

# The BookBrunch interview: Frances Hardinge

Jasmin Kirkbride

**News - Interviews** Friday, 4th March 2016

---

*Frances Hardinge talks about her surprise at her Costa win, what it might mean for children's books, and how and why she writes*



Just when you think publishing's getting staid, it turns around and does something delightful to change your mind. The Costa Book of the Year to children's and YA author Frances Hardinge for her novel *The Lie Tree* was one of those moments.

## **Against the odds**

Hardinge is only the second children's author - after Philip Pullman - to win Book of the Year since the Costa (previously Whitbread) adopted this format in the mid-Eighties. "That's, of course, one of the reasons why I didn't think I'd get it," she says, with what is becoming known as trademark modesty.

"At first I just felt completely stunned, then I felt stunned, sleep-deprived, and as if somebody had attached me to a sort of media rollercoaster. Now, I'm working my way around to it sometimes actually sinking in. There's been a great deal of happiness throughout. On the occasions where it has sunk in, I have a tendency to giggle... I still can't really quite believe that this is actually happening!"

The choice has been a hot topic in the industry, with literary news outlets and commentators discussing what this means for the genre. "It's really good for children's and YA fiction," comments Hardinge, "because it does mean that some people are looking at them anew, and maybe even delving a bit and noticing exactly how much interesting and exciting stuff is out there.

"There do seem to be an increasing number of adults reading my books, which is lovely. As well as being children's/YA books, they're all basically genre fiction as well, and the genre fiction community is actually quite open-minded about children's/YA fantasy." Her 2014 novel, *Cuckoo's Song*, won the Robert Holdstock Award for Best Fantasy Novel.

## **The appeal of strong themes**



One of the reasons her books have been picked up by adults as well as children is undoubtedly Hardinge's ability to wrestle with strong themes. *The Lie Tree* focuses on a young girl called Faith unraveling the mystery behind the death of her Reverend father. Living in a strict Victorian milieu, she picks up his enthusiasm for botany and science, despite internal and external criticism that it isn't a suitable occupation for a girl. The feminist themes are apparent.

Hardinge's original idea was the Lie Tree itself. Once she slotted it into the context of the Victorian period, the story began to flow. "Because we are dealing with lies and facades - not just the lies we tell each other but the lies we tell ourselves, the lies we let other people tell us, and the untruths we cling to - the Victorian Period very much looked like the one to use.

"But then, looking at the fact that I would be writing about a teenage girl in the Victorian period and looking at interest in science, I couldn't see a way I could dodge gender - in fact. I couldn't see a way I *should* dodge gender. I could try to tiptoe around it, but that felt wrong, so in the end I gave up and took it head on."

The complex issues do not end there, because the Lie Tree resonates with the characters' religious ideas. "I started thinking about the tree in terms of how it would be perceived as something connected to the Book of Genesis, because obviously all my characters would have been brought up in a culture suffused with Biblical teachings. There's no way they weren't going to see it at least at some point in those terms, but also in terms of it as a botanical specimen, which then got me thinking about natural science and the context of untruths that people would be desperately clinging to."

The result is a powerful story, with universal appeal. Hardinge never condescends - to adults or to children. It's a trait she seems to have picked up from her own father, to whom *The Lie Tree* is dedicated.

"I'm glad to say my father is very much unlike the Reverend in the book! In that, unlike the Reverend, he is quiet, kind, and scrupulously honest. Yet he says stuff with this very quiet, thoughtful integrity. I always remember him giving me credit for intelligence, always trying to take things on and explain difficult concepts, things that were difficult intellectually or emotionally. Being taken seriously and being treated with respect in that fashion makes a difference to one."

### **Endless curiosity**

You can imagine Hardinge being a child of many questions. She developed an interest in the Gothic at a young age, and this features throughout her books. "It always has interested me, even when I was very young. One of the things I tend to say when people ask, 'Who are you writing for?' is, 'I'm writing for a younger version of me!' *The Lie Tree* is probably written for 14-year-old me, and 14-year-old me had developed an interest in the Gothic."

A voracious reader, and read to with equal enthusiasm by both her parents, Hardinge always knew writing would feature in her life. "When I was younger, I had ambitions in lots of different directions. I always wanted to be an author and an artist, I was very clear on that, but at different points I didn't see why I couldn't also be an astronaut, scientist, ballet dancer. When I was very young I also wanted to be a cat and learn how to fly - but let's brush over that!

"Recently, I've been going through a lot of my old papers and finding stories, some of which I remembered writing, and some of which I didn't. There's something I wrote when I was about six, which is about half a page long, and another poem I found - called *The Night Dragon* - doesn't even have joined up handwriting, so I was probably pretty young."



Hardinge was first published when her already-published friend and writing companion, author Rhiannon Lassiter, took the first few chapters of a draft novel and showed them to her editor. Within a week, Hardinge had a publishing contract. Even after publication, Hardinge still swears by writing groups. "I find them incredibly helpful, because actually self discipline is an incredibly hard thing for me. Having miniature deadlines is quite motivating."

She seems quite disciplined to me, trying to work on her books from nine to five during the weekday. "Most of my writing happens in my study, which sort of doubles as a store room. Right now, I'm sitting in my study looking at a lot of boxes, rolls of wrapping paper and things like that. And water pistols." Other features include a sith lightsaber, which she was apparently gifted after a duel with another children's author in a dimly lit bar in Chinatown.

There's a sense of fun about Hardinge that is quite infectious, and even extends to her research, which, she admits, is not always reading-based. "For example, in *A Face Like Glass*, the protagonist starts off as an apprentice cheese-maker, so I went on a one-day cheese-making course... Similarly, for *Gullstruck Island*, loads of volcanoes. I'd already got a bit hooked on volcano visits before I started writing, but I did go back and scrambled around a lot more. I have even claimed volcanoes against tax.

"I am still enthusiastically curious about everything. Now, I take it almost as an occupational duty to chase down everything I might find interesting, because you never know when you might be able to use it. Once, I was in Macclesfield and I found a loom museum. There was nobody there except me and this elderly couple and the person showing us around. And the elderly couple said, 'So, are you studying this for something? Why are you here?', and I said, 'I'm a children's author, I'm interested in everything!'"

**Source article: <https://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/article-detail/interested-in-everything>**