



INTERVIEW: KATHERINE WOODFINE
(THE MYSTERY OF THE CLOCKWORK SPARROW)



Kane Miller: What attracted you to the Edwardian era and why you chose to set the character of Miss Sophie, a young woman with contemporary ideals, in that time period?

KW: So many of the books that today we think of as the "classics" of children's literature were written during the Edwardian era—*The Secret Garden*, *The Railway Children*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Peter Pan* and many more. I grew up reading those books, and I was enchanted by the world they depicted. In some ways, it seemed incredibly innocent and old-fashioned: a story-book land of hot buttered toast for tea, and little girls in velvet frocks and frilly petticoats. Yet at the same time, the heroes of these stories had real and often frightening hardships to deal with—from Sara Crewe being banished to the attic by the horrible Miss Minchin in *A Little Princess*, to Mole's adventures in the nightmarish Wild Woods in *The Wind in the Willows*.

Perhaps because of all that childhood reading, the Edwardian era has always fascinated me. What's more, there are surprisingly few children's books written today that are set during that time. We're used to encountering historical adventures set in Victorian London, and books set during World War I, but the Edwardian period is a fascinating little space in between the two that we don't tend to hear quite so much about, but is rich in incredible history.

When I came to write *The Mystery of the Clockwork Sparrow*, I knew straight away that I was going to set the book during the 1900s. I wanted to write something that was inspired by my own childhood reading—both classic children's adventures, and the mystery stories I devoured growing up—so the historical setting came very naturally. The Edwardian era was also a time in which things were changing rapidly and the old rigid rules of Victorian society were beginning to break down, which perfectly suited the story I wanted to tell—about a group of young people who became friends and solved mysteries together, in spite of coming from very different backgrounds.

I also knew that I wanted the story to have capable and independent young heroines. We're used to seeing the character of the downtrodden orphan girl in Edwardian children's literature, but I wanted to put my own contemporary spin on that familiar character—and in doing so to have the opportunity to challenge some of the outdated stereotypes that we so often see in children's books of that period.



.....

It's been great fun writing about Sophie and Lil, who are absolutely Edwardian girls from the top of their straw sailor hats to the tips of their buttoned boots—but who I hope are also characters that children today will be able to relate to. And ultimately, I'd love to think that *Clockwork Sparrow* and *Jeweled Moth* might inspire some young readers to go off and discover some of those wonderful Edwardian children's classics for themselves too!

KM: As a child, what role did books play in your home? Were they available as entertainment?

KW: I was absolutely obsessed with reading as a child. I can't remember a time when I didn't love books! I'd often get in trouble for reading in bed after "lights out" or trying to sneakily read my book at the dinner table.



The author's hometown.

There were always lots of books at home, because my parents were both readers. I especially enjoyed reading the books that my mum had kept from her own childhood, mostly old hardback editions of books by authors like Enid Blyton, Malcolm Saville and Lorna Hill. We read together a lot. I particularly remember my mum reading me *The Hobbit*, and we also listened to lots of audio books. I have very fond memories of audio recordings of *Winnie the Pooh*, the Roald Dahl books and lots of children's poetry.

A hugely important part of my childhood was visiting the local library every Saturday, which was the highlight of my week! The library was one of my favorite places, and there was nothing I liked better than coming home on Saturday laden down with a pile of new books to read.

KM: When did you first become aware that "author" was an occupation?

KW: As a child, I don't think I made a connection between the names I saw on the covers of books and real people. Growing up in a village in Lancashire, in the north of England, I didn't come into contact with writers. I went to a small village school, and author visits were unheard of: the most exciting book event was when the mobile library came to visit. As a consequence, "authors" seemed like rather magical, otherworldly figures.

It probably wasn't until I was 10 or 11 that I realized that being an author was a real occupation. Even then I had no idea how you could go about becoming one. If you were good at writing, the careers advice you were given at school tended to suggest areas like journalism or law. Being "an author" was never really presented as an option.

When *The Mystery of the Clockwork Sparrow* was first published in the UK, I went back to my old primary school to do an event, which was a very special experience. It was lovely to speak to the children, but also to know that, as a result, they might be more aware that a writing career was possible for them. Although I hope the idea of writing for a living still has a bit of magic about it, hopefully "being an author" will be something much more real and achievable to them as a result.

KM: What challenges do you face as an author for children, and what have those taught you?

KW: I love being a children's author; it really is a dream come true. However, I do think that one challenge can be that children's books are still often seen as being less "worthy" than adult books.



.....

I'd like to see children's books get the same kind of coverage in the media that books for adults receive. It's so important that parents and teachers can access information about children's books, but also it's hugely rewarding to discuss children's books as literature in their own right.

With this in mind, a couple of years ago, some friends and I started up a monthly children's books show, called "Down the Rabbit Hole," on a London-based radio station. Each month we have authors and illustrators join us in the studio to talk about new children's books, from picture books through to YA, and we've seen for ourselves what a delight it is to have a proper space for a meaningful discussion of children's books. (You can find out more and listen at [Down the Rabbit Hole](#).)

KM: Did you encounter any barriers while pursuing your career as a writer?

KW: Pursuing any career in the arts can be challenging. I always knew that I wanted my career to relate to books, and ideally writing, but I didn't really know where to start. I was fortunate enough to have some tremendously encouraging teachers while I was at school, and I went on to study English Literature at University, but after that I was unsure what to do next.

I was interested in working in publishing, but soon found that the vast majority of jobs were in London, where it was expensive to live and I didn't really know anyone. Starting salaries were low, and most jobs required at least some relevant work experience or an internship. It all seemed rather out of my reach, so I ended up getting a job in an art gallery and bookshop in the city of Manchester, close to where I grew up. I kept exploring my love of books and writing in my own time, studying for a part-time MA in literature, writing a blog and entering a few writing competitions.

A couple of years and a couple of jobs later, I found out about a great role in London that had become available at a big reading charity, working on projects relating to children's books. I now had plenty of relevant experience to offer, and getting to work with some of the UK's best known children's authors and illustrators was incredibly exciting.

What's more, working in the children's book world also gave me the opportunity to learn more about the publishing industry, and gave me the confidence to take my own writing further. I now combine my own writing with working on a handful of children's books projects that I love: the radio show, Down the Rabbit Hole; reviewing books for a children's magazine; and running YALC, a huge YA convention that takes place in London each year.

ADVICE FROM A WRITER:

1. Write as much as you can. I wrote non-stop as a child—stories, diaries, plays for my friends to act out, my own "newspapers" and I think all that time that I spent writing has helped me hugely. Writing is like a sport—you have to keep practicing!
2. Have fun with it. Play, enjoy being creative and let your imagination loose. Don't worry too much about spelling, punctuation, neat handwriting and getting it perfect (I realize this is contrary to what a lot of teachers might tell children at school, but I think it's so important to have some space to simply be imaginative without worrying about getting it "right.") Just enjoy exploring your ideas; you can always fix the spelling later!



-
3. Try to finish projects if you can. It can be tempting to abandon a piece of writing and start something new—but you’ll get a huge sense of achievement from completing something. Once you’ve finished a piece of writing, put it away for a while, then get it out again and read it with fresh eyes. Think about what you could do to make it even better.
 4. Read as much as you can! Reading will help you enormously if you want to become an author. Try reading a range of different kinds of books, and find out what kinds of writing inspires you, and connects with you, the most.
 5. Finally, stick to it, be determined and have faith. There’s no single route you have to follow, but it pays to be open to opportunities, be flexible and to learn as much as you can about your industry. If it’s your passion, then keep writing. Whatever you’re doing, make sure you find space for it in your everyday life. For me, it’s been a bit of a wiggly path to get here, but I feel very much as though all the twists and turns have led me to exactly the right place.

KM: Lastly, to your mind, what is the power of literacy and early reading?

KW: I am so passionate about the power of reading. Literacy really does transform lives, and children’s books are hugely important. They are often the first works of art we encounter, and those early experiences can have an enormous impact on how we feel about reading—and about the arts—for the rest of our lives.

Books also offer children valuable opportunities to learn, to use their imaginations, to broaden their horizons and to experience a range of different perspectives. In today’s world, I think it’s more important than ever that children are offered that opportunity to look beyond their own experiences, to empathize and to make connections with others from the earliest age. Books are an incredibly powerful tool in doing exactly that.

KM: Thank you, Katherine!

Series includes:

[*The Mystery of the Clockwork Sparrow*](#)

[*The Mystery of the Jeweled Moth*](#)

[*The Mystery of the Painted Dragon*](#)

[*The Mystery of the Midnight Peacock*](#)



*From Katherine Woodfine's
Edwardiana Pinterest board.*