre, that you had published?

That was one called *Bad Faith* which was for young adults. It was published in 2008.

That was your first book?

Yeah. That was the first published one.

You certainly have been prolific! Had you been writing prior to that? Did you have a whole pile of finished manuscripts stacked up waiting to go once the first one was published?

Yeah, exactly. There was this kind of log jam of manuscripts, so that's why there's been so many so quickly since then. There's the ones that never got published, as well. I tried to write romances and things like that but I wasn't any good at it, I just couldn't get the hang of it...[they're] really difficult.

You've written under a number of pseudonyms and I wondered whether that has allowed you to be a lot of different writers...let you do more things that you might otherwise have been able to do under just one name?

Yes, definitely. The pseudonyms tends to be, a lot of them, for packagers, [books I have been commissioned to write]; those [books] tend to be under pseudonyms. It's like using different writing muscles and writing different ways, it's fun. I like it.

Have you always needed to be a writer?

Yes! I always wanted to be a writer.

The way you talk, it sounds like you needed to be a writer.

That's probably true, yes; because when I was a kid, and I wanted to have a really great time, I would go to my room and shut the door and start writing stories. Filling up notebooks with stories, which is very anti-social, but that was my favorite thing to do. I always liked writing stories. I would write fan-fic and stuff like that because I was into things like *Silver Brumby**, which was a horse series. I would write fan-fic for *Silver Brumby* before there was even fan-fic, right before computers.

* *The Silver Brumby* series, by Australian author Elyne Mitchell, is about Thowra, a brumby stallion, and are set in the Snowy Mountains region of Australia. A Brumby is an Australian feral horse.

Did you show what you'd written to your friends, or was it just for you?

No, friends, as well.

Are the commissioned books you write just for children?

Yes, that's all been for children and young adults. But I should mention Erin Hunter - I do *Survivors* for the *Erin Hunter* team, as well.

I've read a couple of your interviews when you're talking to somebody and you keep on books you've written under different names. There seems to be something of a multiple personality situation going on here. How do you keep track?

I have been known to sign the wrong name in a book! I once went into Forbidden Planet and they had one of my *Darke Academy* books, which wasn't under my name, it was under Gabriella Poole, and I went up to the guy and I said, "Oh, would you mind if I signed this?". It was the first time I'd ever been asked for any identification...he said, "Have you got any ID?" and I said, "I'll just show you my driver's license." Then of course I had to say, "Actually, that's not going to be any use..."

Did he believe you?

I'm not sure he did...he did let me sign them, but I think he thought I was some kind of lunatic.

Do you have a favorite alter ego?

Oh, crikey! My favorite alter ego is probably Erin Hunter, yeah...I like Erin.

It sounds like a really great team to be part of.

It's a *lovely* team to be part of, yeah, it is. Actually, it's the same team that are involved in *Ravenstorm*, as well. I've been working with them since 2012 now, and they're just they're just great. They're a super team to work with, yeah.

You're quite open about writing commissioned books, the ones that aren't your original idea. Is doing that kind of work, do you think, another skill set entirely, more like journalism in a way? Is it different from working on your own ideas?

Yes...yes, it is. It's a totally different process for me because the style and the content are usually quite different from my own stuff, for a start. What I'm creating from scratch myself usually ends up being quite violent and quite a bit more kind of 'sex, violence and brutality' than the ones [that aren't my original idea]. Also, the whole process of it is different because when I'm writing my own stuff I'll be plotting it as I go. I have a general idea, I know roughly where it's going, but it changes direction all the time and it tends to develop as I write it, as I get to know the characters.

Having a storyline [to work] from, it's just totally different. I can concentrate on building up the characters and just enjoy doing the dialogue and putting additional things into it...building up around the story line. It's totally different way of working for me.

Do you physically have to pull yourself back? Keep a tighter hold on the language reigns, so to speak, when you're writing for younger children?

A little bit. Obviously, more for the twelve year-olds and than for the teenagers. I do put an occasional swearword in a teenage book. You are little bit restricted, but it's no bad thing, really, because when I do use a swearword I know that it's absolutely got to be there, and it's really much more effective, because as soon as I use an f-word or something it's because [the character is] really stressed or really at the end of their tether. You can't pepper, even a teenage book or YA book, with cursing, but using it occasionally I think is more effective anyway.

Do you find that a problem, or do you just change gear in your head?

No, I think I just change gear, and sometimes I will...[laughs] this is a terrible admission...sometimes I do put in a swearword and I just know I'm going to go back and take it out later; but it's just because in my head I want [the character] to be really furious or upset or whatever, and I just stick in a swearword. Then I go back and take it out. Usually it doesn't actually matter. They're, obviously, still furious or they're still upset, it's just that I take out the swearword.

The character has vented, so it's OK. They're done, they're over it now.

Yeah.

Do you always remember where you were when you have the idea that, subsequently, turns into a book?

Sometimes, yeah. Sometimes I know the exact place and the exact time because it is a very specific place at a very specific time - or it's a very specific news story. Like *Bad Faith* came out of one particular news story, which was a local story about a monk who got lost in the woods. I didn't use that story, which was a very tragic local story, but remember that image being in my head, and turned into something else entirely. But it started with that image.

Places as well...I've got a fantasy series that all started when I was walking around a little loch. It's a very creepy place that's surrounded by trees and there's no rivers running in or out as it's a kettle loch. I just thought, "I know, I'll throw two teenagers in there and see what happens". Just fictionally, you know, not in real life!

I don't know where Ravenstorm Island is, but I imagine that you must have had somewhere in mind when you were working on the idea - is it in Scotland?

I think of it as being more off the coast of the south of England, maybe the south west; a lot of it is the village of Crow's Nest and I imagine that as an English village. I do really like islands. I love going to Scottish islands on holiday which we tend to do quite a lot. That whole spirit and environment of being on an island, being surrounded by water, a whole, self-contained world in one place. It's very much something that's fun to write and I'm used to it. It's an environment I'm really familiar with.

There's something kind of magical about islands. There always is, and a lot of children's stories are island stories, because it is a safer world, it's self-contained - but there's no escape because the sea's all around it. Yes, there always is something magical about sailing off to an island and you're on a ferry or you're on a plane or, whatever, and that's your place, that's your home, that's everything there is for a few weeks.

I wondered what you thought fantasy added to a story that one set in a real world wouldn't have?

[Pause] Ooh...I think fantasy adds something without actually having to take anything away, because fantasies can be as realistic as you want to make them, but just with that extra magical dimension.

So you're not *losing* a dimension, you're just adding another one. You still have real people and real problems and real dilemmas, but just in the context of an extra, magical perspective. So, I do think [it] adds something, without actually taking anything away. I liked to read fantasy when I was a kid, so it was something I always loved anyway.

I was going to say it's something kids love, but, obviously, it's something a lot adults love, as well. The whole adult fantasy genre is really popular, of course, and I just think fantasy, as I say, can be as realistic, emotionally realistic, and as gritty as you want it to be and as gritty and emotionally realistic as you like.

The *Ravenstorm Island* story line was really quite spine-tingling and it did occur to me that it could have been written for an older audience; if you took away the Sprye/fairy element and beefed it up, it could have been an adult story, or a more adult story. Did it every cross your mind that the story could have gone up the age range?

I think it did, because I do think the first book in particular...the whole line about the vanishing children, it's a very basic terror.

I'll say!

It happens all through the ages, vanishing children is the thing everyone fears. I think there were a couple of times when I thought, actually, I'm going too far with this for the [age range], I'll just tone the scary bits a wee bit... it's not so much the vanishing children that I thought was a really eerie and frightening on a very gut level, it was the fact that nobody remembered they'd ever been there.

You're obviously used to doing a lot of world-building for your books. Presumably, you'd have to do that for *Ravenstorm* too?

Yes, because there was the island, and the village. There's [all the] inhabitants, and the Sprye, of course; I didn't go off and draw a map or anything, I tended to realize it all in my head as I wrote, to walk with the readers up to the cliffs, say, to the craggy old oak and the crumbling edge, and be there as if I'm seeing it the first time as well as them.

When I'm doing world building I tend to do it from the inwards, outwards, if that makes any sense? I go for the details, take small things and then build them up into the bigger things. I'm not trying to create everything at once. I would say that I would build from the inside out, that's probably the best way I can put it.

That's a very good way of describing it. Do you make a list of rules and regulations that have to be followed for this world? Do you know the laws?

I don't make a physical list. In my head I know the rules and that you can't break them. I think that's quite important, to make it believable, to make it credible, particularly, in fantasy. I think you've got to have rules for that world because otherwise you could do anything. You get some character wandering around with a magic wand, who could just fix everything. So yes, you do need to have rules, but I wouldn't set them in concrete [right at the outset]. I think the rules develop with the world, but then you have to make sure that everything you've written fits, and if it doesn't fit then you've got work to do, you've got to change it.

Have you ever written yourself into a corner?

Yes! I've got this other YA fantasy series, called *Rebel Angels*...there's four books in the series and I remember vividly getting to the end of Book Three, and I was having a great time and I just saying, "Oh, this is happening and this is happening - it's great, fantastic, they're in so much trouble!", and then I thought, "I have *no* idea how I can get them out of this! Absolutely none!". I had to go off to a cottage on a cliff by the sea. I had to go off and take all my characters with me and sit there and try and get them out of trouble.

Is the mythology in *Ravenstorm* all made up or is it based on existing stories that you know about?

I think any fantasy story, if you're writing something mythological or about legendary beings, is always based on something that went before because fairy stories and myths are so old. The thing I like about working with old myths and legends and changelings, for instance - changeling are a big thing in *Ravenstorm* - [is that] you can rework myths infinitely and make new things out of them all of the time; that's what they're for. That's what we've always done with myths and legends and fairy tales. People are always retelling them and making them new for a new world and a new generation. So yes, it's based on old ideas, but the fun part and the trick is to spin them to make them something new for a world with mobile phones and computers.

Mobile phones are a problem, aren't they. It confines us as writers, this electronic shadow following characters around. It's really difficult.

Absolutely. It's [gone from] one extreme to the other - in previous years, you had to do something to get rid of the parents, have them go off on a world trip or have them killed by an evil wizard, or something like that. Now, as well as the parents, you've got to deal with the *blasted* mobile phone! And you can't always just say, "Oh, their mobile phone ran out batteries, they can't call for help".

When is the next book coming out?

Good question, I think the second one in Britain must be 2015 sometime and it's about a ghost ship. Ghost pirates.

I love the little illustrations at the heading of the chapters.

Oh, they're gorgeous, they're *gorgeous*. I just love them and I love the interior of the cover, the frontispiece there, it's gorgeous too - the Shadow Sprye. David Roberts is the illustrator. He's a genius. They're just beautiful. The first time I saw a printed copy I started looking through it and I couldn't wait to get to the chapter headings to see what was next, because they're all so different, as well.

In an interview of yours you made a comment about walking and writing that really gelled with me. These are two activities, which you would assume would be polar opposites, that actually go together extremely well. I wondered why you thought that was?

I *really* don't know. But you do this, you're stuck, you go for a walk and it's like you're jiggling something loose in your brain, something that you've been stuck on forever, and you'll just go, "Ahhh! That's the way it goes!", and you'll know what happens next. There was diagram doing the rounds on Twitter...a scan of a brain of someone who's been sitting at a desk and a scan of brain of someone who's been out for a walk. The second one's all lit up like a Christmas tree. I don't even know if it's a fake, I don't know if it's for real but that's how I feel.

My feeling has always been that what you're doing with the book is going on a journey and when you go out for a walk, even though it might be just a short half hour walk, you're going on a journey,

too. Very often, you can unravel the knot, can't you? By the time you come back you've unraveled it somehow.

Yes, you have. And even with something as simple as getting out of breath, or getting cold, or getting too hot, you're just thinking, "OK, my character can do that, as well". Just having something for them to feel or something for them to see or hear can start spark things off. With *Bad Faith*, again, I remember being out for a walk when I was thinking about the plot and I came across a rabbit that had been hit by a car, and it wasn't quite dead yet; that literally started the whole plot point. My heroine did the same thing.

You just come across things, you walk around the country or the city and get loads of ideas. You might think you're characters are going to have a big confrontation somewhere...then you go and you find this great, dark, slimy alley with moss and steam coming out the side of the buildings, and you're thinking, "Oh, yeah! This is it! Great, this is where they are!". Walking just sparks [moments like] that.

Do you have writing routine? Are you one of these people who treat writing as a job? I'm assuming that you must have some kind of routine with the number of different people you are in your professional life!

Theoretically...[laughs]...I think I'm going to sit down at my desk at 9am and start writing, but when I do sit down at my desk at 9am I go on Twitter and I have about three coffees, so it doesn't really work. I suppose you could call it a routine in that I have to go to my desk, and I have to have my three coffees, and then I will think about opening up the laptop and doing some work. Then I can go on for as long as I need to, or as long as I like. It's probably not a very efficient routine, but it's a routine. I'm a bit of a deadline junkie, how about you?

I have to have them. It is all about the deadline, always.

Yes, exactly. I know I'm going to make myself miserable and I know I'm going to leave it until the last two weeks, or whatever, but I just say, "No, it's fine". [I know I'm] going to go crazy, but it works for me...I'll mess around doing maybe a little character sketch or just a little description here and there, and I can do that for weeks. Then I'll suddenly realize I've got two or three weeks to get it in, and then I can do it. Then it focuses the mind, yeah?

Yeah.

You obviously have had the same experience?

Oh, yes. That's when you hit your peak 'words per day' moment. Suddenly, it's gone from 500 words a day to 1500, 2000 words a day. Boom!

Yeah, absolutely.

There's a lot more to come for Molly, Jack, and Art. Do the kids grow up during the books?

They pretty much remain the same because, actually, although it's a series it pretty much all take place over the one summer because there's so much mystery and weirdness happening on the island; they've just solve one mystery when the next one comes along. So they do stay the same age. They have a pretty hectic summer.

It sounds like one heck of a holiday, Gillian.

Oh, a *heck* of holiday, I'll tell you!

Do you have a favourite character?

I love Arthur because he's got such a good heart but he can be really snarky, and can be really cynical. I *adore* Arthur.

I have to say that I'm hoping that we're going to see more of Mason and just exactly what's going on with him.

There is more of Mason. We find out about his origin story and about the other gargoyles, and what the purpose of the gargoyles is, and all that stuff. He's really fun to write...I love all the characters, but he's a hoot to write he really is!

Well we won't say anymore now otherwise we'll get into spoiler territory – thank you Gillian!

ENDS