



AN INTERVIEW WITH COSTA SHORTLISTED AUTHOR ROSS WELFORD

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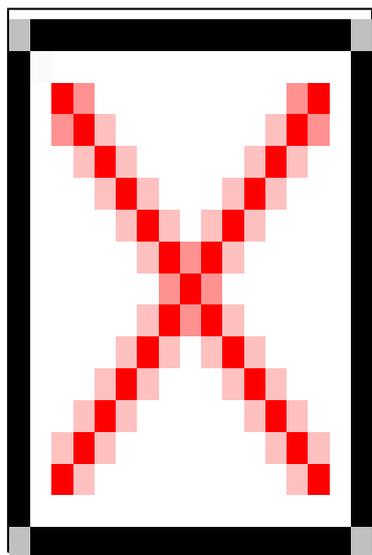
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An interview with the author of **Time Travelling with a Hamster**

The shortlist for the [2016 Costa Book Awards](#) [3] features four novels for young people, each accomplished and very different. Ross Welford's book [Time Travelling with a Hamster](#) [4] is described by the judges as 'a highly accomplished debut, genuinely enjoyable for both a child reading independently and an adult reading with a child'. Costa judge **Anna James** interviewed **Welford** for **Books for Keeps**.



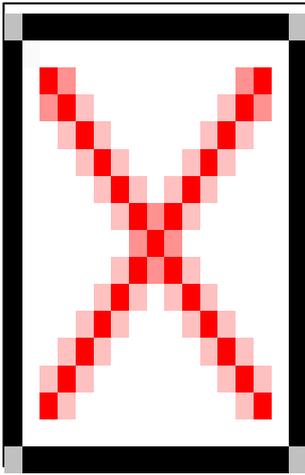
It's been a good month for Ross Welford. Not only has his debut children's novel, **Time Travelling with a Hamster**, been shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Prize**, he's just found out that he's also made the shortlist for this year's **Blue Peter Book Prize**. In his words, it's been 'most exciting', and it's going to be rounded off with the release of his new novel, **What Not to Do If You Turn Invisible**, published right at the end of December.

Welford, a former business magazine journalist turned television producer, had a slightly bumpy road to publication: 'I was doing a lot of live studio television stuff, and it really was the best fun but I drifted out of it and started freelancing and it is hard work to freelance in telly. I was in my 40s and a senior producer, but I wasn't much much better at my job than someone who was 25 and much much cheaper, and the phone kind of stopped ringing.'

Although he'd played with the idea of writing a book for a long time, including through an MA in Screenwriting, the tipping point eventually came from two different directions. Firstly, Welford was hired as a joke writer for a documentary about dog owners: 'I was employed for about six weeks and I went to the screening and not a single one of my lines was in it!' And then his family moved to Sweden for two years for his wife's job and eighteen months in, he

ran out of excuses.

The origin of the story is a bit vague: 'I don't really know where ideas come from! You have to come up with some



weird story that is entertaining but I don't know, it really just popped into my head!' but Welford's interests in science and cosmology combined to create [Time Travelling with a Hamster](#) [4]; a funny, moving story of family, home and time travel as a boy called Al tries to change the course of history and avert a go-kart accident that will go on to kill his father. He wrote about a quarter of it in Sweden but had stalled a little before a friend told him about NaNoWriMo, or **National Novel Writing Month**, where writers pledge to complete 50k words in the month of November: 'It's a weird little thing but it works', he explains. 'It gives you the disciplines to just barge through. If it's not working you can just leave a hole and go back to it; you can't edit a blank page. And that's how I ended up with a first draft.'

After a bit of editing Welford signed with his agent, Silvia Molteni at Peters, Fraser and Dunlop and two months after that HarperCollins bought the book. His journey continued in a slightly unexpected way: 'The thing that surprised me was everybody saying how funny it was because I didn't know I'd written a funny book - I know that sounds like a humblebrag, but it's not a comedy, not in the same way a book by someone like David Walliams is.'

Another surprise was the intended audience: 'I thought I was writing it for older kids, I suppose subconsciously I was writing it for my twins who are 14. So when HarperCollins bought it and my editor, Nick Lake, said 'This is a wonderful middle grade' title, I said 'What's middle grade?' but now I know that this is a huge and very important market that is much loved and respected by everybody! I occasionally get the 'Ah, sweet' thing, like writing children's books is easier. My editor is adamant it's far harder to write a successful children's book than to write a long indulgent literary thing!'

Writing about time travel was anything but easy: 'I'd never recommend it as a theme for a first novel! I wanted to avoid the doppelgänger thing that you see **Back to the Future** or Bill and Ted where they come up against other version of themselves. I love it, but it's been done before. But I think the plot is watertight - I'm sure if some smartarse on Amazon was being really hyper-critical then might be able to find flaws but I've tried to unpick it and I can't!'

Having tackled time travel, Welford hasn't made things any easier for himself and has moved on to invisibility with his new book: 'It's about a 12-year-old girl called Ethel who accidentally discovers the secret of invisibility and it's terrifying. That's kind of the way I work; think about what would really happen in an extraordinary situation. I have one big implausibility but then the rest has to be super real. If you become invisible unexpectedly, would you really find it a hoot? What would really happen if a boy found a time machine?' Readers will find out in **What Not to Do If You Turn Invisible**.

Anna James is a writer and journalist. Her debut children's novel book **Pages & Co** will be published in October 2017 by HarperCollins.

[Time Travelling with a Hamster](#) [4] and **What Not to Do If You Turn Invisible** are published by HarperCollins Children's Books, £6.99 pbk.

Also shortlisted for the 2016 Costa Children's Book Award are [The Bombs that Brought Us Together](#) [5] by [Brian Conaghan](#) [6], [Orangeboy](#) [7] by [Patrice Lawrence](#) [8] and [Monstrous Child](#) [9] by [Francesca Simon](#) [10].

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