

Firing the imagination

Aleesah Darlison, author of the 'Unicorn Riders' series, has filled her new book with unicorns, fairies, griffins, dragons and goblins. She spoke to **Thuy On**.

You're well known for your 'Unicorn Riders' stories and now you've written a story about a phoenix. Did you have an active imagination as a child? Were you one of those children who had an imaginary friend (or a mythical creature as a 'pet')?

I've always had a keen interest in mythical creatures, especially unicorns and phoenixes. As a child, I used to read loads of fantasy stories and 'fact books', which probably did help me to have a very active imagination. I still try to tap into my imagination today. It comes in handy for my writing, that's for sure. My favourite mythical creatures when I was little were unicorns. I used to collect all types: glass, crystal, silver and ceramic unicorns plus soft toys. And yes, some of them did come to life! What could be more magical or special to a little girl than having her very own unicorn?

Why do you think children like reading about fantasy?

Fantasy stories offer adventure, hope, escapism and joy to young readers. It allows their dreams and wishes to come true even if it's only in the realms of their imagination. This escapism and firing of the imagination can have a wonderfully positive and empowering effect on children, especially if they're facing challenges in everyday life.

What was the last book you read and loved?

The Night Fairy (Laura Amy Schlitz, illus by Angela Barrett, Walker Books). It was sweet and funny and precocious. I read it to my six-year-old daughter who loves fairies. And unicorns!



Do you have any firm views about the bleak and gritty stories often presented for the YA market? It seems a large jump sometimes to move from fairy dust to themes focussing on depression, bullying and familial dysfunction for instance?

I think there's a place in the world for every story. Some 'hard line' stories can be quite confronting, it's true, but we need narratives of all types for all different people. That doesn't mean every author must write bleak tales or that every reader will want to read them. If a book doesn't resonate with you, you don't have to read it. There are, however, many people in the world (some children, some teenagers) who are dealing with tougher issues in life. Books that tell their story can help them deal with their own issues or help them heal from negative experiences they've been through.

How closely do you work with your illustrators? Do you offer them any ideas on how you'd like a story to be narrated with certain images or do you leave them to their own devices?

I never like to stifle illustrators, but an author must have input in the visuals of their book. Producing books really is a team effort. For the 'Unicorn Riders' series, which has many illustrations throughout, I created a map of the world of Avamay, which was artistically reworked by the illustrator, Jill Brailsford, and included at the front of each book. I also created physical descriptions for my main characters and drew them in colour. I should add here that I am a terrible artist, but it still gave me, and later the editor and illustrator, a snapshot of what the girls should look like. Because Avamay is a fantasy world, much of the scenery in the books is unusual or exotic, so I would often find photographs of something similar to what I intended and use them for inspiration in scene-setting as well as emailing them to the editor so she knew what I was trying to achieve visually. Throughout the editing process, I'm able to provide feedback on draft illustrations and have a final check before everything goes to print. **JUNIOR**

Ash Rover and the Keeper of the Phoenix is published by Walker Books in February.

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