



AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURA WOOD

Article Author:

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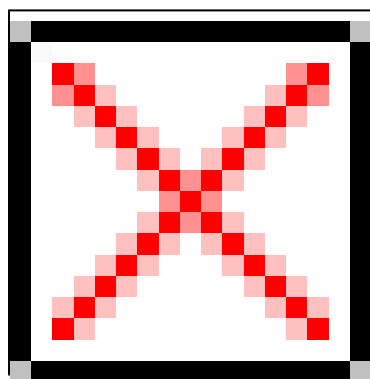
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Article Category:

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The author interviewed about her new book, **Under a Dancing Star**.



Laura Wood is the winner of the **2014 Montegrappa Scholastic Prize for New Children's Writing**, and the author of seven books for children and teenagers, including the **Poppy Pym** series, **Vote for Effie** and **A Sky Painted Gold**. Her latest Young Adult novel, [Under A Dancing Star](#) [3], revisits the story of Shakespeare's **Much Ado About Nothing**. **Imogen Russell Williams** interviewed her for **Books for Keeps**.

Your range is very broad - from the *Poppy Pym* mystery books to contemporary middle-grade, to your YA debut *A Sky Painted Gold*, and now a Shakespearean revamp. Is there an age category or a genre where you feel most at home?

I really enjoy the variety of messing around. I'm absolutely the worst artist in the world, but I'd love to have the challenge of writing a picture book; I think that would be so much fun! But it might be confusing if I start popping up in every age group. I think the YA stuff is probably where my heart is; it's harder work, but I find it rewarding because of that.

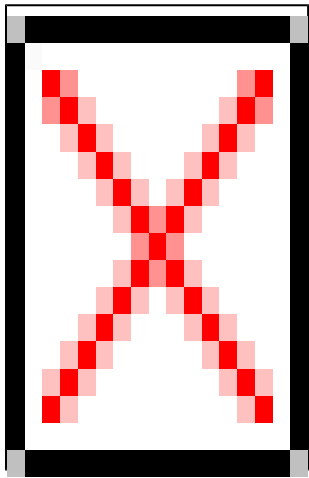
Have you always been fond of *Much Ado About Nothing*? How did you first become hooked?

My **Much Ado About Nothing** obsession began with Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson. I saw the film when I was sixteen, and it was the first time that Shakespeare had 'clicked' for me - which actually had a big impact, because I became a really keen English student, and then went on to study English at university and to do a PhD. Also, I just had a massive crush on Kenneth Branagh - not the loftiest revelation! And I absolutely loved the Beatrice/Benedick dynamic; I think Shakespeare's trope with Beatrice and Benedick is such a seminal romance trope, and one that I'm always drawn to. When there are bickering lovers involved, I'm into that, every time!

What's the relationship between your book, *Under a Dancing Star*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*

The book is a prequel to the play, which I loved doing, because artistically it was such a challenge: 'How do I get these characters to the place where they end up in **Much Ado About Nothing**?' For example, Hero's father Leonato - Leo, in [Under a Dancing Star](#)

[3] ? is the *worst* in the play, because he completely accepts these false accusations against his daughter, and he?s easily swayed, and keen to keep in everyone?s good graces ? so that became the basis for his character [in the book]. So Leo?s in a relationship with an artist, and embracing a Bohemian lifestyle, but over the course of the book, he meets other people from a more rigid, upper-class British background, and is swayed into their way of thinking. I liked doing that; it was fascinating to think about how to take those vivid characters and give them the kind of believable backstory that would inform the play. It was a really fun creative challenge.



How much research did you do to create your main setting - a lush, rather wonderfully permissive artists' retreat?

I did some research into the period, but it?s not so much later than **A Sky Painted Gold**, so in terms of historical setting and clothes and that sort of stuff, I felt reasonably comfortable. I did a lot of reading for tonally similar things; **The Enchanted April** was a big influence, and Rumer Godden?s **Greengage Summer**, and lots of films as well. But there?s a great big dose of it that?s completely escapist, romanticising, Tuscany out of a dream ? and that was fun. I just let my imagination go completely to create this golden world.

Why did you decide to set it in the 1930s, during the rise of Mussolini? What drew you to that period?

For the same reason that **A Sky Painted Gold** is set three or four years earlier. I think aesthetically it?s an exciting time to write from; there?s lots of fun to be had with the clothes and the music and the Bright Young Things. But also, setting it in the interwar period gives it a fragility for the contemporary reader. For the characters, they?re not seeing it as the ?interwar period? in the same way that we are: you know what?s coming up for them, but they?re oblivious to it. And then during the rise of Mussolini, they?re starting to have an inkling that something is on the horizon, though lots of people are oblivious to it, so I could still have some of that lingering tension without writing a book about the Second World War.

It also felt quite relevant, writing this book about fascism. There?s a moment when a Mitfordesque character, who?s friends with Oswald Mosley, is presenting fascism as something very polished and attractive; and there?s a scene towards the end where another character calls this out, and says this is how it is, it?s insidious. It?s not someone hitting you over the head with something, it?s people drinking tea and being ?civilised? and talking about ?This is the proper place for this?. It felt quite timely to me to channel a lot of my upset and anger at the current situation into the book.

Tell me about Beatrice, your heroine. Why did you decide to make her the daughter of fading English aristocracy, rather than Italian?

Again, the Mitfords were the characters that I had in mind when I was thinking about where Beatrice came from ? **Love in a Cold Climate**, all clinging on to this vision of the past that?s not really sustainable. I felt like that was a nice place for Beatrice?s character to start from, because in the play, she?s so confident and funny and bright, and kicking against convention, against these restrictions that she feels have been placed on her because of her gender. So I felt that giving my Beatrice that background gave her a similar place to start from; she feels like she?s locked into this narrow way of

life, that's firmly rooted in the past and in traditional gender roles, wanting her family to respect and care about her, but feeling deeply that this path she's on is the wrong path.

Beatrice is very scientifically minded, too ? infuriating her mother by searching for specimens or using terms like ?sexual reproduction? in front of the vicar! Why did you want her to be scientifically inclined?

When I started thinking about the quotation that my title comes from: ?No, sir ? my mother cried. But then there was a star danced, and under that was I born? ? all of a sudden Bea's mother was there, and that quote became about how she was disappointed in her, and how Bea wasn't the child that she had imagined or wanted. The science background fits into that, because it's the antithesis of what her mother wants for Bea, but I also really liked it because it's part of Bea's character. She's practical, she's keen, she observes things very closely, she wants to know why people do things and how they work; she's very rational. And because the book's written in first person, that allowed me to write in this voice that was observant and keen; that saw and noticed everything.

What's your favourite part of the book?

I think it's when Bea and Ben meet and she punches him in the face [laughs]. That was an idea that I had early on, and I just love how it sets the tone for their relationship, and how, again, it gives Bea the opportunity to be so unruffled and practical in that situation, and how that immediately sets him on the back foot ? so it sets up their relationship in a really fun way. And then she's quite disappointed that she hasn't broken his nose ? because obviously it's good that he's OK, but she was hoping that there would be more interesting results?

And which part did you find most challenging to write?

Getting the tone right, especially with the creeping elements of fascism, Mussolini, the oncoming war ? it felt very difficult to balance this light, golden romantic comedy against that, wanting to make sure that it was there enough, but also not wanting those shadows to overwhelm the story. I would say finding that balance was tricky, because the reader has an awareness that the characters don't have, and on the one hand I quite like that, because it means that there's something delicate about the story ? this golden beautiful thing, a feeling of the last perfect summer ? that is quite poignant. But on the other hand you don't want the reader to feel they're constantly looking forward ? you want them *in* that moment, in that story.

Would you write another Shakespearean reboot? Are there any contenders?

I'd quite like to do something with **The Taming of the Shrew**. I went to see the recent RSC production where they gender-swapped it, and it was still insanely problematic ? but it was really interesting. I love **Ten Things I Hate About You** ? and there's an amazing modern retelling with Rufus Sewell in it, who I'm in love with, so I think there's something interesting there. Maybe because it's got bickering lovers in it, again!

Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA.

[Under a Dancing Star](#) [3] is published by Scholastic, 978-1407192406, £7.99 pbk

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