



Cathy Cassidy ...

Alice's No.1 Fan!

to mark the 150th anniversary of Lewis Carroll's book. I grabbed at the chance with both hands because I had loved the book since I was small. I didn't want to do a retelling, but, perhaps, I could write a story with a link to the original book."

Talking with Cathy about her latest book, *Looking Glass Girl*, she told us that she had always been a huge fan of Lewis Carroll. "I first read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when I was about eight or nine and it was just a strange, and slightly crazy, adventure story. I remember, even then, loving the Tenniel illustrations. Reading it as a teenager it seemed darker and more intriguing, and, as an adult, surreal and malevolent. I loved it in all sorts of ways." Cathy then described how she came to appreciate just how much influence the book was having on her. "When I was an art student in Liverpool, in the early 1980s, I was happily traipsing through the city when somebody shouted at me 'Who do you think you are? Alice in Wonderland?'. I realised then that I had a sticky-out dress on, crimped hair, hooped tights and little Chinese slippers. Having based my whole style on Tenniel's illustrations, I had morphed into Alice and I hadn't been aware of that at all! And now, even as a cosy, middle-aged author, there is still a little bit of that in me. Alice is an amazing character. Even when the world around her is crazy and scary she is bravely wandering her way through it, wide-eyed and naïve, but making the best of everything that happens."

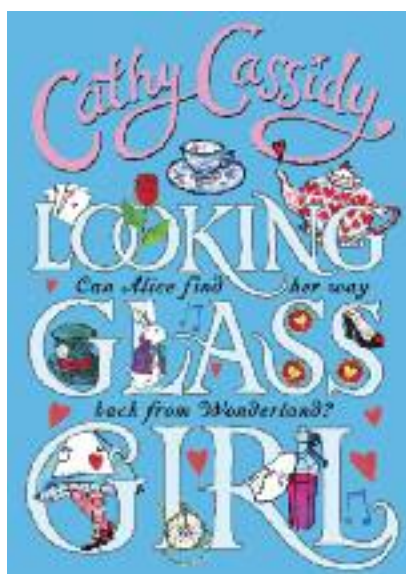
Looking Glass Girl tells the story of Alice Beech, a thirteen-year-old girl who feels friendless and alone in a confusing world. She is, very unexpectedly, invited to a sleep-over and, although very unsure why, decides to go. The book is very skilfully structured. It opens with a dramatic accident. Cathy explained, "Always, when I am writing, I have to start with something dramatic." Then, the alternate chapters follow two, very different, but interconnected, stories: one going back in time to explain the happenings leading up

"During a casual conversation, my editor, Amanda, asked if I would be interested in writing a story to the accident and one following Alice's progress in hospital. She is lying in a coma, having dreams, perhaps nightmares, involving characters from *Wonderland*, which Cathy has, very cleverly, matched with those people visiting Alice in hospital. The outcomes of both storylines, 'Why, and how, did the accident happen?' and 'Will Alice ever recover?', are gradually, and simultaneously, revealed throughout the book. "To keep the reader hooked I had to be very careful which bits of information I allowed out in each chapter."

"It was such bliss to write, and so easy. With flashbacks, real-time happenings and dream sequences, it was so different for me to write as I would never normally experiment with all these different techniques, but they seemed just perfect for this. I found it really interesting and compelling. It is a dark story compared to some of the books I have written, and could have been even darker. My take on the original Alice story is not the sweet and 'sugary' Disney version. For me, the original story is quite malevolent and oppressive, possibly even with a darkness of the soul. It is just like so many fairy stories, not what they first appear at all; you scratch the surface and they are really terrifying and dark."

Fortune Cookie, the sixth and final book in Cathy's very popular series, *The Chocolate Box Girls*, is also published this summer. "When I started there were to be five titles. I knew what was going to be in each, but I didn't have them all planned in detail. When writing, I spend a lot of time thinking and I always know the beginning and the end – the middle may sometimes

be a little hazy. I like my stories to have the freedom to go off in their own direction, to go 'off-piste'. I did discover the idea of plotting each title on a 'story arc' which really helped me when working on the series. However, I also wanted them to work as stand-alones. *Sweet Honey* was always going to be the final book in the series but there was so much to get in and I needed to give everyone their own happy ending. I also wanted to include the thread of cyber-bullying which, by then, had become a massive issue. So, by not planning too thoroughly, I could go off at a tangent and, at the end of the fifth book, Honey discovers a new character. She discovers that her Dad has had a son by

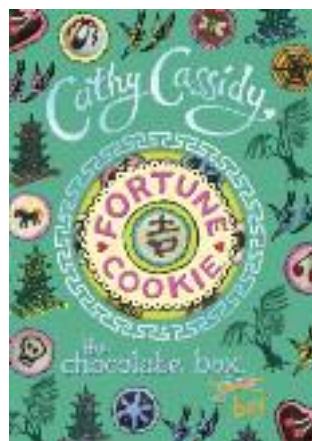




someone else and she reaches out to this brother that no-one knows about. The sixth title has a cover where the subtitle has been amended to *The Chocolate Box Boy*, which has surprised and excited many of my readers." Cathy revealed that it was very hard to write, with "a lot of chopping and changing", redrafting and even a complete rewrite at one stage, but finally, "I am really pleased with it and I feel it is a successful end to the series."

Also being published is a companion, non-fiction title. This very unexpected paperback, entitled *Chocolate Box Secrets*, contains many fashion, cookery, art and craft ideas which link to events and characters in the series. Inspired by requests from readers, Cathy, previously an art teacher, has tried and tested all the activities. It will be a must for all who follow the series.

Irritated by those who trivialise her books as just 'pink and sparkly', Cathy explained, "My books are not 'pink and sparkly' on the inside and anyone who says that has not read them. For all the sweet themes in the titles, there are serious issues inside that are not just for girls. Boys are eager to read about feelings and emotions, about friendship and bullying. They need to develop emotional intelligence just as much as girls. We are not two different species." She went on to describe the impact that her books can have on children. "Almost everywhere I go there are children who will hand me a note, cry or whisper something incredibly moving. This makes it all worthwhile. You realise that books have the power to change lives. Sometimes, at this age, you can't always talk to parents, teachers or friends because you don't want to appear weak or a failure. Children can genuinely feel isolated and alone,



the only one in the universe, and sometimes a book can tell you that is not so. There is hope and life won't stay that way."

"When writing I try to sit down by half nine, until, with only short breaks, by five or six o'clock, my head is fried. If I'm writing a book and it is going well it can be quite intense. In Scotland there was a little blue shed in the garden. I loved it to pieces and I miss it terribly but most of the contents are now in my upstairs writing room, where I shut myself away. Even when not writing I am always busy with the Web Site and the Dreamcatcher blog and keeping up with Facebook and Twitter. Social media allows children to talk about big issues, such as self-image and identity. I am really impressed at how amazing they are and I'm really glad they have somewhere to discuss it. Also, visiting schools and book festivals, seeing who you are writing for, is fantastic – the best bit of what I do – because writing is very isolating, just you and a laptop."

We concluded our very interesting conversation with Cathy by asking about plans for the future. "I think I am going to do a stand-alone next, which will give me breathing space. Having just finished *The Chocolate Box Girls* I don't want to be pinned down again too quickly. Stepping outside my usual formula, I enjoyed myself and the Alice title was fun to do. I had an idea some time ago for quite a sad, powerful book, but that's all I really want to give away at the moment."

Sinéad and Martin Kromer

Looking Glass Girl Puffin (eB) £12.99 ISBN: 978-0141357829
 The Chocolate Box Girls, published by Puffin:
 Cherry Crush (eB) £5.99 ISBN: 978-0141325224
 Marshmallow Skye (eB) £5.99 ISBN: 978-0141325248
 Summer's Dream (eB) £5.99 ISBN: 978-0141345888
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