



# A Q&A INTERVIEW WITH CATHRYN CONSTABLE

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[Cathryn Constable](#) [1]

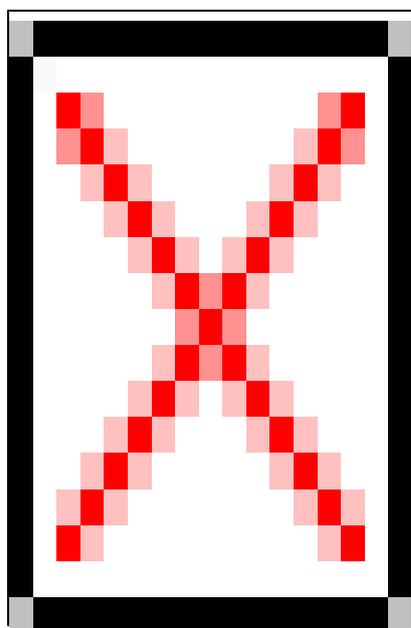
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The author talks about her new book **The White Tower**



Cathryn Constable's debut novel [The Wolf Princess](#) [3] won much acclaim and was an international bestseller. Now after a four year wait, her new novel is published.

In [The White Tower](#) [4] thirteen-year old Livy, grieving over the death of her best friend, transfers to an ancient former Charity School in London where her father has been appointed librarian. She shares the same name as the Elizabethan founder of the school who is in fact a distant relative. Before long she travels both in time and space as she becomes involved in the unravelling of an appalling crime involving alchemy and crime committed centuries ago. 'What's at stake is more than forbidden knowledge,' says **Chicken House publisher Barry Cunningham**, 'It's solving an unhappy mystery from the past and finding peace in the present. **The White Tower** is thrilling, fascinating and so, so magical.'

**The White Tower is part school story, part mystery, part fantasy, while also featuring a fair bit of physics. Where did the inspiration come from?**

All I had, initially, was a girl coming home from school on the bus. All very ordinary. But even before she got home, she was struggling with odd physical sensations; promptings that something was amiss. **The White Tower** became an exploration of that child at first denying what her body was telling her (and at that point, how could she know?) and then

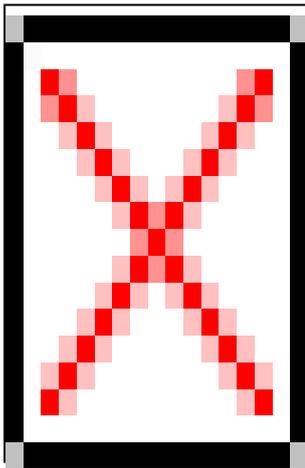
giving in to the dangerous impulse to climb out of her bedroom window. At the beginning of writing the novel, I really had no idea what she would find on the roof or how she would be affected although the impulse to step into the sky came very quickly.

**Alchemy plays an important part in the story. Has that always been something that fascinates you? Did it require special research?**

At the beginning of writing, I became fascinated by groups like the Rosicrucians or The Golden Dawn who believed they could access a form of higher knowledge through secret ceremonies. And it doesn't take very long to discover that Isaac Newton was an alchemist. He literally discovered gravity in five minutes on a Friday afternoon and then spent the rest of his time trying find the essential material that he thought the whole universe was composed of. He'd regularly set fire to his college rooms in Cambridge as he burnt his way through metal after metal writing notes that read like the ravings of a mad man. And this is Isaac Newton who we think of as being a rational man. So I thought, let's just pretend that someone like him, a scholar, an alchemist, did discover something, but with terrible consequences. What if that scholar managed not just to 'perfect' lead by alchemical means and turn it into gold, but then turned his attention to the blood of a child? What might have happened? I did read a lot about alchemy and it is the most frustrating thing to try and research because alchemists are a slippery bunch and don't want to give anything away!

**Your books are highly visual, with vivid, memorable and dramatic scenes. Do you see the scenes before you write them? Do you have a favourite scene in *The White Tower*?**

To me, writing feels like how I imagine playing an immersive computer game might be. I step into what I'm writing



about (although this stepping in does not mean I am in the right place or what I have stepped into will stay in the book). I have to be able to see what I'm writing about even before I know how I feel about it.

Writing is really trying to keep myself in that mood of attentive half wakefulness where what is 'real' slips away and I am fully immersed in my inner landscape. I should plan more, and intend to for the next book because this novel took too long. But I do love the surprises that happen when you're just watching the story and experiencing as if in a dream. For example, there is a moment when Livy looks out of her bedroom window at the skyline and the winged Sentinel on the roof turns its head to look at her. It surprised me when I first wrote it and I hope it surprises any reader who picks up the book. My other surprise (and therefore favourite scene) is when Livy meets Ralph on the roof. I love that boy! I found his plight so heartbreaking and yet he was so suspicious of what Livy might do that he initially pushed her away even though she was the one person in a myriad of lifetimes who could help him out of his situation.

**Your characters spend a great deal of time scrambling across roof tops. Is that something you would enjoy?**

When I started writing *The White Tower*, I knew that something was going to happen in the sky. But I had no idea that Livy would climb out of the window and onto the roof herself. (You can tell from this that this was at a point where I was writing before planning!) I was a sensible child, so it would have held no appeal for me, although, before writing this book, I always felt comfortable climbing up anything and had a fine head for heights. And then I got a dreadful bout of vertigo: I couldn't walk across the room without falling over. That will teach me.

**'Gravity and time are interlocked' says one of your characters. Tell us a bit about the science behind the book.**

I've had this sense about time and gravity for a while, but had to read up on the physics to make sure that I wasn't just making things up for the book. (I can recommend **Time Reborn** by Lee Smolin as a primer for what physicists are thinking about time.) An object falls not just through space, but through time. Or perhaps I should say that it is operated on by two forces, time and gravity because as soon as you think of time as a force rather than a dimension like space, you can start to think about it differently. And so, the flying in the novel is not strictly flying, it's a suspension of gravity and time, with the consequence of immortality thrown in. And it was the immortality that really fascinated me.

**The White Tower is a book that concentrates on loss, not the loss of a family member, but of a best friend. Was that important to you?**

I arrived at that particular strand of the book quite late: although everything in the book – the tone, the sense of otherworldliness, the loneliness that the two main characters were experiencing – pointed to an exploration of loss. But I resisted. I had been quite clear with myself at the beginning that I didn't want to write about death. I actually find books about a single issue a bit of a drag. But I started writing the book when my mother was very ill and continued on with it after her death. I suppose the surprise of that separation was in my mind and seeped into the book.

[5] [The White Tower](#) [4] and Cathryn's first book [The Wolf Princess](#) [3] are published by **Chicken House**, price £6.99 each.

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