

# Cornelia Funke

## Writing a Love Song to the World

Nineteen years ago, German, children's novelist Cornelia Funke, wrote a fantasy, adventure story called *Dragon Rider* (original title *Drachenreiter*). Translated into English in 2004, this warm-hearted and thrilling tale has sold over one million copies worldwide. Cornelia Funke is now a multi-award-winning novelist with many acclaimed titles to her name, including *The Thief Lord*, and the *Inkheart* and *Reckless* trilogies. This year saw the publication of *The Griffin's Feather* which is the second adventure in what will become a *Dragon Rider* trilogy. During a rare visit to the UK, in front of an enthusiastic audience of her readers of all ages, Cornelia spoke to Kathrine Woodfine about her writing and the long gap between the two *Dragon Rider* stories. Subsequently, I had the opportunity to question her a little further.

*Dragon Rider* introduces the reader to a world where the continued existence of dragons is under threat from both humans, who are steadily invading their space, and a merciless monster looking for revenge. Firedrake is a brave, young dragon who, with the aid of Ben, his boy rider, and some fantastical creatures, embarks on a quest to discover the legendary realm of the Rim of Heaven, a place where dragons can live in peace. An array of exotic characters populates the story. These are inspired by myths and legends and embellished with the author's unique take on each being. Sorrel is a petulant brownie, which is a type of forest fairy, and the petite, polyglot, Twigleg (Cornelia's favourite character) is a homunculus or humanoid. With a sparkle in her eye, Cornelia tells her audience, "I do believe these fabulous creatures may have existed." When asked by a young reader if she could ride a dragon anywhere, where this might be, her prompt response suggests it's a prospect she has already considered, "... the huge, natural landscape of Alaska - the dragon would keep you warm and safe from the grizzlies!"

A prominent feature of Cornelia's storytelling in both *Dragon Rider* and its sequel, *The Griffin's Feather*, is the rich diversity of the natural world which forms an integral part of each adventure. She considers that we tend to write about the



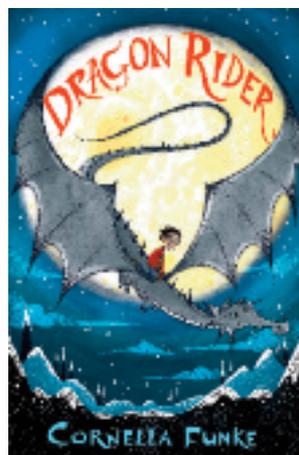
Pic: Thorsten Wulff

things we love, and the opportunities she has had to explore many of the world's wild and remote places for herself has deepened her love for the ecology of the planet which she celebrates in her writing. "When I saw the wilderness of Yellowstone, my first impulse was to run back to Europe - what I experienced was so different from the landscapes of my childhood. But behind the curtain of fear there is always a land of enchantment." Describing the fantasy she creates as "a love song to this world", she feels it is important that children should come to appreciate this magic and enchantment for themselves, rather than to preach a direct message about conservation through the story. Warming to her theme, she continues, "I strongly believe that we need an understanding of the natural and non-human life on this planet to create and to understand our own nature. I think the estrangement from it is far more dangerous for our children than the fact that they may read less." She also considers that fantasy

fiction can come closer to expressing truth in a way that you cannot in a realistic world.

A digital project brought Cornelia back to *Dragon Rider* when she was working on an iPhone App for the first story. Speaking to collaborators about the characters, she found herself falling in love with that world again. "I had tried before to write a sequel but I always thought I was repeating myself - which I consider a deadly sin for a sequel. Working with others brought a fresh breeze of inspiration. The story came so easily that it was a wonderful ride to do this book."

*The Griffin's Feather* provides a new, important challenge for Firedrake and Ben as they undertake a mission to save three Pegasus eggs. The winged horse species is facing extinction and the eggs will perish unless a griffin's feather can be obtained to help them grow. But a griffin is a deadly creature, hard to track down and unlikely to willingly give up his plumage. Generously illustrated with Cornelia's own intricate and expressive drawings, the book includes a comprehensive Who's Who which provides a fascinating overview of each species and location.





The conservation theme remains strong and is fused with the motifs of home, friendship and loss. In the intervening years between the publication of the two stories, Cornelia has experienced these matters for herself. "I watched my children grow up in these years, I lost my husband, I moved to another country. The life I lead is very different from the life I led in Hamburg when I wrote the first adventure." She considers this

shows itself in the story through two human characters, Barnabas and Vita Greenbloom, who are Ben's adopted parents. They mirror many of Cornelia's own thoughts which have evolved over the years. "Their ideas on parenting, their curiosity and respect for other life forms and their belief that we all have a responsibility to preserve what we love in the world ... the Greenbloom's are pretty much who I would like to be in life!" She further notes that there are no lonely heroes in her books. "The years after my husband's death taught me even more how much our friends define us, how rich they make our lives and how important they are in understanding ourselves." In

responding to a question from her audience which touches on the theme of loss, she describes writers as "word fishers" whose task is to "... find words for those who don't have the words to address the loss."

Home is now an old avocado farm in Malibu. She has recently bought ten acres in the Santa Monica mountains. The wild landscape, which is within sight of the sprawling city of Los Angeles, is likely to be the setting for the third story in the *Dragon Rider* trilogy. Provisionally called 'The Volcano Mission', it will tell the story of what happens when dragons appear near civilization.

"I bought where I hope to create and live and welcome other artists. I think it will make me travel less and turn into a tree! A tree with a bird in its branches who from time to time flies to Europe, India, Australia or another country where I have readers to meet."

This comment suggests a writer who has found a place where she can be content and continue to tell wonderful stories that reach out to the whole world.

Elaine Chant

Published by Chicken House

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*The Griffin's Feather* £6.99 ISBN: 978-1911077886

## What I Know Now



When I was first invited to write this column, I was thrilled by the title. I thought I might use the opportunity to discover what I had learnt over my many years of making picture books. But for me, the core of picture book making is the gathering of ideas. And what do I know about that?

As a child, like most of us, I loved to draw, but I also liked to create a sequence of drawings that formed a

little story and maybe add some words. When I made my stories and stapled them together into tiny books it never, not once, occurred to me that I knew ANYTHING. Writing and drawing always opened up a very intimate and vibrant place for me. Scribbled lines became whole worlds, dots became faces brought to life along with space rockets, parrots, submarines and dinosaurs. Lost in ideas arriving from my pencil and appearing on paper like magic, they surprised me, made me laugh, made me curious for more. That was many years ago, but not much has changed.

In schools today, I see children eager to be the same when given the opportunity. No right, no wrong, no anxiety, just intrigued to see what comes about when the pencil or brush strikes the paper. No thinking necessary. Just creating for no particular reason other than playfulness itself.

Strangely, I have to report that despite many years of making stories and over twenty books later, I know surprisingly little about gathering ideas. Wait, no, I will be honest, *Carousel* reader,

I know nothing. And what a relief that is, because it means it's still possible to find delight in what appears on the paper.

Today, in my studio, I am at my drawing desk. I have recently completed my latest book, *The Boy From Mars*. I am looking forward to its publication in November. But I am sitting here wondering what will come next. Each time I face a blank page ready to find a new story, I have no idea what will happen or how things will develop.

The important thing is to start. To draw, to put down a few words, perhaps create a little sequence. Sometimes, I seem to become very attached to one little scene or a face perhaps, maybe a phrase. It starts to invite me in to reveal more. Yesterday, it was a tortoise in a pet shop window smiling at a little girl passing by...

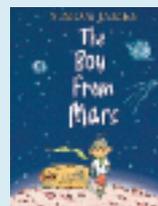
The most common question an author or illustrator is asked at book events is, "Where do you get your ideas from?"

I usually say, "Tesco's; they have a 'Two for the Price of One' offer at the moment..." It gets a laugh, but of course, I just don't know the real answer.

I have always remembered Simon Jeffes, the composer from the Penguin Café Orchestra, once saying that ideas are like letters in the post. Some are wrapped in brown envelopes and are rather disappointing, but occasionally a wonderfully unexpected letter arrives on your doormat. How true. I check my post every day.

I wonder how that tortoise at the pet shop is doing...

Simon James



*The Boy From Mars* Walker £11.99 ISBN: 978-1406374100