

Elen Caldecott

– first a writer, then an author!

Elen graduated with a MA from Bath Spa University in 2008 and was highly commended in the PFD Prize for *Most Promising Writer for Young People*. It was the year after she left that her first book was selected for publication by Bloomsbury, *How Kirsty Jenkins Stole The Elephant*, the story she had written during her University course. Since then there have been three more, very well-received books, one of which, *Operation Eiffel Tower*, made the short list of the RH Children's Book Award this year. A new story *The Great Ice-Cream Heist* was recently published and immediately snapped up by her young reader fans. An impressive start for a new author, so how did it all begin? Meeting up with Elen at this year's Federation of Children's Book Groups Annual Conference gave me the opportunity to find out.

"It was 2005 and my husband, Simon, had just about completed his five years of being an impoverished student. He asked me if there was something I wanted to do before we got used to having two incomes again! I'd dreamed of becoming a writer and had, over the years, investigated a number of courses. The one in Bath had tempted me... At the time we were living in Edinburgh but Simon immediately said that we would move there so I promptly sent off an application and my dream became reality."

The course included a specialised programme on children's literature and that appealed to Elen's deep-seated love of books for young readers. She was able to immerse herself in the current children's book world without having to study the art of creative writing or journalism before children's literature became the main focus. "I thought that Bath would give me the opportunity to look at many stories that were less than five years old." Happily this was the result, facilitating her to enjoy these texts before analysing them from a writing perspective. Very impressed with the material provided, and also with the calibre of her student colleagues, she was determined to work hard. "We all knew we were making a huge, personal investment in terms of money and time – one or two years of our life. We all brought a similar hunger and talent to the course and wanted very much to succeed."

Many of these course colleagues had been in previous jobs and were more mature than the average, straight-from-school university student



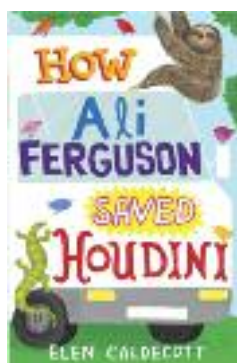
intake. There were a few who had studied and taken their BA at Bath and just moved on to the Writing Course to complete their MA. "Personally, I think it is a choice you should make after you have had a bit of life experience. Those who had done a day job seemed to have a special quality, an internal focus. You can be terribly focused at twenty but the voices that truly resonate are those that come to this course later in life. They know they have the sustainable passion it requires. But, admittedly, there were some notable exceptions."

So, how did all this come about for Elen? As a child she became a voracious reader, although not initially. She successfully decoded print at school but it was not until she had experienced reading a copy of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* that she became enthusiastic. She felt that it was something magical about this story that gave her brain a fluidity for reading and she became totally immersed in a book for the very first time. From that point on she couldn't get enough. She re-read all she owned " ... books that I secreted on my carefully guarded bookcase."

Her mother had treasured all her original copies of Enid Blyton's *Adventure* series and shared those with her. "I loved them because of their solid-brown, hardback appearance with the blue print on their covers." Elen also had her own paperback collection of the *Mallory Towers* titles, which she

would read through from book one to the end of the series and then immediately start all over again. It was round about this time that she felt she wanted to write but never had an opportunity during her early adult years to translate that into earning a living. "I thought teaching or nursing was probably more me."

Looking back Elen can appreciate that many of the jobs that she had all contributed to the success she has experienced from writing. Working as an archeologist, history became alive and she created stories about the artefacts she unearthed and researched. She became a theatre usher where she was immersed in stories and storytelling. She loved watching the audience reactions when visually inspired to dream of another world. Nursing extended her awareness of human needs – every patient had a story to share. It was only when she started working in a museum that she allowed her ideas to develop into longer tales. Her starting point was that there was a way to steal anything if you really wanted to. "I reckoned it was either



'become a thief yourself' or 'create characters' that would do it for you!" Suddenly she was made redundant. She had little money but Simon had almost finished his studying so the circle was complete and it was now her turn to follow a dream.

How Kirsty Jenkins Stole The Elephant was the manuscript she completed on her course which was industry focused. Regular visitors from the children's book world gave lectures: publishers, authors, illustrators, agents. Part of their brief was 'hang around afterwards and go to the pub!' Tutors ensured that everyone circulated giving students a relaxed opportunity to make direct contact with professionals in their new career. "I met my agent, Rosemary Cantor, like that. I had submitted some of my work for the prize that her agency were giving so she knew a little about my writing. I shared the early drafts of *How Ali Ferguson Saved Houdini* with her and, as a result of this, she took me on!" Having an established agent to promote a new writer is very important but difficult to establish.

All Elen's stories are well-written and exciting stand-alones. Children can pick up any of the books and read to enjoy a different experience with new characters every time. She weaves the mundane with the fantastic and produces wonderfully plausible plots.

The Mystery of Wickworth Manor was written with a completely fresh voice and introduces us to a mystery painting that produces more

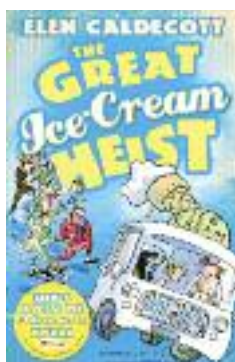
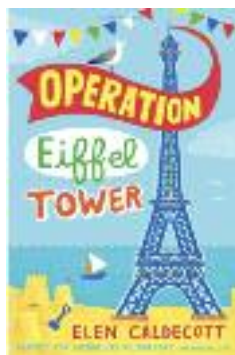
questions than answers. A humorous story, it introduces young readers to ghostly happenings but above all it is a tale about friendship, with plenty of adventure and detective work.

"I sometimes envy writers who have a long running series so they can revisit established characters," she confessed. "But my current work-in-progress may break that mould."

She feels that this is going to be two books because of its word length – it will be too long for her readership group of those building reading confidence.. "There is a good central point which will seem like the ending for the first book, but it will probably need a second one to complete the story."

Having met many of the enthusiastic readers who tested *Operation Eiffel Tower* this year I am sure that none of them will be objecting to her taking two books to tell a story. They will just be delighted that she is still writing stories accessible to younger or less experienced readers to enjoy.

David Blanch



Elen's books are published by Bloomsbury.

How Kirsty Jenkins Stole The Elephant ISBN: 978-0747599197 £5.99

How Ali Ferguson Saved Houdini ISBN: 978-1408805749 £5.99

Operation Eiffel Tower ISBN: 978-1408805732 £5.99

Mystery of Wickworth Manor ISBN: 978-1408820483 £5.99

The Great Ice-Cream Heist ISBN: 978-1408829776 £5.99

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