



Ross Montgomery reads at the Kingston Childrens Literary Festival.

Look Up and See the Wonder

Ross Montgomery

I finally got to interview Ross Montgomery after the 'Beast from the East' snowfall thwarted my first attempt. I asked him how he got into writing and he said that he was lucky, he was one of those children who loved reading, his parents were happy for him to read whatever he wanted, as they knew he could cope with it and he went to schools that didn't place any barriers on his reading. At ten, he started reading sophisticated, well structured, exciting books like Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* and thinks he now writes for that age range, because that's the age he was when he realised what books could do. He also always loved writing and learned so much about structuring jokes, plots and dialogue from the *Beano* annuals which he adored.

Around fourteen, like many boys facing homework and exam pressures, he stopped reading for pleasure. He felt too old for children's books, didn't connect with YA novels, so thought there wasn't anything for him. He thinks, if he'd had access to a librarian, who would have spotted he'd stopped reading and recommended books for him to try, then it might have kept him reading. It wasn't until age seventeen when he discovered books like Gabriela Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude* that he remembered reading was actually something that he really enjoyed doing.

He started writing again, while working as a Teaching Assistant and this led to his first novel, *Alex, the Dog and the Unopenable Door*, shortlisted for the Costa and Branford Boase

Awards. It took two years to produce the first draft and a further two years to rewrite, but since its publication, he hasn't stopped writing. Having qualified as a teacher, *Tornado Chasers* was written while full-time teaching and ended up being a 78,000 word manuscript, which had to be reduced to 50,000. I asked him how he managed it and he said, "I don't know how I did that! I think you just have to put the hours in you need to do it, learn from it and try to underwrite the next time." He was able to reduce his teaching hours only because of an Arts Council grant, and now this is his first academic year as a full-time writer.

So which authors influenced him and who does he most admire? As a child, one of his heroes was Terry Deary, because the *Horrible Histories* series made him see that you can write books with facts and they can still be very funny. He was also obsessed with Jacqueline Wilson because he thought she was a 'proper' author having written eighty-two books at the time. She made him think, gave him a different perspective on family and advice on how to handle the not so nice stuff in life. His mum always took him to the library and it was there he discovered Terry Pratchett. When he read *Eric*, he said, "It was the first time I read a book that made me feel like it was for grown-ups. It blew my mind. Pratchett's sheer imagination was awesome, he could have really stupid jokes and also write with such beauty." As an adult, he feels the whole community of writers is so supportive. He's a big Neil Gaiman fan, thinks Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* is one of the best novels he's ever read and feels particularly grateful to Abi Elphinstone because she gave him so much help and advice on how to make the transition to full-time writer.

With his writing routine, he gets up early and writes until lunchtime, trying to stop at the end of a chapter, so he can start with a fresh revision the next day. He tries to follow Ernest Hemingway's advice of, "Always stop when it's good." saying, "If you stop when you feel it isn't good, then you won't stop thinking about it all night and you'll face a bad situation in the morning." He likes working on two books at the same time because if one isn't going so well, the other one can lift you up. He wrote his recent books, *Max and the Millions* and *Christmas Dinner of Souls*, at the same time. In *Max and the Millions*, a lonely, hearing-impaired boy at boarding school finds himself trying to protect a tiny sand kingdom and its warring people from themselves and from his own horrible headmaster. *Christmas Dinner of Souls* is a collection of short stories about a secret club of people, who on Christmas Eve compete to tell the most terrifyingly gruesome tale they know, in the hope of destroying Christmas forever.

We talked about the contrasts between both books and Ross felt that with *Max and the Millions*, he tried to avoid his tendency of making his books 'dark', but the short stories in *Christmas Dinner of Souls* allowed him to indulge his gruesome side. All of

his novels and picture books are very different as all have underpinning themes of vulnerability and loneliness, but always with a thread of hope running through. He thinks that he writes about people who feel like they are outsiders, admitting that he has always felt a bit of an outsider who didn't

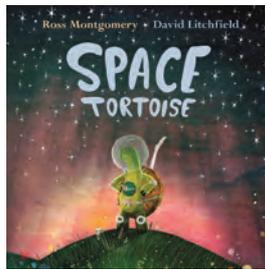
quite fit in. As a teacher he saw many children who were in that situation. His experiences of teaching dyslexic children helped shape the character of Caitlin in *Perijee and Me*, and it was working with a deaf assistant and learning how people often respond to a deaf person, that made him make Max hearing-impaired, especially as one of the underpinning themes was about communication.

I asked him about his partnership with illustrator David Litchfield, who has illustrated some of his novels as well as his two picture books, *The Building Boy* and his latest *Space Tortoise*. In both picture books, David Litchfield has beautifully captured the essence and emotion of the stories, of the special and magical relationship of a child with his grandmother and a lonely little tortoise's adventure as he dares to explore his world in search of friends. Ross feels they have a partnership working relationship, they get on very well, enjoy working together and he believes David's illustrations help to give his books their "moments of magnificence".

His top tips for would-be writers are, "Read loads, write loads and carry a notebook with you everywhere." He hopes that when children read his books, they take away empathy – helping them think about the people around them, how they might be feeling, what their lives are like, what they might be going through and how that might be making them behave. He also hopes that his books will offer children escapism and an understanding

that sometimes, although things might not be as good as they want them to be, it won't always be like that and they are not alone. Everyone experiences these feelings at some point. Most of all he wants to encourage children to try and find a way to, "Look up and feel the wonder in what is going on around you.", which is, I think, something we all should try to do!

Annie Everall



Bibliography

Published by Faber & Faber:

Alex, the Dog and the Unopenable Door £6.99 ISBN: 978-0571294619

The Tornado Chasers £6.99 ISBN: 978-0571298426

Perijee and Me £6.99 ISBN: 978-0571317950

Christmas Dinner of Souls £8.99 ISBN: 978-0571317974

Max and the Millions £6.99 ISBN: 978-0571333486

The Building Boy £6.99 ISBN: 978-0571314102

Space Tortoise £5.99 ISBN: 978-0571331055