

# The Time Travelling Cat

Julia Jarman talks about her series



A cat springs out of the black and gold cover, decorated with the fierce symbols of a powerful and apparently pitiless culture. *The Time Travelling Cat and the Aztec Sacrifice* is a new book in a series which successfully presents history as the fascinating and sometimes frightening adventure it is.

When school librarians first suggested an Aztec story for the series, Julia wondered how it might be done for children. The meeting of the Aztecs and the Spanish conquistadores does not make gentle bedtime reading for adults or children but in this story we travel with Topher and his remarkable cat, Ka, and see the story through their eyes. She was pleased to discover during her research a 'goody' in the shape of Father Bartolomé, a real character who wrote a book critical of the Spanish force's disregard for the humanity of the Aztecs. The story shows both sides, and the author's experience with children is demonstrated in the clever handling of often violent historical events.

The series has its origins in a real cat owned by Julia when her children were young. She says he was a bit of a 'Six Dinner Sid', rather vain and often mysteriously absent. On one occasion, he was away for a week and returned very hungry. "Where have you been?" asked Julia and it was her daughter, Josie, who said he must have been time travelling – because that was what cats did. The idea took root. She had been to Egypt where the historical importance of cats is still in evidence and when she began the first adventure, *The Time Travelling Cat and the Egyptian Goddess*, her cat character turned out to be a composite, partly her haughty absentee and partly a comforting cat she once owned who was very clever. This cat would jump on her keyboard, and seemed quite capable of communicating, so that is what the astonishing Ka does. In this story, Topher is grieving for his mother, an Egyptologist who has died in a plane crash, leaving him a stone cat. When he finds a real cat in the shed, looking amazingly like the statue, it is clear that it is not an ordinary creature. Then it disappears and Topher awakes one night to find an Egyptian falcon outside his window. He is being summoned to join Ka in Ancient Egypt.

All the titles combine an adventure, often dangerous, with well researched historic detail. She says she tends to plunge into the research. If possible, she will go to actual sites, such as Silchester when she was writing *The Time Travelling Cat and the Roman Eagle*. She uses the internet increasingly but usually needs to return to "a good solid book". She is looking not only for historic detail but good characters. In this way she found El Sol, the Spanish villain in the Aztec book and speaks of how our view of what a 'good

character' is has changed over time. There are aspects raised by history that children need to consider and Topher will often reflect on what he has experienced.

In each of the books, there is a linked, contemporary issue. The Egyptian obsession with the after-life is linked with Topher's mother's death. She is boldest in a Tudor story, *The Time Travelling Cat and the Tudor Treasure*, when she tackles the problem of animal rights. Julia says she wanted to show the other side, the value of medical research, something much less tackled in children's books. The Roman book raises the question of collaboration and the Aztec setting invites us to consider racism, but it all happens within the framework of a strong story.

Asked whether fiction has value in the teaching of history, Julia has no doubts. Rather, she sees it as pre-eminent. Surely, she says, we must try and understand history as human beings? Facts, she believes, cannot be properly understood without imagination. What is the value of knowing what a weapon looks like and operates without knowing what it can do? To learn completely, feelings must be engaged. For her, history is not about facts but about values. In her recent book, *Peace Weavers*, she tells a story of the role of women in making peace. Why, she asks, do we only learn particular parts of history? Why do we know so much about Anglo-Saxon warriors and nothing about peace weaving? Historical stories need to address these questions.

Julia also writes across the wider spectrum. There are picture books and novels set in the present. *Class Two at the Zoo*, a picture book, will be published in June. In the meantime, Julia has to get to work so that we can continue the series with *The Time Travelling Cat and the Viking Terror*. Fans will be waiting.

Pat Thomson



Published by Andersen at £4.99  
*The Time Travelling Cat and the Egyptian Goddess*  
ISBN: 1842705210  
*The Time Travelling Cat and the Aztec Sacrifice*  
ISBN: 1842705164  
*The Time Travelling Cat and the Tudor Treasure*  
ISBN: 1842706160  
*The Time Travelling Cat and the Roman Eagle*  
ISBN: 1842706179 (pub. Nov.)  
*Peace Weavers* Scholastic £4.99 ISBN: 0439977711  
*Class Two at the Zoo* Hodder £10.99 ISBN: 0340911603