

Introducing Sophia McDougall

There are few more gratifying experiences for a reader than finding yourself gripped at the beginning of a story when you are plunged into a world of exciting possibilities. *Mars Evacuees* is Sophia McDougall's first venture into children's fiction and her opening sentence, "When the polar ice advanced as far as Nottingham, my school was closed and I was evacuated to Mars" instantly demands you read on. What follows is a fast paced, sci-fi adventure story from an accomplished writer who has already a strong following amongst adult readers of the *Romanitas* trilogy; alternative history titles which have the intriguing premise of "What if the Roman Empire never fell?"



Meeting Sophia just before the publication of *Mars Evacuees*, I sense a mood of purposeful anticipation, not least perhaps, because she had first conceived the idea for the novel when she was only nine years old. "I'd read Michelle Magorian's WWII evacuee books, *Goodnight Mister Tom* and *Back Home* where children were sent as far as America. Stories about travelling a long way appealed to me, with characters moving away from danger but going to experience a different form of danger. I began thinking, if the situation arose again, instead of going to the countryside where else could you send people – well obviously Mars!"

Mars Evacuees is narrated by twelve year old Alice Dare, a reluctant trainee space fighter, who gets caught up in a series of potentially catastrophic events, of which being uprooted from Earth and adjusting to a training academy on Mars is merely the beginning. The story contains features all children relish: a world where adults are largely absent – the crew mysteriously disappears during the transportation to Mars, some pesky alien life forms including space munching locusts and robot teachers who insist on delivering lessons at the most inappropriate times. Humour is clearly an important element of the novel. "Often this emerged naturally from the way Alice thinks about things, the combination of a very practical, get on with life narrator and the insane situation she faces. The story is quite a scary one and the thread of humour keeps pulling you through. I never found myself forcing a joke where it didn't belong."

Sophia's research for *Mars Evacuees* included spending time on Google Earth (you can alter the settings to look closely at Mars), reading Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy and receiving a Mars cuddly toy as a present complete with polar ice caps as fluffy hair! "I also read articles about terraforming, the atmosphere and the gravity on Mars, which is a third of

what it would be on earth." These are aspects which Sophia weaves into her story.

Underpinning a strong plot line are some serious issues. A story about a war with aliens meant dealing with ideas of difference yet being alert to the traps sci-fi stories can fall into. "I wanted to find ways of both avoiding evil aliens who are fighting purely out of malice and also unpicking those ideas - how you can understand people who seem at first to be very different, and how you can deal with conflicts that have very real roots, but still involve a level of misunderstanding and prejudice."

Correspondingly, the story doesn't end neatly. "The characters know they're not going to be able to say everything is fine now, just like it never happened – that's not how history works." Sophia considers in some ways the main characters find this easier to deal with *because* they're children; they have never had a sense of how things are supposed to be.

The central characters in the story are four child soldiers who are in a dark situation but they have the resilience and friendships that will help them through. In particular, Alice develops a close and entertaining relationship with Josephine, a fellow space cadet whose character complements Alice's. "I explain it as what if Holmes and Watson were twelve year old girls? I have tried to bring in that type of dynamic; genius and eccentricity versus loyalty and common sense." Sophia detests the term "strong female characters" and has written an article denouncing the concept. "So many books for both children and adults have a lot of men and boys and one girl who is clever or she does one thing. I don't think that that's enough or fair; there's as many ways to be an interesting girl or woman as there are to be an interesting man." Choosing my words carefully, I voice my enjoyment of the variety of characters from both genders, along with sexless robots and the intriguing concept of multi-sex aliens!

Sophia is currently working on a second novel in the series dealing with the aftermath of events in *Mars Evacuees*. It will have the same core characters but will take them to a different destination. Intriguing from someone who tells me she recently had a dream where she was falling into portals between worlds.

Elaine Chant

Mars Evacuees published by Egmont
ISBN: 978-1405268677 £6.99

