

Rebecca Shepherd's Interview with author, Catherine Johnson

Q: What books would you recommend people of my age (11 or 12) to read?

A: Any books at all! Or comics, magazines, instructions – anything.

Enjoy reading and don't read anything that you don't want to – explore what's out there and keep trying if you can't find anything at first.

I was really inspired to read a wide range of books by my primary school teachers, who I LOVED and who were great. I didn't like the ones at secondary school as much when I went there and so I wasn't very inclined to read what they TOLD me to read. I developed a taste for non-fiction and used to trawl the school library for interesting books. Also, I loved and still love making things – I was a real fan of Blue Peter and anything to do with crafts.

Q: Were you into history when you were younger?

A: I really loved telly (not sure how many authors admit to that!); I especially liked stories and dramas set in the past and programmes like *Meet The Ancestors* and *Time Team*.

These days, *Horrible Histories* are really great because they take what could be dry facts and turn them into something entertaining – you pick up historical knowledge without realizing. Having said that, I got the worst mark in the school for history, but that is because I found the lessons very dry and boring – it didn't come alive for me. One thing that does do that is looking at costume – I LOVE frocks and clothes that people wore tell a story too. The Fashion Museum in Bath is really excellent for showing the changes in dress over the ages.

Q: What genres did/do you like to read?

A: Anything – I'm what you call a cereal packet reader. I love fiction, but it's hard to read it when you are researching, so I tend to read a LOT of non-fiction, such as biographies. I READ A LOT!

Q: What inspires you to write?

I cannot always wait to be inspired as writing is my job. Sometimes something that I read (or see on telly) may give me a sudden inspiration, but often the remit I have been given by a publisher is pretty specific and then I have to stick to it. Having said that, the publisher of *Freedom 1783* wanted a book set just as the abolition of slavery happened in the UK (in 1837), but I said that that was nonsense, as it didn't just happen straight away – it took years for the practice to finally stop. Anyway, I got my way and was able to set it just as serious questions started to be asked about the slave trade, after the Zong case – it was a turning point in history. So it's a historically correct narrative, but with a bit of artistic licence to make it a unique story. I hope that the different voices come through the storyline.

Q: What advice would you give to aspiring writers about inspiration?

A: Keep your ears open, your eyes open and question what you see and hear – don't take things at face value – form your own opinion. Some writers that I read when I was young and they didn't make much sense to me, I have re-read later on, such as Leon Garfield and Joan Aitken. I enjoyed their stories when I was young, but may not have grasped everything they were saying. I can understand the background much more now. I used to write a lot when I was young, but I used to pretend that I was a presenter on telly so they were more like articles – I did love a good story though!

Q: What are your own inspirations when you are actually writing?

A: Oooh, I'd say other books (obviously as I read so many), my own thoughts when I'm writing, current events, or events I have read about, things I watch on telly (still love that!), conversations I have had. Most authors have a "shallow" knowledge about an awful lot of things, especially of things related to whatever project they are working on, or have just worked on.

Q: What would your advice be to someone like me, or my sister who thinks that they might like to write (she actually does write)?

A: Ah you think you might like to write? Well I'd say:

- Do what you're doing
- Do things, not just reading books. Writers need to read but they also need to have experiences so that they can write about them realistically
- They can be ordinary experiences, not necessarily scary ones – I definitely don't do scary stuff as I'm a big chicken, so it doesn't have to be climbing mountains! Helping people, volunteering – you get a lot of story material from talking to people
- Keep writing stories, type them up and edit them, then write more!
- Expect rejection - Malorie Blackman had 80 rejections before her first book was published so just keep going
- My daughter is just going through this, as she is just trying to get her first book published

Q: If you could write one other thing, apart from what you have already done, what would it be?

A: Weeelll, I love horses, and so I have always wanted to write a horse or pony story, but my real passion at the moment is a guy called Colonel Thomas Dumas. I have found a publisher who will publish a book about him and so I'm going to write it. Colonel Dumas was a French general in Revolutionary France and ended up being the highest-ranking officer of African descent to lead an army in Europe. His dashing exploits feature in the writings of his son, Alexandre Dumas, in his *Three Musketeers* books. I'm really looking forward to writing it, even though I am so busy with other projects at the moment.

Q: Your characters always seem to end up becoming strong because of their experiences – would you say that you have a strong character?

A: Well my life has pretty much been ordinary, but I have been through a few things lately that toughened me up. I have never been in a fight or anything like that (big chicken – remember?), and I'm definitely not into violence, but I think that I can say that I am quietly tough.

Q: What jobs did you have before you were a writer?

A: Well, in about year 9 I thought that I would be a politician, but after I left school, I went to art college and then to film school. Then I had jobs like being an usherette in a theatre, and a bookseller. I was a professional knitter for a while and I had a market stall selling my creations. I eventually joined a company that made pop videos (they were all the rage then!), but decided that my heart wasn't in it and managed to get a teenage book publishing deal on the back of a TV drama that I pitched – the rest is history.

When I look back, I can see how many varied and different experiences these jobs all gave me plenty of material for my books.