

Katherine Rundell

Explorer Extraordinaire



When Katherine Rundell learnt that her first children's novel was to be published, she describes turning cartwheels of joy down the Codrington Library at All Souls College, Oxford, which is a wonderful example of this young woman's lively attitude to life. *Girl Savage*, set in Zimbabwe, Katherine's home for ten years, describes the difficulties facing Wilhelmina when she is propelled from her tomboyish, wild and free life on an African farm to the constraints of a boarding school in Britain. It is loosely based on Katherine's own teenage transition from home in Zimbabwe to school in Belgium where she found the culture and expectations very different. A slightly revised edition was published in the USA under the title *Cartwheeling in Thunderstorms* where it won the 2015 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction.

Katherine considers that her subsequent books have been, "a journey, learning how things work and how you deliver that narrative pleasure." She continues, "Children deserve the satisfaction of closure, of that joy that there will be a happy ever after."

Her highly successful novel, *Rooftoppers*, published in 2013, took two and a half years to write and Katherine describes the process as, "agonising, so painful, I couldn't make it sing or

make myself like it." This is not surprising as at the time Katherine was also completing her Masters degree in Renaissance Literature followed by a doctorate on John Donne. She says it was thanks to the encouragement of her agent, Claire Wilson, that she kept going.

Katherine starts writing early in the morning and says that writing fiction has, "a feeling of stepping into another room. When you know what you want to write and feel it taking shape and coming vivid in your head, those are the best days." She continues, "It doesn't feel like work, it's a joy – I would pay to do it."

Rooftoppers is a story about belief, faith and bravery. An endorsement on the cover from Philip Pullman describes Katherine as, "A writer with an utterly distinctive voice and a wild imagination." It is not surprising that it went on to win The Blue Peter Award, The Waterstones' Children's Prize and was shortlisted for many others. The story of Sophie, survivor of a shipwreck, who was found as a baby floating in the sea in a cello case, is exciting and unusual with many serendipitous moments. Adopted by the kind and generous Charles, a scholarly bachelor, Sophie grows up happy but certain that her mother is still alive. No-one believes her but Charles' maxim 'never ignore a possible' is encouraging.

When the authorities decide it would be more suitable for Sophie to live in an orphanage, she persuades Charles to follow the clues on the old cello case and take her to Paris to find her mother. Here, Sophie finds a new world amongst the rooftops and a friend in mysterious Matteo who walks tightropes and can hear everything going on in the busy city below him and her stubborn determination is rewarded. Katherine's inspiration came from summers spent in Paris, her own experiences as a tightrope walker and a love of climbing the roofs of Paris and Oxford colleges.

Katherine loves research; "to sit at a desk with a stack of books which comes to the top of your head is to me the greatest pleasure there is, a joy." *The Wolf Wilder*, published in 2015, with atmospheric black and white illustrations by Gelrev Ongbico, was inspired by spending Christmas with her grandfather in St. Petersburg, "wading through thigh deep snow to cut down your Christmas tree." and from conversations with her father about the Russian revolution. Katherine visited a wolf sanctuary and had to be reminded by her "wonderful" editor,



Ellen Holgate, that her readers “only need the vivid image” and not too much factual information about Russian life.

Katherine enjoys imagining the characters until the desire to write about them is overwhelming. Whilst she doesn't go into too much detail; “I want the reader to imagine them themselves.” Katherine knows them, “down to the last freckle.”

The wolf wilder, Feodora, lives with her mother in the depths of the snow bound forest where they encourage wolves, who have been kept as pets by wealthy Russians, to return to the wild. “Wolves make sense to her” and are Feo's friends and companions whilst she respects their wildness. When soldiers come with their guns and their threats, kidnap Marina, Feo's defiant and beautiful mother, and burn down their home, Feo is determined to rescue her. So begins her journey of defiance to the city where revolution is rumbling, collecting an unlikely group of friends and allies along the way.

Katherine says of her writing, “When you are writing about places that children may never go ... you are saying to them believe in the world and the vastness and variousness and beauty of the world.” *The Wolf Wilder* was received with reviews such as, “Rundell's pen, like wolves' ears in this story, is gold tipped.” (Sunday Times), “precise, magical and wise” (Sarah Crossan) and Jacqueline Wilson declared, “It's a truly compelling read; it's beautifully written ...”.

Stories and books were an important part of Katherine's childhood and she treasures being read *The Hobbit* by her father with the “joy of sharing the same adventure together”. “Books tell you that there are so many ways of approaching the world” and “give you hope and a vision.” She also commented, “You need books to fully believe with your imagination, as well as your intellect, that the world is an extraordinary place.”

The Explorer, published in August this year, certainly achieves this and Katherine's aim of writing, “a classic adventure story with daring- do and unlikely moments of bravery.” Research took her to the Amazon, flying in a tiny plane over the jungle where she saw beauty she had not imagined. “Something about the trip along the Amazon river, wild river dolphins jumping out of the water and macaws flying over head felt like it should be imaginary and it is real.”

This adventure novel is written with Katherine's characteristic flair for description and magical turn of phrase and is embellished with Hannah Horn's delicate and imaginative illustrations. The dangers and beauty of the Amazon are evident from the outset when Fred, Con, Lila and Max, survive a plane crash in the depths of the jungle. Frightened and lost, they discover unrealised skills and

strengths to survive and undertake a journey of their own as they experience trials and tribulations before discovering a ruined city where more challenges await them.

They are told, “You are right to be afraid. Be brave anyway.” and Katherine believes that “Children are often under-estimated, because they are young and sometimes clumsy and lack the knowledge of the way the world is structured. We think they are not able to be tough and enduring, not able to imagine and come up with solutions and brave ideas. We need to have slightly more faith in children and believe in their wisdom.” She hopes her stories will empower youngsters as they are shown a richness different from their ordinary lives.

The question is where Katherine's adventures will take the reader next, having travelled with her colourful, attractive characters from Zimbabwe to Paris, to the cold of Russia and the heat of the Amazon jungle. She has not been idle and, whilst teaching Shakespeare at All Souls, Oxford, she has written the play, *Life According to Saki*, which won the 2016 Carol Tambor Best of Edinburgh Award and was staged off Broadway in New York earlier this year. Katherine has also written a short, animated film about a hedgehog and an adult novel. In October Bloomsbury are publishing Katherine's Christmas picture book, *One Christmas Wish*, illustrated by Emily Sutton. She is very excited by this story about a little boy who wishes on a Christmas star for some company and the decorations on the tree come to life and cause chaos.

It is intriguing that when asked to dress up as a children's book character for the Oxford Story Museum's 26 Characters exhibition in 2015, Katherine chose to be ‘a wild thing’ from Maurice Sendak's classic picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*. There is a strong thread of the unexpected and the unusual running through Katherine's work. This touch of magic gives her stories that extra thrill where all things are possible and it is exciting to wonder where her imagination will soar to next.

Louise Stothard



Bibliography

Published by Faber & Faber

The Girl Savage £6.99 ISBN: 978-0571254316

Roof Toppers £6.99 ISBN: 978-057128059

Published by Bloomsbury

The Wolf Wilder £7.99 ISBN: 978-1408854853

The Explorer £12.99 ISBN: 978-1408854877

One Christmas Wish illustrated by Emily Sutton £12.99 ISBN: 978-1408885734