

Unique Hats and Unbearable Truths

Frances Hardinge

As she is wearing her brown fedora, it's easy to spot Frances Hardinge in a busy café in Piccadilly. During our conversation, she tucks into a bowl of hearty soup, and I consider that she would make the perfect dinner guest – immediately engaging, frank and gifted with a delicious sense of humour.

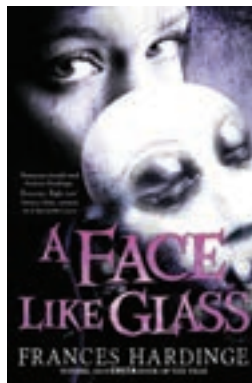
Winning the prestigious Costa Book Of The Year for her latest novel, *The Lie Tree*, catapulted Frances into a world of public engagements. She recalls the crazy twelve-hour schedule, which followed the announcement and which included eleven interviews, (four for television), and a photo shoot. Barely capable of speech by the end of it, her publicists kept her upright with a constant feed of tea, Gummy Bears, cashew nuts and Lucozade! In winning the overall award, Frances joined the illustrious company of Philip Pullman by being only the second children's writer to achieve this accolade. She considers, "There's some amazing children's and YA fiction. People who talk slightly about them just haven't read them. They have no idea of the richness and adventurousness. Some of them are so experimental - look at *One* by Sarah Crossan (this year's winner of the CILIP Carnegie Medal) – a verse novel about conjoined twins. Or Patrick Ness in *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* who overturns the idea of being the Chosen One. Children's writers are subverting and playing with genres. I think that in children's fiction, you have a lot more freedom to do that."

Similarly innovative, *The Lie Tree*, is beautifully written and brimming with ideas. Faith, its fourteen-year-old protagonist, is taken to live on an island, seemingly because her family harbours a dreadful secret. When her father is later found dead, Faith sets about discovering the truth of what has happened and uncovers amongst his possessions, a tree that appears to hold the key. At the heart of the story is the ingenious metaphor of a tree you can whisper a lie to and the fruit it bears will tell a hidden truth to the person who eats it. The greater the lie, the more people who believe it and the greater the truth that is revealed. Frances explained, to begin with, she had the idea of a lie tree, but no feeling for where she could place it. "I came up with a few fantastical settings – I tend to create brainstorming documents and let the ideas run like crazy little bunnies. But in those settings the tree didn't have any emotional resonance. It was just a weird thing in a weird place." By chance, her editor asked if she had considered



writing another historical fantasy following the success of her previous book, *Cuckoo Song*, set in the 1920s. Frances returned to the lie tree and auditioned different periods in her brain. When she considered the Victorian period, she immediately

knew that was where it belonged. "At that time you had an emphasis on appearances, respectable facades and double standards. You also had the diligent quest to push back the boundaries of knowledge and science which was proceeding in leaps and bounds". By this point Frances realised that *The Lie Tree* was not just a story about the lies we tell each other, but also the lies we tell ourselves - the tension between the desire to discover the truth and the desire to cling to the old untruth; a story about scientists and unbearable truths.



Mendacity is a thread I detect running through her books. The fantastical worlds she creates are a mesh of layers where deceptions and trickery are commonplace and essential for concealing actual truths from their inhabitants. *A Face Like Glass* has an enclosed, underground city with myriad tunnels which manufacture narcotic wines and cheeses. Here, people are incapable of showing emotion in their facial expressions and have to be taught by Facesmiths. Neverfell, its resourceful heroine, defies these conventions, not least because her face is unique in that it displays true feelings. *Cuckoo Song* is a dark changeling story,

but also a moving family saga concerning the tragic aftermaths of WW1. It includes some terrible acts of cruelty which are carried out in the sometimes mistaken desire to repress truth and smother things that threaten – most chillingly in the form

of 'the Besiders' who have arrived unnoticed in the city. She notes, "I am continually appalled by a species' ability to treat fellow species as less than human and that kind of behaviour generally needs lies to support it."

Her protagonists are imperfect heroines who, although they end up kicking against the situation they find themselves in, are also a product of that situation. "I want them to have absorbed everything they have been taught and told. Take Faith, for example, in *The Lie Tree* - I didn't want her to be a modern twenty-first century girl who is teleported back to Victorian times and put in some rather nice Victorian clothes".

I take Frances back to the child who at the age of six wrote a dark story that, "...involved a fake death and amongst other things a villain being thrown off a cliff". She tells me she was incredibly shy and very good at diverting attention away from herself. "The thing about being that shy is that people tend to assume that you are made of candy floss - you're sweet and fluffy all the way through to the middle. I always did have a dark imagination and rather a macabre sense of humour. So when people read the short stories produced by this rather mousy child, it could be rather a shock." Her list of potential careers at that age were artist, writer and international spy! Her initial career as a graphic artist suggests only one item remains unfulfilled.

Her journey to being a published writer began in her teens. She wrote full-length works at the age of thirteen and began submitting short stories when she was sixteen. Her friend, Rhiannon Lassiter, who she had met at Oxford where they both read English Literature had, in the meantime, become a published children's author. "She realised that my writing style and my concepts were better suited to writing a children's novel. I began with an idea I had already, and about five chapters in she said, 'That's enough to submit to a publisher'. I wanted to play around with it and hide it in a drawer. She stole my chapters from me and took them to her editor. A week later, I suddenly found I had a book contract."

Fly By Night won the distinguished Branford Boase Award for a first novel. Set in the marvellously labyrinthine world of *The Fractured Realm*, it has an irresistible plot involving murder and espionage and three unlikely companions - a teenage runaway, her hot headed pet goose and a travelling con-artist. Plus, there are a myriad of interesting scenarios involving illicit printing presses and floating coffee houses. In *Twilight Robbery* Frances returned to the world of *The Fractured Realm*. This takes the three fugitives to a city divided between those who live by day and those who live by night, having a set of suitably unscrupulous characters to contend with. Frances doesn't rule out revisiting this world again, revealing

that she has written a detailed history for *The Fractured Realm*, only a portion of which is glimpsed in the books. "There are still places that I want to explore. In the case of my other characters and settings, I feel as if I have told the part of their story that I wanted to tell. Often my endings aren't exactly endings. They are more about unlocking potential. I like to leave a sense that interesting things will still happen in those worlds, that history is in a state of continuation and change will happen. I can't think of anything more depressing than to say 'then everything was solved'."

Underpinning the unfettered ideas to be found in her stories, is a strikingly, eloquent writer; a wordsmith with an apparently limitless capacity to be inventive with language. "Paradribbles", "greasing the sky with smoke", "snowfreckle" and "eyes eerily segmented like oranges", are some examples I quote to her which demonstrate the pleasure of reading her stories. "Coming up with images isn't a problem. A lot of what happens between first and second draft is cutting detailed descriptions and metaphors and similes. Like most authors I have the deranged magpie part of my brain that is always looking for stuff. I do carry a notebook and jot things down. Authors are odd scavenger creatures; we get used to looking at everything around us as potential story material."

I can't resist enquiring about her fondness for hats which she tells me began when, as a baby, she was pictured wearing a little red hat. A sequence of *Oliver Twist*-style caps saw her through to her late twenties, when her 'significant other' gave her a trilby, a style to which she has since stuck, along with fedoras. They are worn until their retirement age and, having bonded with each one, they are never thrown away. She confesses, "I do have a lot of other hats, many more than it's sensible for one person to have".

As we close, I am keen to know about her next book and discover that this will be a historical fantasy set during the English Civil War. Perhaps Frances will invest in a period hat to mark its publication? In the meantime, just in time for Christmas, there is a new gift edition of *The Lie Tree* with evocative, gothic illustrations by Children's Laureate, Chris Riddell.

Elaine Chant



Selected bibliography of titles published by Macmillan
Fly By Night £7.99 ISBN: 978-0330418263
A Face Like Glass £7.99 ISBN: 978-1509818723
Twilight Robbery £7.99 ISBN: 978-0330441926
Cuckoo Song £7.99 ISBN: 978-0330519731
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