

A Merchant of Stories:

Walking through Venice with Michelle Lovric

On a late autumn morning, I am being guided through the back canals and campos of Venice by Michelle Lovric. An author of several books for adults, Michelle has recently written two novels for younger readers, *The Undrowned Child*, and its sequel, *The Mourning Emporium*. Her novels are rooted in this most enticing of cities and I'm curious to know if Michelle shares a different Venice with her younger readers.



Michelle Lovric

to the origins of cats in the city. Long-legged striped cats are thought to have been introduced into Venice by mediaeval merchants from Syria. In my story *The Undrowned Child*, I decided that a colony of these original cats was still living in the wilds of Sant'Elena on the edge of the city. I gave them wings and attitude, then one of their number – with more attitude than most – becomes the guardian of a secret almanac in the Venetian archives.”

“The great relief of writing for children is that I can tell so many tales about Venice that are ... simply too good for adults, or that adults would not understand. Fantasy allows me to bring history to life, without delivering a history lesson. But you must breathe life into the facts. I've brought the dreaded Black Death back to Venice, and reanimated some of the city's old ghosts, like those of Bajamonte Tiepolo, the Traitor, and the cannibal Butcher Biasio, who really did cook children in a stew in the fifteenth century. Signor Rioba, the statue with the iron nose and jutting chin, has been made to talk in the same rude way that he stares out today. Fantasy also allows me to make more use of the natural world so I can send floods of icebergs and blinding fogs into Venice, or let

her animals talk or heat up the lagoon.”



Michelle's stories seamlessly weave these historical and mythical elements into action-filled adventures. “For such an urban environment, Venice offers a surprisingly scintillating bestiary to a writer of children's books. Not one of these Venetian beasts sits on the fence morally, so they make a great cast of good guys, baddies, minions and side-kicks. I went back

The statue of Signor Rioba

We visit the remains of the skin of Doge Bradigino, a gruesome monument to an horrific episode in Venetian history. I ask Michelle about the severe cruelty which the characters within her stories encounter. “I had a dark idea I wanted to explore in *The Mourning Emporium*. One of our most primitive and deepest fears is to fall, helpless, into the hands of someone who simply doesn't care about us. Miss Uish of *The Mourning Emporium* is exactly like this. The darkest moment is when she kills a baby seal, almost as a joke. This happens at the point when she has taken control of the children in the floating orphanage. The awful scene is intended to make the reader feel, as the Venetian children do, that they are in the hands of a human being without scruple or decency and that anything might happen next. I think all children are potential victims as soon as they enter the school playground. There are dangerous, hurtful currents of power and popularity there. A child soon learns to accommodate them, to placate the bullies, to find a safe niche in which to survive. It was possible, in Miss Uish, to create an adult bully who enjoys total power over helpless youngsters. I agree that this toxic dynamic is something one doesn't often find in books for children, but I wanted to write her bad enough to make the reader feel indignant, tearful even ... and then to contrast Miss Uish with the English bulldog Turtledove, a Fagin without the mercenary aspect, who adores and cherishes all children.”

Michelle's own literary influences are varied. “When I was a child growing up unwillingly and wistfully in Australia, Joan Aiken's alternative England was the one in which I wanted to live. Venice came a little later. Perhaps I learned about Venice in the Venetian way, by looking at her art. “Painting is the way Venetians write,”

John Ruskin said. “By that token, the Bellini brothers and Carpaccio were my first favourite storytellers about Venice. I grew into, and have never grown out of, Dickens. Now I love his humour, but as a little girl I craved his pathos – children are dreadfully sentimental. And Gallico’s *Thomasina* broke my heart, and mended it. I read unusual things for a child: Solzhenitsyn was a great favourite, and I also loved my father’s gruesome medical magazines, which may explain why there is so much colourful quack medicine in *The Mourning Emporium*.”

Our tour winds through a labyrinth of passageways most tourists miss. Teo, the heroine of both novels can move undetected by passing *between the linings* to an alternative Venice of curry-eating mermaids and vampire eels. The richness of Michelle’s landscape is complemented by a website which amply feeds the reader’s curiosity for more information, providing an extra dimension to her work. “In the old days, everyone had calling cards. These days, writers must have electronic ones – our websites. I wanted something new for *The Undrowned Child*, my first book for younger readers. It takes the form of a magical book with moving images, just like *The Key to the Secret City*, the old manuscript that guides Teo around Venice. For *The Mourning Emporium*, I’ve added new pages that give background information about the funeral industry in England, London in 1901, and the awful food that the poor orphans of the novel must eat. One secret joy of a website is that it becomes a repository for research that would otherwise clutter up the storyline of the novel. The sites are peppered with quotations from the books, intended to give a flavour of the voices and the places.”

Michelle saved until last a visit to the idiosyncratic *Acqua Alta* bookshop which houses a full-sized gondola. The children in her novels are avid readers. “I always wanted to write books for, and about, children who love books and reading. Heroes of reading! So, when the opportunity came, I created a girl who reads omnivorously and a boy who is addicted to history. However, Teo and Renzo would only ever ‘work’ as dynamic characters if their aptitudes became part of the storyline. Indeed, I wanted to show how a good book can save your life! For example, in *The Mourning Emporium*, remembering Casanova’s cunning plan – for escaping a Venetian prison in the 1750s – helps Renzo find a way out of Newgate in 1901, and Teo’s extensive reading and photographic memory gets her out of many a tricky situation.”

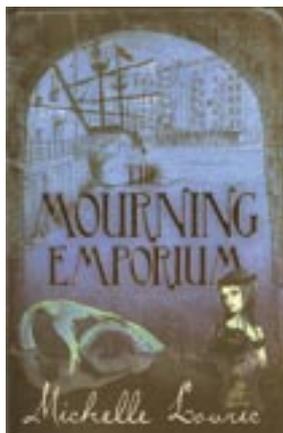
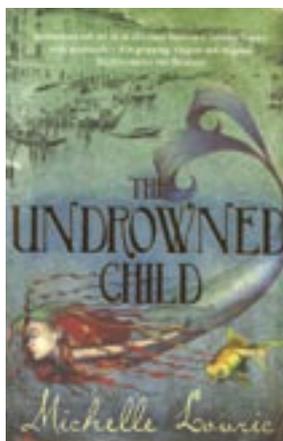


The *Acqua Alta* bookshop with gondola

We part amidst the bustling Campo Santa Maria Formoso. Reluctant to relinquish a Venice so richly steeped in enchantment, I enquire about further opportunities to glimpse into this world. “Venice is remarkable in that every century delivers a different version of the city. She was aggressive and successful in the fifteenth century, giddy and decadent in the eighteenth ... and the mid-nineteenth

was a time of occupation by the Austrians, a Venice that wasn’t totally Venetian. I want to explore the idea of who really owns the city – but in a metaphorical, fantasy setting. In my new book, Venice is menaced by a cohort of fierce creatures, who claim an ancient right to her. Children don’t usually own land, but they have a strong sense of their own space. They personalize their bedrooms, their pencil cases, their school uniforms. I want to look at how far children who live in a city might be said to own it. The only thing I can say for certain is that whatever I write will always be linked to Venice. It would seem both impossible and ungrateful not to involve her in my storytelling.”

Elaine Chant



The Undrowned Child Orion
£5.99 ISBN: 978-1444000047
The Mourning Emporium Orion
£9.99 ISBN: 978-1842557013

Michelle Lovric has two websites:
www.michellelovric.com
www.undrownedchild.com