



# Authorgraph 235: Julia Golding

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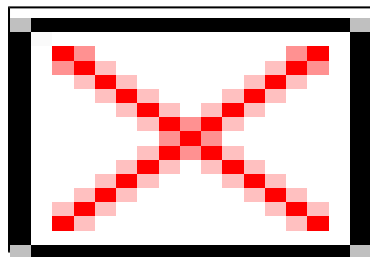
[235](#) [2]

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**Julia Golding** interviewed by **Imogen Russell Williams**

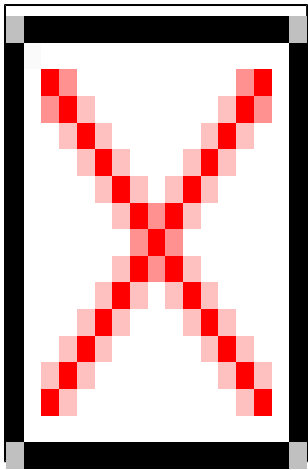


A buzzing bookshop café in Oxford feels like an appropriate place to discuss Julia Golding's erudite, intriguing new books: **The Curious Crime**, an alternate history for middle-grade readers, and **The Curious Science Quest**, a younger series of time-travel adventures focused on the history of science. Golding is best known for her **Cat Royal** books, set in eighteenth-century theatrical London (the first in the series, **The Diamond of Drury Lane**, won both the **Waterstones Children's Book Prize** and the **Nestle Children's Book Prize** in 2006). She has ranged far and wide as a writer, however, writing books under different names, for different ages and set in very different periods – dark teen thrillers as Joss Stirling, Elizabethan historical fiction as Eve Edwards, and mythological creatures, Arthurian legends, Victorian butlers, Vikings and pirates as Julia Golding. Is there a quintessential element that always appears in her work?

‘Perhaps a certain gentleness,’ she says, quoting an early review – as well as a willingness to see things from the villain's point of view. Golding is fond of her bad eggs, in fact, and likes to remind herself that ‘everyone is the hero of their own story’, providing her readers with nuanced, at least slightly sympathetic portraits of all her characters.

Her own career has had a fascinating range – after reading English at Cambridge, she joined the Foreign Office, and took up diplomatic work in Poland. Returning to Britain, she studied for a doctorate in Romantic literature at Oxford before joining Oxfam as a lobbyist, though she now writes full time. As a child, her favourite books included Elizabeth Goudge's ‘adorable fantasy’ **The Little White Horse** [3], and Frances Hodgson Burnett's **The Secret Garden** and **A Little Princess**; especially the latter, in which Sara Crewe ‘creates a world out of her imagination, to make her own reality bearable.’ She enjoyed **The Lord of the Rings**, too, for its vision of ‘British countryside writ large’, the everyday made sublime. The rich, resonant sense of these fully formed imaginary worlds is clear in her own work.

In beginning a new story, Golding admits, she also looks for ‘complete worlds’ that she can build. The vast museum in which



**The Curious Crime** is set in a prime example; a building both discrete and seemingly infinite, isolated by its island situation and fascinatingly rife with wandering wildlife and straying students. Part Gormenghast, part Hogwarts, part Holmesian mind palace, it's the ideal setting both for a murder mystery and for walking the reader gently through the history of science via its uncountable halls, exhibits and corridors.

Golding chose to set the story in an alternate Victorian era partly because she felt the science of the period was well illustrated by a museum (unlike, say, general relativity and quantum mechanics). It's also a period characterised by intense debates about women's education, and she wanted to ask: what if the debate went backwards? What if, when Darwin came up with his version of biological evolution, [some scientists] took it in an extreme way, and used it to justify existing biases in society? In **The Curious Crime**, which she describes as her own 'thought experiment', societal prejudice against women and people of different ethnicities has been justified by a dubious Darwinism taken to anti-religious extremes. To suggest belief in a creator of any kind is now anathema; to work as a mason, if you're female, a monstrous transgression. In the first few pages, Golding's heroine, Maria 'Ree' Altamira, does both. Defiant, tenacious, an accomplished stonemason with an excellent head for heights and an adored, indulged dodo companion, Ree is an instantly engaging protagonist. How much does Golding have in common with her heroine?

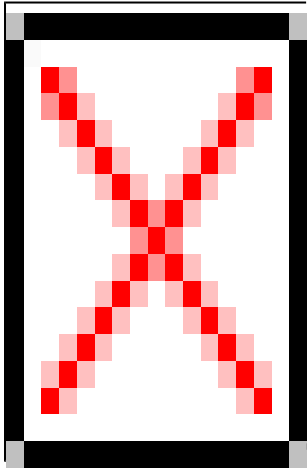
'Well, I like doing things with my hands, but I haven't actually had a go at stonemasonry. And I'm not bad at heights, but I probably wouldn't offer to be a roofer in another life?' The relationship between Ree and her dodo, Philoponus, however, is based on the bond between Golding and her cockapoo. (Philoponus' name is a nod to the forgotten scientist who ran Galileo's famous 'falling bodies' experiment, centuries before the Leaning Tower of Pisa was even built; Ree's full name, meanwhile, is borrowed from Altamira, a site in Northern Spain where early cave drawings were discovered. 'It was actually a little girl who was there with her father; she was really small, about seven or eight, and she crawled through a hole that he couldn't get through, and came back and said: 'Papa, there are oxen on the walls.'')

Golding allows Phil the dodo and other extraordinary creatures – a Tasmanian wolf, a Javan tiger, a python, a macaque – to roam throughout the museum partly just for the fun of it. But, also, there is a serious point to be made there about extinction – I wanted to say these are gone, we've lost these creatures, and to remind the reader of their amazingness. All of the main animals, apart from the macaque, are extinct. As menageries were part of the scientific way of teaching, giving the museum dedicated zoological gardens makes historical sense – but in this alternate Victorian landscape, Golding is also able to put an Aboriginal character, Mr Billibellary, in charge (he is so devoted to his creatures' freedom that he is satirically described as 'a let-looser', rather than a keeper.)

The cast of characters is diverse throughout – the book's other protagonist, Henri Volp, for instance, is an Algerian scholar, pioneering the forensic science of fingerprints – and the place itself remains unnamed. 'I wanted to make clear that science doesn't just belong to the Western tradition – and I wanted someone to be reading the book in America or France and to be thinking it could be happening in their country. I wanted that feeling of a little city-state, that could be anywhere, so I deliberately went for quite an international flavour, making it feel it didn't belong to any particular history of any particular country, but was actually the history of science.'

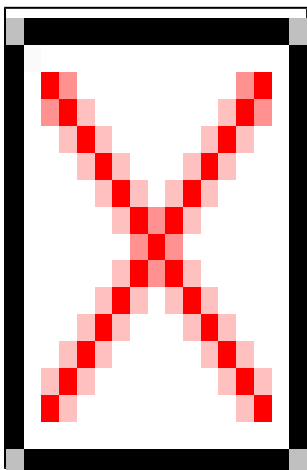
Ill-feeling runs high within the closed world of the museum, however, with phrenologists defending dubious observations, students competing for kudos and resources, and despised maids, denied formal education, picking up furtive scraps of information. But when a murderer strikes, Henri the scholar and Ree, stonemason turned skivvy, must

pool their skills and knowledge to solve the mystery ? discovering more about the museum?s secrets than they could ever have imagined in the process. Hidden renegades, the complex balance of faith and science, the necessity of the scientific method and the dangers of attachment to debunked theories all run through this thought-provoking, quick paced crime-and-creatures caper, enticing its readers to explore the museum island in their own minds.



**The Curious Science Quests** series, meanwhile, came about very differently. ?Normally, when I write a book, I just think of an idea and then get on with it.? This time, however, Golding was asked to adapt **The Penultimate Curiosity**, a book for adults dealing with enquiry, science and philosophy, by Andrew Briggs, professor of nanomaterials, and artist and poet Roger Wagner, both of whom are friends of Golding?s. ?They said, could you turn this into a book for kids? And I said I can?t do one book ? there?s too much here. So I suggested slicing it up into six parts, and then I came up with the idea of how to do it ? with time travel.? The series? protagonists are Harriet, a tortoise collected by Charles Darwin and brought home to England in his suitcase, and Milton, a cat belonging to Erwin Schrödinger, a pleasingly unlikely duo who travel through time to witness moments of significant scientific discovery. Impressive figures have provided input: ?When I first started working on it, and I did a sample text to show ? some pages about the possibility of time-travel ? I sent them off to Andrew, thinking he was going to check it. But no - about two weeks later, he said ?I?ve showed what you wrote to the Astronomer Royal, Lord Rees, and he?s given you this feedback.? And then a week later I got another email, saying ?I was at a conference in Cambridge, and I showed what you?d done to Stephen Hawking, and here?s *his* feedback! So I got a short paragraph of feedback about the paradoxes of time travel from Stephen Hawking - and I thought, well, that?s it, my career has peaked!?

The series is humorous, light-touch and highly illustrated, with cartoon-style images by Brett Hudson and try-at home



experiments interspersed. It has some weighty points to make, too: ?There?s a bit in the last book about how society needs to engage with science, because science is taking big decisions which affect all of us. We can destroy the world now, for instance. You can?t just disengage from science if you don?t understand it. As well as the fun and games and time travel, it has that running underneath.? One of Golding?s major contributions was to put in women wherever possible, and to try and avoid the ?history of dead white guys - which is a struggle. It *is* largely a history of dead white guys, because they?re the ones who got recorded.? Nevertheless, she explains, ?the word ?scientist? itself was coined by Mr Whewell in 1833, in order to include Mary Somerville??Scientist? is a neutral word, and has been all the way through, since the beginning.?

**Imogen Russell Williams** is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children?s literature and YA.

**The Curious Crime**, Lion, 978-0745977874, £6.99 pbk

**The Curious Science Quest: Cave Discovery**, Lion, 978-0745977447, £6.99 pbk

**The Curious Science Quest: Greek Adventure**, Lion, 978-0745977454, £6.99 pbk

**The Curious Science Quest: Rocky Road to Galileo**, Lion, 978-0745977522, £6.99 pbk

**The Diamond of Drury Lane**, Egmont, 978-1405285308, £6.99 pbk

Page Number:

8

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