



Helen Skelton:

Facing a new Amazon Challenge

Helen Skelton is one of those rare individuals for whom the description intrepid and audacious is spot on. A much loved, now 'retired' *Blue Peter* presenter, Helen has kayaked the length of the Amazon, become the first person to use a bicycle to get to the South Pole and has walked a tightrope between two chimneys at Battersea Power Station. She's now embarking on a new venture – not a physical challenge this time, but the publication of her first children's book, *Amy Wild: Amazon Summer*. Helen recently told *Carousel* what prompted her to write a children's novel.

"I have always written. I did some travel writing and I write a blog. Writing children's fiction was a good way of documenting some of my adventures for my grandchildren. My family joke is that I go on about having been to the Amazon. This way I have a record without me actually banging on about where I have been!" When Helen got the publishing deal, everything became more stressful as she was so aware of the many amazing authors out there. When she started to realise her story would be joining them on the bookshop shelves, she got a bit scared. With the publishers on board she kept pulling it apart and re-writing bits. "It's taken a lot longer than I would have liked but I am happy with it now."

Helen was "a total bookworm" when she was younger, frequently being told off for staying up too late reading. She loved Beatrix Potter when she was little, and later got into the *Sweet Valley High* books, and *The Baby-sitters Club*. "I really enjoyed *Tom Sawyer* and *The Lord of the Flies* too. I have always had a varied taste! I am the same now. I go through phases where all I read are autobiographies, and then I have a chick lit phase..."

Amazon Summer is packed with incident and adventure. Its heroine is a high-spirited and plucky youngster who you warm to immediately. Forever getting into scrapes, Amy is allowed to accompany her famous photographer aunt on an expedition to the Amazon, but things don't quite go to plan when her aunt meets with an accident (inadvertently caused by Amy). A train of events sees Amy begin a journey along the Amazon accompanied by a boy just a few years older than she. A daring Amazon adventure undertaken by a feisty individual, does this seem familiar territory?



"Lots of it is real. I spent a couple of months in the Amazon, kayaked on the river and slept in the jungle. The family in the book are very similar to a family we met and Amy is very much like me. Her childhood is very much like mine. I adore my big bro' and was always trying to keep up with him and his pals. I have also come face to face with a caiman and woken up with a tarantula on my pillow. Lots of what happens in the book has happened to me but things like the encounter with the Shaman are fictitious!"

Helen has an effective way of educating her readers about some of the creatures and legends of the Amazon by interspersing *Top Trumps* cards throughout the story. There are also regular emails to Amy's brother to add further detail about events. Helen explains she was partly influenced by *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, "I love the illustrations and think they break the text up brilliantly, however I worried that the target audience for my book might consider cartoons a bit young for them. I wanted a way of breaking up the text for young readers who aren't used to reading such large volumes of text. I hope that the trump cards plant a seed of knowledge, provoke intrigue and a little jeopardy in the reader as they start the chapter armed with enough information to get them excited and nervous about what Amy might come across in the jungle."

Helen is clear that this isn't a book specifically for girls, rather a story for young readers where the main voice is a girl. She wants children to get excited about the world beyond their back gardens, and she hopes the book encourages children from a normal family, with a normal background, to believe they can be part of big adventures and do exciting things. "Rather than me stand there banging on about *why* kids should do things I actually wanted a character who *does* achieve. If we see more young women taking on adventurous roles, it will hopefully become the norm. That's the only way we can expect girls and boys to have equal expectations."

Helen is currently working on the next adventure in which Amy goes to the South Pole. "It's somewhere I have been so I could write about it relatively well armed! There are many places I would love her to go. Fingers crossed *Amy Wild: Amazon Summer* goes well and then we can send Amy all over the place!"

Elaine Chant

Amy Wild: Amazon Summer Corgi Books £6.99 ISBN: 978-0552568595