

Cressida Cowell:

Ten Years of Training Dragons



My neighbour's little boy wants a dragon for a pet. He's convinced this is a possibility because his teacher has read to him a funny story in which you learn how to catch and train dragons. He has also seen the film where a boy climbs onto the back of a dragon and gets to do some cool things. Both the book and the film are the wonderful creative invention of Cressida Cowell. The bestselling *How to Train Your Dragon* book series is currently in its tenth instalment, and building on the success of a first film, *DreamWorks Animation* are in the process of producing a further two films.

I had the opportunity to talk to Cressida during a Radio Day in her role as a judge for the *National Young Writers' Award*. Cressida is keenly interested in helping children to write for pleasure; she worries that this is being squeezed out of an increasingly skill-focused curriculum. Indeed, her discovery of the joy to be had from writing and drawing stems from her own childhood when long summer holidays spent on an uninhabited Scottish island provided the inspiration for the Dragon series. "There was no television, just a wild space. I think it was very good for my creativity because if you're bored you have to make things up."

The overarching story of the Dragon series tells the tale of Hiccup, a young misfit heir to a Viking tribe, who is learning to be a hero the hard way. The novels invite children to inhabit a world where dragons exist and to discover what happens to them. Although each book can be read independently, Cressida has interwoven quite complex threads through the series including ten lost things which Hiccup has to collect and the story of what happened to Hiccup's ancestors. Ten years on from the first book, the novels remain fresh and innovative.

From the outset, Cressida had an idea of the pattern by which Hiccup's story would unfold, but she was uncertain what would happen in each book. "Because if I were to have, there would be no sense of discovery in it for me, and I wouldn't be able to explore the accidents that come along which is the organic process of writing." She knew she was telling a much larger story of a boy leaving childhood behind and growing up. Central to this theme is the boy's relationship with his father. "The difficulty for the boy who is very different from his father and having that pressure of expectation; the difficulty for the father in realising that the son is very different and not feeling rejected by that. All those subtle emotional things I try to explore." The stories are told by the older

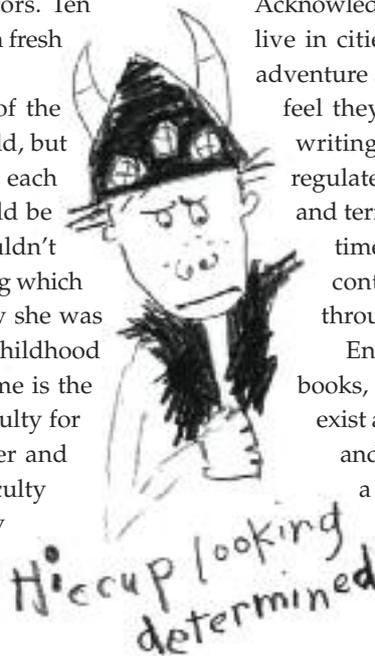
Hiccup who is looking back on his childhood, but the story is also being told through the point of view of Stoic, Hiccup's father, who is trying to bring up his son to be a young man, and possibly a young King. Cressida is pleased with the way the film portrays the tender relationship between Hiccup and Stoic. "For a large Hollywood movie, it is a very affectionate film."

Each book is meticulously researched. "In order to play games with history you have to do an enormous amount of research." And Cressida does a tremendous amount of research on Vikings. A recent discovery has been a Viking swimming competition in which the winner was the last man back in full body armour! These facts give her inspiration and feed into the stories. "Really they are fantasy books – they're not trying to give a factual account of Vikings, but they are pretending they are. I take some quite sophisticated concepts, but I write in a way that bears in mind a child's attention span, making the storylines very exciting. The children know I'm playing games with history, but I'm asking them to think about what is history. I think they like to be challenged in this way." Cressida encourages her readers to believe that the dragons are not storybook dragons, but actual species like dinosaurs, providing a range of statistics which includes the speed, disobedience and fear factors for each subspecies. The hut in the bottom of her garden where she now writes is surrounded by pictures of dragons and books about Vikings to allow her to immerse herself in that world.

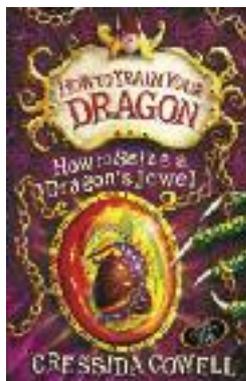
Acknowledging that she is writing for children who mainly live in cities, Cressida believes they can respond to the adventure and excitement in the stories because they may feel they don't have enough in their own lives. "I'm writing about wilderness and a world without regulated rules. The time of the Vikings was a barbaric and terrible time, but it was also an incredibly exciting time for exploring. We can no longer discover new continents, but children can explore the feeling through fantasy."

Environmental issues is another concern in her books, asking children to consider if a species doesn't exist anymore, should we be looking after the natural and wild spaces of the world better? "I try to create a feeling of wonder at the natural world and I invite them to discover and think about it. The film also tried to capture that – it's one of the reasons I like the film so much."

When *DreamWorks Animation* decided to



make a trilogy of films from the series, Cressida was aware from the beginning she needed to be open to some significant changes in order to make these into potentially wonderful films. She gives as an example the portrayal of Hiccup's loveable, if disobedient dragon, Toothless: "In the books, Hiccup doesn't ride on the back of the dragon until book 6, and in the book that's a bunch of description. If you're making a film in 3D, you want your hero to be able to climb on the back of a dragon and ride it; you want to feel the experience." She also cites the difficulty of translating the idea of Dragonese – a whole invented language which Hiccup, a 'dragon whisperer', is able to understand and speak. The only way film can convey this is through using sub-titles which very young children might not be able to read. Cressida believes the books and the film have been successful in their different ways because each is focused on how the story can best be told in that medium. She doesn't feel threatened by a different interpretation, seeing the books and their illustrations as existing as a distinct book world. "I didn't see the film as needing to be a literal interpretation... They have been true to the things I wanted to say in the books and to the feelings I wanted to have. I also admire the epic style and the touching depiction of Hiccup which I hope I also have in my books." She has an excellent working relationship with the writer and director, Dean DeBlois, and with the creative and



acting teams who are largely the same team working on the next two films. I wonder if some aspects of the film have found their way into her recent books. Cressida feels they probably have, but in an unconscious way.

There are two eagerly anticipated novels in the Dragon series to come. Initially, Cressida had been uncertain how long each element of the story would take to tell. "These books are quite short in words because they are packed with pictures. It was quite difficult to judge exactly how many there was going to be. But now I am coming to the end." Understandably, she has mixed feelings about any pressure to write more. "As a mother I know how valuable it can be to have your child excited about a book series and how that can help a child's reading, but on the other hand, it's not an 'adventure of' series – it's about growing up. It is something that has to have an ending."

I have one final question to satisfy my aspiring pet owning neighbour. Which species of dragon would Cressida choose to train? "Very tricky, but I suppose it would have to be Toothless – I have so much affection for him – although he might set fire to the furniture!" I'm sure he will approve of Cressida's choice.

Elaine Chant

How to Seize a Dragon's Jewel Hodder £6.99 ISBN: 978-1444908794

How to Seize a Dragon's Sword Hodder £6.99 ISBN: 978-1444900941

How to Break a Dragon's Heart Hodder £6.99 ISBN: 978-0340996928

Now Don't Get Me Wrong...

Chris Powling – Number 40: Re-Reading

...for years, unless a particular review or article demanded it, I didn't do a lot of this. I didn't have time. There was always a batch of new books demanding attention. Though well aware that Literature – in its honorific capital-letter sense – can be defined as the books we choose to re-read, over and over again ideally, I was too busy immersing myself in the new stuff to give the best of the old stuff the look-in warranted on its own terms.

Silly me.

Now the pressure to keep constantly up-to-date has eased up a bit, I can make more room for what I've been missing. With Literature, that's to say, the first fine careless rapture of initial encounter doesn't just last, and go on lasting, it actually refines and enriches itself. Somehow, miraculously, Aladdin's new lamp can incorporate the old one as well. Or is it the other way round? Whichever, the genie is pretty much guaranteed to stay in residence.

And so it's turned out. Recently, for instance, I've been re-reading – in this case for the umpteenth time – one of the best-known of all children's books: *Treasure Island*. I first came across Stevenson's classic as a ten-year-old and was

hugely impressed with the half-of-it I understood...and even more impressed with the half-of-it I *didn't* understand ie the fifty percent I identified as 'grown up'. But when my grandson, aged almost ten, brought it to me last month for sharing as a bed-time story, I had to smother a doubt or two. Jake's a good reader. Times, and reading-habits, have changed, though. Helped by Miss Bow, my class teacher, I was able to cope with the substantial gap between RLS's writing and my own reading experience. Would it be the same for Jake?

Well, Billy Bones, Blind Pew, Dr Livesey, Long John Silver and Company soon got that sorted. Margaret Meek showed us long ago how texts can teach what children learn...and so far Jake has been learning prodigiously. As for his Grandpa, he has a double-pleasure at present: not just re-reading and re-living *The Black Spot*, and *The Apple Barrel*, and *The Man of the Island*, etc. But watching the impact these, and other famous scenes, have on a young reader encountering them for the first time. In fact, I'm already asking myself if Polly, Jake's seven-year-old sister, is ready yet for the Moomin books...