



Authorgraph 221 Lauren St John

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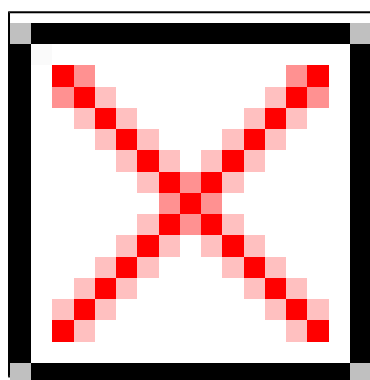
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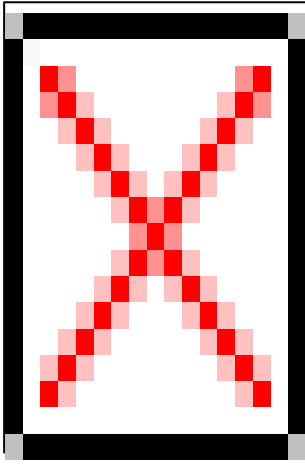
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Lauren St John interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**



Growing up on a farm and game reserve in what was then Rhodesia, Lauren St John experienced almost as many real life adventures at the time as her young fictional characters have enjoyed since. She still likes putting herself through gruelling overseas trips in search of authenticity. Michelle Paver, Tess Sharpe and Katherine Rundell are children's novelists who also do the same thing when it comes to experiencing tough reality at first hand. Together they mark a return to those Victorian children's authors who too would regularly set out on an adventure first and then write it up in fiction afterwards. But Lauren is also a great admirer of Eva Ibbotson's **Journey to the River Sea**, set in exotic parts this fine author had never visited. Talking to Lauren who is in her pretty South London flat, beloved cat Max periodically sitting on her lap, I wondered what is it about actual experience that Lauren finds so important in her writing?

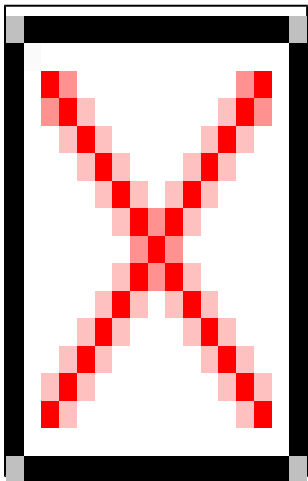
I really struggle if I don't go somewhere and do some research before starting writing. And I love the adventure of it



*all. Recently I have visited the far North of Australia and travelled hundreds of miles visiting out of the way places. I suppose I could have looked up that whole area on YouTube or something but it wouldn't have been the same. I wouldn't have had the experience of bottle-feeding wallabies or talking to Human Rights lawyers about some of the things going on there. I personally find such experiences totally enriching and I hope that feeling gets into the books too. First-hand knowledge also helps when talking to children in schools. I am an ambassador for the **Born Free Foundation**. After talking to pupils about animal conservation you can sometimes get that feeling that their minds really have changed as a result.*

You loved Enid Blyton as a child. Was she an important influence when writing your **Laura Marlin** mystery novels?

*When I read **The Famous Five** out in Africa I thought what amazingly exciting lives her characters were having, even more exciting than my own. That's despite growing up on a farm where I had a pet giraffe, there were crocodiles on the river and a war going on around us. I also had three pet pythons over the years. But you always look elsewhere when you are a child and Enid Blyton's characters tramping the moors and catching smugglers had lives that still seemed more enviable.*



You are at the moment finishing the fifth book in your **Laura Marlin Mystery Series**. Are you planning for her ever getting past age eleven and entering puberty, with all the emotional complications that can sometimes follow?

All her adventures take place during one year with characters who stay aged somewhere between nine and eleven. She won't get any older. When I talk to schools I find the difference between her age band and ages thirteen is utterly extreme. Nine to eleven is such a beautiful age. Children at that stage are so compassionate and intelligent and still have so many hopes and dreams. I'm not saying you can't have these at thirteen, but younger children still want to change the world for the better and believe they could do this. Teenagers who might still feel the same have also become so much more aware of all the other pressures now impinging upon them.

You have written that at one stage you found the prospect of writing dialogue particularly challenging. Has that changed?

I started out writing non-fiction though I always wanted to be a novelist. But I worried whether I would ever get past the

less given up any idea of becoming a novelist the weirdest thing happened. I was walking down the street on my way to doing some Christmas shopping and suddenly the image of a girl on a giraffe just swam into my head. Shortly afterwards while I was on one of my trips to Africa, where my parents still live, I kept thinking about this image and finally got round to jotting down a few notes. The story then poured out of me and I wrote the whole of **The White Giraffe** in under a month. I never had to think about the dialogue because all the characters were so alive to me I simply had to write down what I somehow knew they would be saying. And by the time I had finished it three more books had already formed in my head so I had to write them down as well.

You have recently written a well-received adult novel, **The Obituary Writer**, and I believe a second one is being mooted. How does writing for children or adults compare?

All writing is hard and writing for children is as hard as any. But it is such a joy to me to do it at all. Every day I can have these adventures sitting at my desk but also travelling all over the world in my imagination, meeting lots of different and sometimes amazing people. I feel so fortunate.

For someone who still looks so youthful, Lauren has already produced numbers of really good books, with five titles completed in one record year. All her stories are pacy and well-written. Her autobiography, **Rainbow's End**, memorably describes a childhood spent in close proximity to wild life. This extra special knowledge and interest permeates all her writing where animal issues are concerned. But there are also her cheerfully up-beat **Laura Marlin Mystery** series, which may have taken some of their inspiration from the adventure stories of Enid Blyton but are so much better written and constructed. Winning the **Blue Peter Book of the Year Award** in 2011 for **Dead Man's Cove** must surely be the first of many other literary prizes still to come.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

New in the **White Giraffe** series: **Operation Rhino**, Orion Children's Books, 978-1-4440-1273-6, £6.99

Lauren's **Laura Marlin** mystery series and **The One Dollar Horse** books are also published by Orion Children's Books.

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