

# Liz Kessler

## Making a Splash

Picture the scene: I was living on a narrowboat on a rural canal, staring into space with a pen in my hand. I was halfway through writing a novel for my Creative Writing MA, but a random couple of lines of poetry drifted into my head.

*Mary Penelope lived on a boat,*

*Which was all very well, but it didn't quite float.*

The poem wouldn't leave me alone. Another two lines slipped into my thoughts.

*It wavered and wobbled and fell on its side*

*Whenever she tried to go out for a ride.*

I was hooked. I spent the next couple of weeks penning a poem about a girl who lived on a boat with her mum. The girl had a big secret. She was ... a mermaid! I thought perhaps it could be a picture book. But after some fantastic advice from renowned editor David Fickling, via my buddy Lee Weatherly, I tried instead to write the story as a novel for older children.

Fast forward a couple of years: the book I was writing for my MA had gone in a drawer (to be published some fifteen years later, as my YA novel, *Read Me Like A Book*) and my poem was now a completed novel called *The Tail of Emily Windsnap*. Thanks to my wonderful agent Catherine Clarke and the fabulous Orion Children's Books, the book was published in 2003, and I was signed up for a sequel. And that would be that, I assumed.

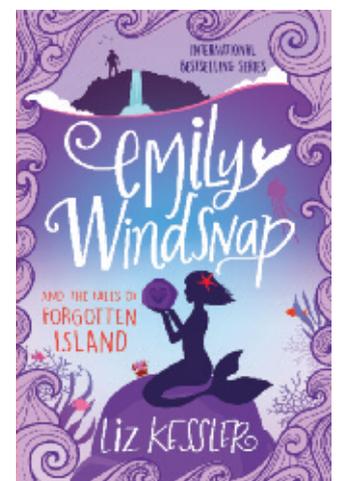
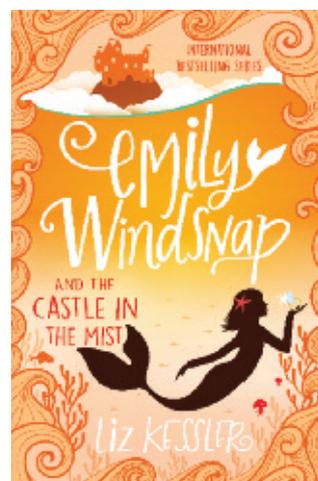
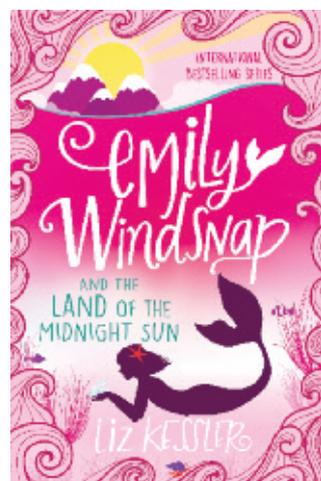
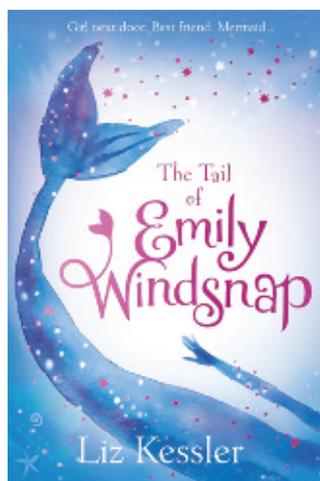
I assumed wrong. Luckily for me, the books sold well. Emily started to make a splash in America, Italy, Germany – rights were sold in twenty-five countries, and it became clear that there was an appetite for mermaids. So, when I went back to my agent and asked if Orion might be interested in another Emily book, the answer was an enthusiastic, "YES!"

After the third adventure, *The Castle in the Mist*, I thought I was finished with Emily – but it turned out that Emily wasn't



finished with me. With the combined enthusiasm of Orion in the UK and Candlewick, who now have over four million Emily Windsnap books in print in the states, Emily has gone from strength to strength. And she's taken me on all sorts of adventures with her. In researching her books, I've been to Bermuda, to magical castles in France, to arctic waters in Norway – and most recently to a place that was last year voted the Eighth Natural Wonder of the World.

I was on a North American book tour in the autumn of 2015. I had a day off before starting events in Toronto and I took a trip to Niagara Falls. I was utterly awestruck by the incredible beauty and majestic power of the place. I had never been anywhere so amazing in my life, and within minutes of



arriving there, I was in no doubt at all: this was where Emily wanted to go next. Emily Seven had begun.

I love this part of writing a book. The initial spark that ignites something inside you. The weeks of wandering around staring into space, listening to the *right* music, going to the *right* places, letting random ideas come to you and scribbling down everything. The plotting is, for me, the most exciting part. But let's fast forward once more. It's now two and a half years later, and *Emily Windsnap and The Falls of Forgotten Island* is about to come out. (I love this part too!) In Emily's seventh adventure, our mermaid girl promises her best friend, Shona, that she will not get involved in any adventures. But of course, it doesn't take long for adventure to find Emily. It finds her on a tropical island, drags her through the most powerful waterfall in the world and spits her out in a place that no one even knew existed. An island surrounded not only by fierce seas but also by a prophecy which tells of an imminent and grave threat. Will Emily be able to save the day, or is she literally and figuratively out of her depth this time?

As always, Emily doesn't only have a real-life quest to solve; her adventure takes her on a deeper journey under the surface too. The weird thing is, it's only when I've finished the book (and often not until someone points it out to me) that I realise this is happening. And this book is no exception. *Emily Windsnap and The Falls of Forgotten Island* is very much a reflection of my

feelings about the world right now. It's about challenging assumptions we make about people we don't know; it's about overcoming suspicion and mistrust; it's about communities who think they have nothing in common learning to work together for the good of them all. And of course, as always, it's about friendship and love. Emily once again shows us that we should all stand up for what we believe is right, look after the people we love, and take care of the world around us.

I will always be grateful to Emily Windsnap for choosing me to tell her stories and share her life and her strength with young people. She makes *me* feel bolder and more daring. I hope she also does this for lots of young girls and boys – and maybe an adult or two along the way as well.

#### Selected Bibliography

Published by Orion:

*The Tail of Emily Windsnap* £6.99 ISBN: 978-1444015096

*Emily Windsnap and the Monster from the Deep* £6.99  
ISBN: 978-1444015102

*Emily Windsnap and the Castle in the Mist* £6.99  
ISBN: 978-1444015119

*Emily Windsnap and The Falls of Forgotten Island* £6.99  
ISBN: 978-1510102323

## What I Know Now

An astonishingly long time ago (so long that I now find myself working with people who weren't even born then) I landed my first job in publishing at Transworld Children's Books. If you'd told me then that I'd still be working in children's books over thirty years later, I'd have been surprised: I fell into it completely by accident, but loved it immediately. Children's books was then and is now full of people who care deeply about what they do, not to mention authors and artists creating books that will be read by generations to come.

Although I'm not working directly for a publisher now, my roles at *Books for Keeps*, *LoveReading4kids*, on the Branford Boase Award and new Klaus Flugge Prize, and at the FT Weekend Oxford Literary Festival, mean that I'm reading more children's books than ever. While I have been around long enough to find myself occasionally echoing a former colleague, a much respected but invariably gloomy Sales Director's favourite mantra – "We tried that in 1979, it didn't work then, it won't work now." I'm still excited by the changes that are happening in the industry. It's still thrilling too to discover "a story we haven't read before", to borrow a quote from Branford Boase's chair of judges, Julia Eccleshare.

It's particularly exciting to see children's books taking an increasing share of the market, and the number of children's authors who have become household names. Back in 1985, the Children's Laureate wasn't even a gleam in Michael Morpurgo's eye, and the role has been an extraordinary vehicle



for change. A description of the reach and impact of the World Book Day campaigns would have left me gobsmacked back in the 1980s, and no-one could have anticipated Harry Potter. Even before the arrival of new social media, children's publishers had developed ways to reach readers directly, and it's been great too to watch the proliferation of book festivals and author school visits, allowing children so many more opportunities to hear, meet and be inspired by authors.

But not everything has improved. I remember approval copies, the days when thousands of books were bought by library suppliers and sent to librarians to read, to discuss and then make their buying decisions. The dismantling of libraries, the dissolution of school library services and the loss of library professionals is a real threat to everyone in the children's book world. In the years since the demise of the Net Book Agreement (yes, I was there for that too), rising discounts have had a real effect on authors' earnings and it's deeply worrying that the industry seems able to support fewer authors at a proper level.

So, there are real challenges to be faced, but I'm optimistic, because the people in the children's book world are as passionate, committed, professional and creative as they ever have been, and the readers haven't changed either. On that note, I'm off to read another children's book and, quite likely, I'll find it's a story I haven't read before.

Andrea Reece