



THE EXPLORER: AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHERINE RUNDELL

Article Author:

[Imogen Russell Williams](#) [1]

225 [2]

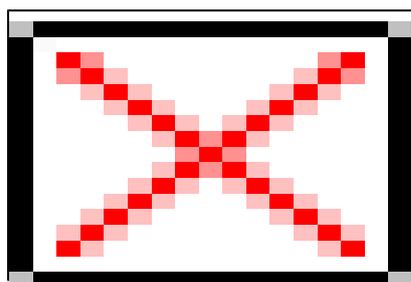
Article Category:

Featured author

Byline:

Imogen Russell Williams interviews **Katherine Rundell** about her new book **The Explorer**.

Katherine Rundell is the author of **The Girl Savage**, **Rooftoppers** (winner of the **2014 Waterstone's Children's Fiction Prize**), [The Wolf Wilder](#) [3] and **The Explorer**. She is a tightrope walker, a Fellow of All Souls College, and has completed a doctorate on the poetry of John Donne. **Imogen Russell Williams** interviewed Katherine about **The Explorer** for **Books for Keeps**.



You've written about running wild in Zimbabwe, climbing over Parisian rooftops, and riding wolves in Tsarist Russia. What drew you, this time, to the Amazon?

I think it was a few things. One of them was another book - Eva Ibbotson's [Journey to the River Sea](#) [4], which I read when I was a child. I had very rarely been so in love with a book, and *never* so in love with the world of a book. I longed so much for that kind of green wildness, and that longing never really went away. Then I won some money with the **Waterstones Children's Books Prize**, and I suddenly had the capacity to go anywhere in the world, and I knew that I would want to write a story based on this journey. And I thought the best place for a story is somewhere extraordinarily beautiful and dangerous ? a place where you can discover life, and also accidentally die ? a place that [the characters] fall wildly in love with, but also are aware is not unambiguously on their side. Nature isn't on anyone's side.

And what made you set it in this period ? in the early twentieth century, between the wars?

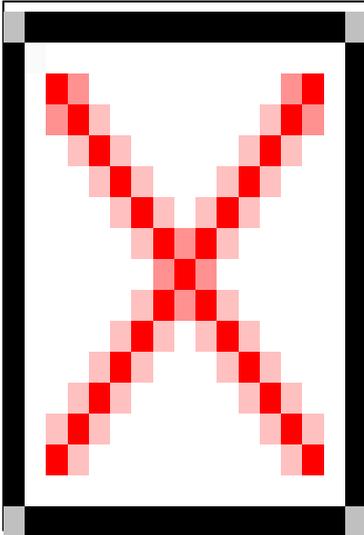
Partly, I wanted to write about a specific kind of aeroplane, that was only available at a specific time. And it also had to fit the era of explorers ? the pith-helmet-wearing, moustachioed explorers of the past. I also wanted a world in which there wouldn't be the difficulty of technology ? I didn't want [the children] to text their parents to come and get them ? so it had to be in the past. And it had to be a kind of world where people still ventured out into the unknown. The book partly explores the difficulty of that ? I wanted it to be a book about the damage we do, as well as the glory there is to be found.

How important was it to you to tell a new story of exploration, rejecting the idea of the 'civilised' investigating the 'savage'?

It was absolutely at the core of the story. By the time I was a child, we had already understood that a lot of exploration had done great harm ? it had decimated huge swathes of the population. So I wanted to make it very clear that you can explore the world without damaging it, and that it is imperative to do so. Percy Fawcett, the real-life explorer who went looking for the city of Z, was a radical, in that he argued for treating indigenous people with respect, and refused to fire on them; and his compatriots thought he was crazy. That says a lot about the mistakes that we made at that time. The Amazon is still at risk, and it urgently needs us to rally and help it - because if not, we'll lose the most beautiful thing in the world.

What sort of research did you do?

I am a nerd by inclination and a scholar by training, so ? a lot! There?s a brilliant book called **Brazilian Adventure**, by



Peter Fleming, which is an account of a young man going out into the unknown - and then of course I read a lot about Percy Fawcett and people like him. There?s a book called **The Lost City of Z** by David Grann, which is a lovely account of his search for Percy Fawcett. And then I also read a lot about the animal life of the place, to try to get it as real as possible; and when I was in the Amazon, I took a lot of notes. Our guide in the Amazon was a brilliant young man who had been a nurse, and a motorcycle mechanic, and he had spent a lot of time living with indigenous people, so he could tell us a lot about the wildness around us. He taught us how to build traps, he taught us how to coax out tarantulas from their holes, how to fish piranha ? but also, the names of all the birds, the nature of all the wildlife. So I came back from the Amazon with this huge book of notes, and that stood me in very good stead when I wrote the first draft.

You?ve mentioned Eva Ibbotson and Journey to the River Sea. Were there any other authors or books that influenced you?

Yes ? **Hatchet** [5], by Gary Paulsen, which is about a boy surviving against the odds, and the intricate detail of his day-to-day. I loved, as a child, stories of children surviving completely against the odds, and the minute details of how they did it. There was also a non-fiction book that I was completely obsessed by, called **Don?t Die in the Bundu**, a how-to guide for not dying in the bush in Zimbabwe. It has brilliant little diagrams of how you get water from a cactus, and how you can collect the morning dew, and how to light a fire using metal and a piece of flint. I memorised the whole book through reading it again and again and again - I was sure that as a kid the day would come that I would need it. That day has never yet come, but I?m not dead yet, so you never know! But this offer of bravery that these books make ? they suggest to you that you too would live, you too would explore. To be told that as a kid is a lovely feeling.

This is the first time you?ve written from a boy?s perspective. Was that challenging?

I would love to say that I found it as easy as writing a girl, and that would be a lie. I found it slightly more difficult. There were moments when I wondered what the effect of being brought up in a world that expects boys to behave a certain way would have on my boy character; what pressure there is to be brave that perhaps there wouldn?t be on a girl in the 1920s or 30s. So it was a more intricate act of imagining than it would have been with my characters Feodora or Sophie or Will [Wilhelmina] ? all of whom have a great deal of me and my best friends when I was a child in them. I

know what it is to be a young girl better than I know what it is to be a young boy. But I also believe that the core of a child, the heart of them, is not determined by their gender but by who they were born, who they have become. So much of it seems to me that a brave boy in peril and a brave girl in peril would act in very similar ways. And I wanted Fred, my main character, to be brave ? but brave as a child is brave, brave with doubts. I do think humans are more, rather than less similar, than we give them credit for; and I wanted to make that clear in the book.

Fred is described as ?sensible? in his school reports. But neither his school nor his father really see the inner him ? the Fred who consists of ?hunger and hope and wire?. Do you think this is true of many children

I do. For me, that?s one of the five most important sentences in the book. I think children feel that they are not given credit for what they could do if they were allowed to let rip a little ? [given] a little more freedom, a little more trust. I think a lot of children feel that they could do real things ? that they could be extraordinary, if they were just given a little more rein. And I don?t mean extraordinary as in surviving in the Amazon alone ? but kids are very capable; they endure, they?re tough, they?re witty, they?re sharp, they have good instincts. Obviously they don?t know everything about the world - but there?s that line in **Journey to the River Sea**: ?Children can lead large lives? ? and I believe that to be true, both of children in books and of children in real life. I would love a world in which we all conspire together as a society to find places in which children can be wild.

What would you most enjoy about living in the jungle?

The thing I most enjoyed while I was there was the nature of the beauty around you. It?s almost literally unbelievable ? these things should not exist. Pink wild river dolphins, and bright, bright scarlet macaws. And we went swimming, and because of the floods, there are drowned forests ? so you can swim past trees. It feels as though it were invented, rather than as if it had grown. And that, I don?t think would wear off ? I think that ravishing beauty would be quite something to live alongside. But I also know that it?s easy to romanticise a place ? it?s a very difficult place to live for many people. And also, while we were there, I got completely covered from head to foot with mosquito bites, to the point where I looked like I had a skin disease ? I ended up with almost a hundred mosquito bites, many of them in places that a bikini covers ? just horrifying! So not all of it is heaven, but enough of it is heaven to make it completely glorious.

Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and critic specialising in children?s books.

The Explorer is published by Bloomsbury Children?s Books.

Page Number:

37

Source URL (retrieved on Jan '21): <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/225/childrens-books/articles/featured-author/the-explorer-an-interview-with-katherine-rundell>

Links:

[1] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/imogen-russell-williams>

[2] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/225>

[3] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/214/childrens-books/reviews/the-wolf-wilder>

[4] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/130/childrens-books/reviews/journey-to-the-river-sea>

[5] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/68/childrens-books/reviews/hatchet>