Cressida Cowell, Waterstones Children's Laureate, was to have been Author of the Day at the London Book Fair today. BookBrunch caught up with her before the cancellation.

**What are you looking forward to in your author of the day role?**
I'm looking forward to talking about how valuable the creative industries are to the UK. We should be proud of the £110 billion that the creative industries contribute to the economy, and shout louder about our success. We need the children of today to enter into the creative industries as adults, or to use innovative thinking in anything they choose to do. We will need creative scientists, politicians, entrepreneurs in the future, and we need to be looking at how we can encourage that imaginative spirit in our children.

**What do you aim to do in your role as the Waterstones Children's Laureate?**
It's all in my Waterstones Children's Laureate Charter, which you can download from the BookTrust website - that's my giant to do list. This year, I'm focusing on two big projects - a creativity project, which is launching in May, and a school libraries project, which I'm launching in October. We need creative kids, and we need school libraries. Nobody has been able to answer me this question: if your parents can't afford books, and there isn't a library in your primary school, how on earth are you supposed to become a reader for the joy it? Children who read for the joy of it are happier and healthier, across all social classes.

"This is one of the most joyful things about being a writer, to feel that you have been helpful"

**How does mythology inspire your work?**
Both mythology and history inspire my work. It is easy to forget how recently people truly believed in magic. For thousands of years, witches and fairies and giants and sprites and dragons were as real to people as the laws of physics are to us now. Mythology WAS history to these people. And although we have grown up in an age of science, the stories are still all around us, hardwired into our psyche by tales told to our grandparents and great-grandparents, and in the landscape we played in as children.
My research into history and mythology inspires my stories.

I will find out a fascinating fact, such as how people used to hang iron horseshoes outside their houses because they believed that magic was allergic to iron, and that it would frighten away the fairies, and I'll think, "Aha! That gives me an idea for an interesting plotline for *The Wizards of Once.*"

*You have spoken about including messages of tolerance and acceptance in your books. How do you communicate these themes to children?*

Kids are smart, ALL kids are smart, so I never dumb down. I ask very big questions in my books - what makes a good leader, is it ever acceptable to start a war, how should we be looking after the environment, why would someone have a difficult relationship with their parents... and I do this deliberately, because you don't have to talk down to children - you just have to make sure you don't bore them.

Tolerance and acceptance is a major theme in my work.

In *The Wizards of Once*, Wish and Xar meet in a Romeo-and-Juliet-like context of being two children from opposing tribes who are at war. They have been raised since birth to hate each other like poison. But through the course of the books they are forced to see things from each other's points of view, visit each other's Forts, and act together against a common enemy, the Witches.

Bullying and fitting in are major worries for children, and by making Wish the protagonist and hero in *The Wizards of Once*, and Hiccup the hero in *How To Train Your Dragon*, I am trying to convey the message that it is okay if you are a little different from those around you, you can still be a hero, you will find soul mates, and in the end the very qualities that make you different from others as a child may be the ones that make you most successful as an adult.

I have received so many letters and emails from children saying how my books have helped them through difficult times, when they were feeling bullied and isolated, and this is one of the most joyful things about being a writer, to feel that you have been helpful.

*What do you love most about writing for children?*

I love creating the books themselves, I love meeting the families who read the books together, and I love it, as I said above, when I hear that my books have been helpful to an individual kid.

But, more than that, I am passionate about encouraging every single child to read, create and imagine with the same delight that I did when I was a kid. I do a lot of events, and see about 12,000 children a year. While you have to be careful that you can still get the writing time in, I feel very strongly that I should use my role to enthuse as many children as possible.

*Illustration is a huge part of your work - why is it important to you?*

How do you get children - all children - to read for pleasure in an age where telly and film are beamed magically into children's heads without them having to do anything? The whole de-coding process of learning to read can mean that in a child's mind books come to be associated with something that is difficult or a "struggle", particularly if they have dyslexia or another learning difficulty.

The illustrations really help to overturn that impression. I make the storylines of my books pacy, and thrilling, and I break up the text with as many wild and whirling illustrations as I can, to invite the child in, and...
to reward them for sticking with the story.

I make the cover shiny and jewel-like, so that in the mind of the child they are "sweets", not "Brussel sprouts".

**What advice would you give to a parent who wants to encourage their child's creativity?**

Continue reading aloud to them, even when they can read for themselves, because children are often far more intelligent than their reading ability.

Get them a blank notebook - their own Magical Ideas Book - for writing, illustrations and research notes. Tell them not to worry about being neat or finishing anything. Nothing in the notebook should be corrected for spelling or grammar, because it's all about the ideas. Make creativity fun.

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