



# AN INTERVIEW WITH LEIGH BARDUGO

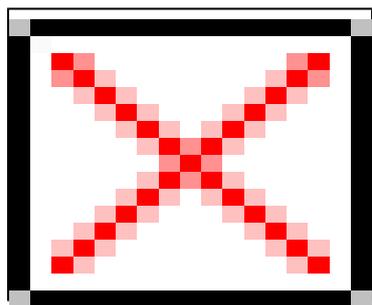
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The author of the **Grisha** series on why she loves writing fantasy.

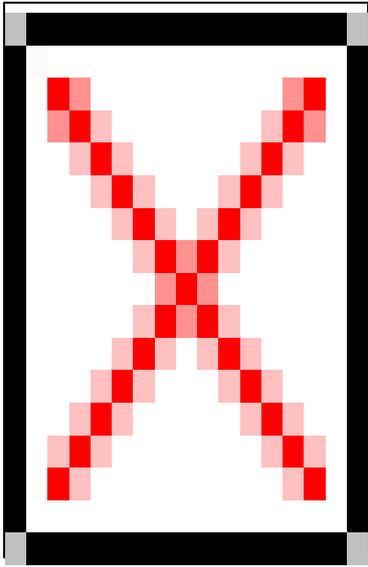


Leigh Bardugo's **Grisha** sequence of fantasy novels, [Shadow and Bone](#) [3], [Siege and Storm](#) [4] and [Ruin and Rising](#) [5], have won her a loyal, even a devoted following of readers. And no wonder. The setting oozes glamour ? a fantasy kingdom inspired by the Imperial Russian court, luxurious, dangerous, corrupt, and divided in two by a terrifying Shadow land; the central character is irresistible ? Alina the mousy but sharp-witted orphan overlooked by all but her best friend and constant companion Mal, at least that is until she is revealed as a Sun Summoner, possessor of enormous and unique power; the plot skilfully combines romance, political thriller and epic quest; while the conclusion, when it comes, is thunderous.

[Bardugo](#) [6] herself, who was in the UK for a series of events this summer, is surely everything her fans would want: clever, forthright, a highly entertaining speaker, and a passionate advocate both for high fantasy and YA fiction. Speaking to a packed house in the events room at Waterstones Piccadilly her definition of science fiction drew whoops of appreciation and understanding from the audience, ?I don't think of science fiction and fantasy as escapist? she said, ?After all, all writing is escapism ? I think of it as being expansive. Fantasy writing doesn't only show you different worlds, it shows you worlds with different values, where anything is truly possible.? Discovering the genre as a teenager, she revealed, ?saved my life?.

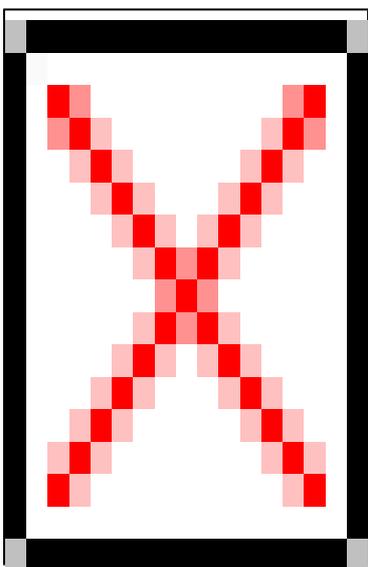
Chatting to Leigh a few days after this, and three more stops into her tour, she elaborated on this, ?I was a prickly kid, angry at everything. My life was very constricted ? school, the mall ? being popular, being ?cute? was what was important. Fantasy lifted me out of a very narrow existence. I needed to know there were places where I would be worthwhile, and where the things I could do and the things I valued would make a difference. And that's what science fiction did for me. When I hear people turn their noses up at it, or when I come across the kind of snobbery there is about it, it really makes me furious: I think about what I was like as a kid and how badly I needed to be told those things.? She started writing her first fantasy novel aged twelve, ?Reading fantasy gave me a way out, writing it the chance to be someone else?.

Despite her early start at writing, it was some years before she was able to write full time. Her first job was as a



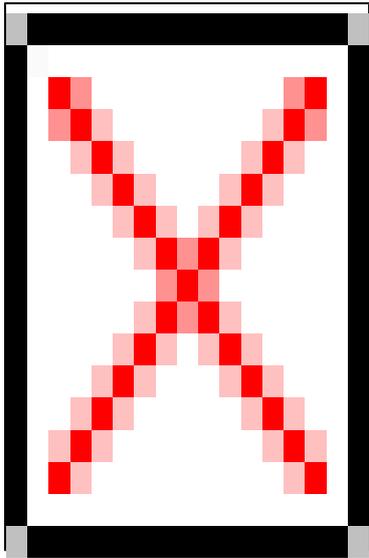
copy writer - she used to write the scripts for movie trailers - but she found that coming home from writing copy all day "left her writing muscles exhausted". The death of her father gave her the impetus to change jobs and she became a make up artist. It is she says, a very competitive field, and hard physical work, "the make up artist is the first on the set and the last to leave." Nonetheless, while chatting to the actors as she applied their make up, she was dreaming up stories in her head, and despite the long hours when she got home at night she was ready to write. It's perhaps no wonder that the **Grisha** series contains a tribute to her work as a make up artist: Genya, one of the most intriguing characters, is a "flesh tailor" with the ability to enhance beauty. (Who wouldn't want someone like that as their best friend?)

The chance discovery of an atlas of Imperial Russia inspired the world of the trilogy (actually it was a 1980s text book Leigh explains, which is a little more prosaic than readers might have expected). Alina's journey follows a path familiar from fairytales "the poor orphan taken away from the hardships of the countryside to the luxurious world of the court, all silks, chandeliers and, in this case, golden domes. But the Grisha court shares more with Tsarist Russia than interior design and architecture: there's an army of conscripted serfs for one thing, and a monarch who has failed to modernise for another. Beneath the glittering surface, a sense of reality: "I love the beauty of fantasy worlds", says Leigh, "but I feel a responsibility to show the price paid for the luxury by ordinary people, and the price paid in war by ordinary people too." The trilogy describes a kingdom wrought in two, and the power struggles between two warring factions. "We often read about the heroes, but don't always hear about the troops on the ground." says Leigh, "I didn't just want to tell the story of a war, I wanted to tell the story of particular soldiers."



Leigh identifies other sources of inspiration for the books too: "The idea of the Grisha Second Army" - an elite force of magicians "was actually inspired by the Brain Trust that grew up in the US in the 1930s when so many of the Jews forced to flee Europe became part of the American military defence" that idea of a persecuted minority that continues to

face prejudice but is also an essential part of a country's political and military structure. But Russia informs it all. In **Shadow and Bone** Leigh even used a few real Russian words, "I wanted to leave breadcrumbs for my readers though what I learned very quickly was that in some cases using real language actually drew some readers out of the narrative, so that's something I moved away from."



Her books are becoming more complex she reckons, and her next book has characters speaking four different languages, "I did question my sanity at various points and wonder why I didn't simply create a common tongue that everyone could speak!" Called **The Dregs** it will publish in 2015 and she describes it as a "magical heist novel" **Oceans Eleven** meets **Game of Thrones**. It is set in the Grisha world, but in Kerch not Ravka and is the story of an underworld criminal gang, "ragtag misfits" Leigh says, "outcasts facing massive odds, which is a theme I really like."

It's a theme that she works to wonderful effect throughout the **Grisha** series, that and the magical transformation of Alina from plain little girl to young woman with extraordinary power, facing tests with courage, intelligence and passion.

We end our conversation talking about the Darkling "the most powerful of the Grisha, handsome, as frightening as he is attractive, and utterly ruthless." "The Darkling has been this controversial character," says Leigh, "But he's always been interesting to me. I think sometimes people want to be told who is good and who is bad. They want it to be very clear, with some definitive line. I believe that the people who are the most dangerous are not the people who enter your life wearing a sign saying "I'm a bad guy", and they're not the people who are missing a nose like Voldemort. They're the people who are charming and manipulative and also probably carrying their own wounds, their own baggage. They can be brooding and beautiful and be monstrous. That's what I was setting out to show with the Darkling."

If that doesn't send you off to read or reread the books, I don't know what will.

The **Grisha** series, [Shadow and Bone](#) [3], [Siege and Storm](#) [4] and [Ruin and Rising](#) [5] is published by Indigo.

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