



Authorgraph 232: Kiran Millwood Hargrave

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Created *Sep '18*

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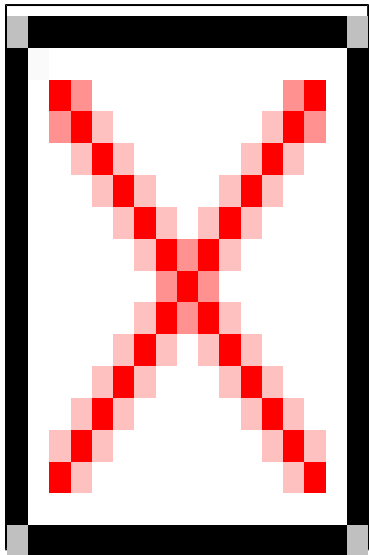
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Article Category:

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Kiran Millwood Hargrave interviewed by **Michelle Pauli**



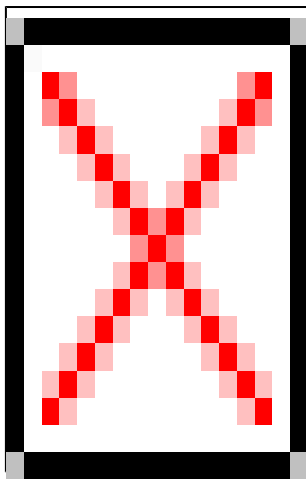
"I do like to be surprised. I know that, for me, if I planned, it would just squeeze the life out of twists like that," says Kiran Millwood Hargrave. She's talking about the great "aaaah!" moment towards the end of her latest novel, **The Way Past Winter**, but she could equally be highlighting the path her own life has taken. The 28-year-old may have achieved plaudits galore for her first two novels, **The Girl of Ink and Stars** and **The Island at the End of Everything**, with rights sales enabling her to pursue a career as a full-time novelist straight from university, but she is emphatic that she never intended to be a writer.

"It didn't occur to me," she says. "This is what's still so shocking, now that I can't imagine doing anything else. It just never occurred to me to write books, just like it didn't occur to me to write poetry until I was, it didn't occur to me to write a children's book until I was, didn't occur to me to write an adult book until I was," she marvels.

It's hard to believe, given the accomplishment of her captivating third novel, **The Way Past Winter**. It centres around a quest to reunite a family and return home – a thread that runs strongly through Millwood Hargrave's work and life – and a young heroine, Mila, who, she says, is the character most resembling herself that she has yet written.

"She loves her home, her life, she doesn't want things to change. And then something monumental happens that means she has to enact change herself," Millwood Hargrave explains. "It's Mila who must create the change and that's something she never thought she would want to do or be capable of doing. There is this real growth into her belief in herself but ultimately she is still a homebody and that is where she sees the end of her journey – returning home."

The book is set in a forest that is encased in an eternal winter. Snow lies heavy and Mila and her siblings, who are



effectively orphaned, are struggling to manage. When Mila's older brother disappears in the company of sinister men she must make the journey out of the forest and towards the sea, guided by a mysterious mage called Rune. Islands are another key theme for Millwood Hargrave (both her previous books are set on them) and **The Way Past Winter** contains perhaps the most magical example yet – Thule, a mystical, mythical island that is beyond imagining yet that Mila must imagine in order to find it and discover its terrible secret.

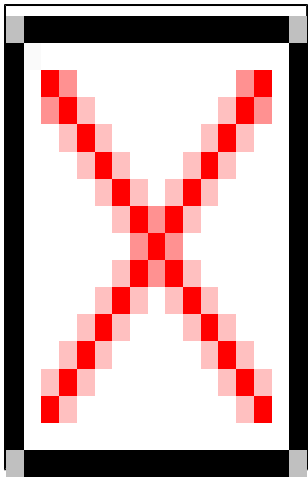
It's a tale that longs to be read aloud around a fire on a dark, wintry night and, indeed, was almost designed to be so. 'My mother is half Indian and grew up there and gave me a love of myths and oral traditions. I always say that my stories are best read out loud because the way I write them is I tell them to myself in my head and write them as I go. When I've finished my first draft I will make my husband read it to me. It's the best way to hear mistakes and the best way to be told a story,' asserts Millwood Hargrave.

This novel draws on Scandinavian and Slavic mythology and occupies a world out of time, moving from magical realism to fully fledged fantasy, which took Millwood Hargrave herself by surprise when she was writing. 'It's extraordinary but recognisable so the reader can feel like they are on solid ground then I enjoy the gradual ripping apart of that fabric beneath their feet, the safety net, and I think if you earn the trust of the reader you're allowed to do that,' she explains. It is the kind of story that, in less skilled hands, risks becoming bloated, billowing out of control. Instead it is restrained, eschewing the lure of subplots for a focus on the central journey and the strength of the characters.

A clue to this restraint might be found in Millwood Hargrave's background as a poet, where each individual word really does matter. Again, this path was not planned. She was always a reader rather than a writer and imagined she would stay that way. A degree in English Literature with drama and education from Cambridge didn't shake that belief and although careers in teaching or the law beckoned, neither felt quite right. Having got through her two final years at Cambridge in a state of crisis due to mental health challenges, it became necessary for her to take a year off afterwards, moving back to her family home and dealing with a crippling depression. Unexpectedly, poetry became a life raft. Her boyfriend – now husband – bought her the **TS Eliot Prize** longlist and 'suddenly there were these people using language in ways that I'd never thought you could use language and it excited me. It never occurred to me to write until I read those poems and wanted to do something with them,' says Millwood Hargrave.

She took a methodical approach to building up a collection, sending off hundreds of poems to magazines in the hope that one, then two, then more would be accepted and published.

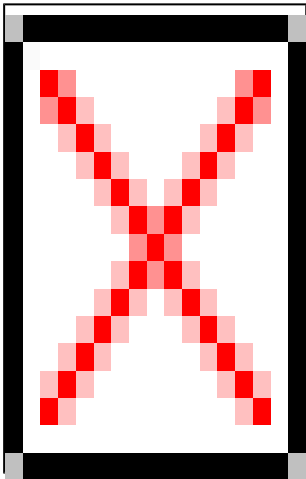
'Poetry was very much about saying you can do something, you can complete something and get better at something. These things are so often put down to talent but it's as much work and reworking. It very much became a habit, which was very motivating because, even if I spent all day in bed, if I'd written a poem I'd achieved something and that felt good,' she says.



It is a period that is clearly not easy for Millwood Hargrave to talk about but she is keen to be open now that she has recovered because "every time I even slightly mention it someone gets in touch and says that they really needed to hear that this can end" because when you're in depression it really does feel like there is no end. It's an illness and the only way to survive it is to talk about it and to ask for help.?"

In combination with intensive therapy her mental health improved and, as a result of her published poetry collections she applied for creative writing courses. She had a book deal with Chicken House by the end of her second year. Within two years of finishing she had published her spellbindingly beautiful debut [The Girl of Ink and Stars](#) [3], which went on to win the 2017 Waterstones children's books prize, followed by the haunting [The Island at the End of Everything](#) [4], which was shortlisted for the **Costa Book awards** and the **Blue Peter Awards**.

Millwood Hargrave's writing career may have been unplanned but, thankfully for her readers, she is now determined to



make it her life. Coming up are a YA novel next year, part of Orion's feminist Bellatrix series, another children's book in October and then her first adult novel, **The Mercies**, in 2020. However, she still can't quite believe how things have turned out: "I was so happy reading I felt no need to contribute my own stories because if I had to choose between writing and reading I'd always choose reading. It's strange to me still that I'm here" it's all so exciting!?"

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

[The Girl of Ink and Stars](#) [3], Chicken House, 978-1910002742, £6.99

[The Island at the End of Everything](#) [4], Chicken House, 978-1910002766, £6.99

The Way Past Winter, Chicken House, 978-1911077930, £10.99

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