

# Robin Stevens

## Murder Most Satisfying



Browsing through the displays of any good children's bookseller, you can't help but notice the *Murder Most Unladylike* series with their distinctive bright covers and elegant silhouettes. There's not a whiff of magic or any supernatural being in Robin Stevens' stories. Instead, we have two schoolgirl detectives bent on solving murder mysteries set against a background of a boarding school with traditions like secret feasts of chocolate cake and iced buns for tea. It's a welcome reinvention and a blending together of two traditional genres, which has gathered a huge readership and scooped the Waterstones Children's Book Prize for 5-12 year olds.

My interview with Robin coincided with her last week working full-time as an assistant

editor at Egmont and with the exciting prospect of becoming a full-time author ahead. It took her a long time to make the jump as she enjoyed working on both sides of the industry and found that the two different strands fed into each other. "Working on other authors' books helped me see how stories are shaped and I think made me a better writer. Conversely, writing made me better at giving editorial feedback." However, increasing demands to attend more events, particularly at weekends, chipped away at the time she had to write.

Robin considers the popularity of her stories, where the characters inhabit a world considerably removed from today's society, stems from a fascination with boarding schools that never goes out of fashion, "because they're so separate to almost everyone's life", and the special quality of the mystery story where children get to be in control. "They're the ones that work things out and who tell the adults what happened. I think these are every day fantasies that you can almost touch, but not quite." It's unsurprising that, as a child, Robin enjoyed reading Enid Blyton's school and mystery series.

A frequent piece of advice given to aspiring writers is to write about what you know. A glimpse into Robin's background reveals she took this tip to heart. Born in California, she grew up in the UK and attended a girls' boarding school. She also has an MA in Crime Fiction. Robin describes the fictional Deepdean School for Girls as "My school with a couple of little tweaks for the story". The detailed map in the first book, which is important to the would-be sleuth, is pretty accurate in terms of the layout. "I work from settings that I can imagine. The people in the story aren't my teachers or my friends, but I feed a lot of the experiences into what I write about". Robin also recalls a close bond of friendship she formed in early childhood which was cemented in part by creating a ghost society together. In spirit, it was similar to the Detective Society founded by the main protagonists, Daisy Wells and Hazel Wong, when they first met at school.

The series is set in the congenial, genteel society of the 1930s. After the first investigation based at the girls' school, the second instalment, *Arsenic For Tea*, takes place in Daisy's country house and the third case, *First Class Murder*, aboard the legendary Orient Express train. Robin finds it easy to slip into the mindset. Describing herself as a "crime fiction nerd", she reels off a list of classic writers she read from childhood including Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh and Dorothy L. Sayers.

"My dissertation was a sneaky way to engage with something of which I had long been a fan. Studying them from an academic point of view was useful in terms of the machinery of the plot and how the authors used real crimes from a previous era to inform their stories, which is what I have done."

At the heart of the series is the evolving friendship of Daisy and Hazel. Robin notes that at that age a best friend is the most important thing in your life. "You haven't quite moved on to romantic relationships, so all that intensity goes to your friend." Their complementary characters and underlying admiration for each other resembles in many ways the relationship between Holmes and Watson. Yet Robin is keen to stress this is an equal partnership and there isn't a detective sidekick. Hazel, who narrates the stories, is from Hong Kong and as such is subject to casual racism. "It struck me reading books from the 1930s that people feel fine about turning around and saying something horrendous without even it having occurred to them it might cause offence". It is one of several themes which briefly surface in the stories and



reflects Robin's fresh and satirical approach to writing an established genre. She quips, "I feel it is important to do something more than Enid Blyton".

Each story has to be meticulously plotted, not least because Robin's young readers are pretty hot on looking for clues. She admits at times she has a tendency to make the plots too complex and has to hone things down. She is equally frank explaining how she plans and shapes her stories. "I start with an idea for a place where I want the crime to be set and an idea for the crime, and then I make up my cast of characters. Once I know all those things, I do a detailed spreadsheet of where the suspects, the murderer and the victim are during the time of the murder so I have it clear in my head. Then I get into really imagining the moment. Everything must be worked through logically to make the girls in the story work through every step." Warming to her theme, she confesses she takes particular delight in deflecting the reader from the solution, describing creating a crime as "like a magic trick", which has to seem more complicated by being dressed up with fake clues and misdirection. "But at the heart it's simple: Someone walks up to someone, kills them and walks off!"

Although her books always contain murders, she is interested in making the reading experience more of a puzzle rather than to focus on the gore. This keeps the story something an eight year old

can read. Robin includes Detective Society Meetings as a device to prevent her readers feeling lost amidst the plot. These take place as the investigation unfolds with details of each suspect being faithfully recorded by Hazel in notebook form. "I try to bring the readers with me, or just a step behind, and twist things a little bit so they don't quite get there. It's one of the things that Agatha Christie does – she will lay out all the clues but won't tell you which ones are important".

*Jolly Foul Play* is the latest title in the series. It sees a return to Deepdean School with the mysterious death of the Head Girl on Bonfire Night. Robin is aware the girls are slowly growing up; though she jokes they are ageing at a slower rate than Harry Potter! The fifth book will be a Christmas story and its preparation provides an ideal opportunity for Robin to reacquaint herself with *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*. Given that Poirot had over thirty cases to solve, there's the prospect of some perfectly rollicking crime-detecting ahead!

Elaine Chant



Published by Random House Penguin & Puffin  
*Murder Most Unladylike* £6.99 ISBN: 978-0552570725  
*Arsenic For Tea* £6.99 ISBN: 978-0552570732  
*First Class Murder* £6.99 ISBN: 978-0552570749  
*Jolly Foul Play* £6.99 ISBN: 978-0141369693

## Now Don't Get Me Wrong...

### Chris Powling Number 47: On Being De-booked

...nobody's dead. Nobody's homeless. Nobody's hungry or wracked with pain. Worst things do happen at sea, ok? *I know all that*. But all I can say right now is that it doesn't *feel* that way. What it does feel like is being on the receiving end of banishment, disinheritance and grand larceny in one fell swoop. Not for a moment do I want you to think I'm taking this thing lightly and stoically while smiling and whistling under all difficulties like a good boy scout.

Because I'm not!

Actually, I'm wailing and gnashing my teeth like some Old Testament prophet. Wait a minute! Now I come to mention it, that's *another* text I can no longer put my hand on! Along with the five or six thousand other books, you see, The Bible is now incarcerated in a cardboard box (just one of fifty-or-so) in a yellow box at The Yellow Box Storage Facility nearby.

Well fairly nearby. A good two miles away, in fact. And there, with no time off for good conduct, is where they'll stay for the foreseeable future. And all because of a burst water-main under our basement flat which necessitated a nippy exodus of

furniture, clothes, carpets, household kit and other assorted gubbins, including the two residents. We'll be in the new place for six months or more, apparently while our personal domestic disaster area undergoes strict intensive care.

The new flat is quite pleasant, really. My trusty co-habitant made sure of that. The trouble is it's haunted – yes – *haunted* – by a distinct shortage of books. I can hear my little darlings no-rustling all around me – the older absentees non-smelling of parchment and the newer non-niffy with the scent of fresh minted paperback. Even the non-shelves on the walls around me seem stuffed with missing wordage. Am I trapped in the Cave of the Phantom Folio?

Of course, I was allowed to bring a few of the dear old things along with me- partly to support my on-going writing, but mostly, I suspect, to ward off the more acute of my withdrawal symptoms. So far it hasn't worked, though. In terms of words rather than Wonga, I feel like a failed tycoon down to his last half million.

How long can bookruptcy proceedings go on?