



AN INTERVIEW WITH EMMA CARROLL

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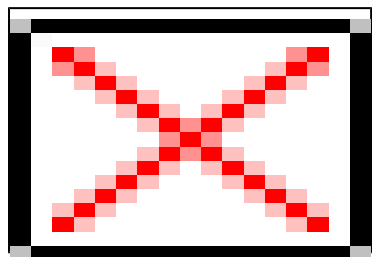
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A girl born lucky, a terrifying tsunami, and a terrifying witch-hunt

Emma Carroll is the award-winning author of [Frost Hollow Hall](#) [3], [The Girl Who Walked on Air](#) [4], [Letters to the Lighthouse](#), and many others. Her latest book, [The Somerset Tsunami](#) [5], is set in the seventeenth century, and follows bold, daring Fortune, sent away by her mother when her exploits bring her to the attention of witchfinders. Disguised as a boy and working as a servant, Fortune witnesses and survives a fearsome tsunami ? but her problems are far from over. As the witchfinders search for human scapegoats, will Fortune?s mysterious charmed birthright keep her from harm? **Imogen Russell Williams** put the questions to Emma for **Books for Keeps**.



Your books often walk the line between the mundane and the uncanny, and *The Somerset Tsunami* is no exception, featuring a girl born lucky, a terrifying tsunami, and an even more terrifying witch-hunt. What prompted you to weave those elements together?

The tsunami story ? this idea that there might have been a tsunami in England, or the British Isles ? was really intriguing for me. It only happened about twenty miles away from where I live, so it was quite a local story; that was the starting point. But I didn?t want to just write a survival story ? I wanted to have some other, more complex layer of narrative weaving through it, so I thought ?What else was going on around the early seventeenth century? What other malign forces might be at work?? Then I came across the witch-fever that was striking Europe, and the more I read about it, the more I discovered that a lot of witch-hunters were looking for odd and unusual things that had happened. Because they didn?t understand geography or geology, they decided: ?We?re going to blame someone we can punish for it? ? ?blame it on magic.?

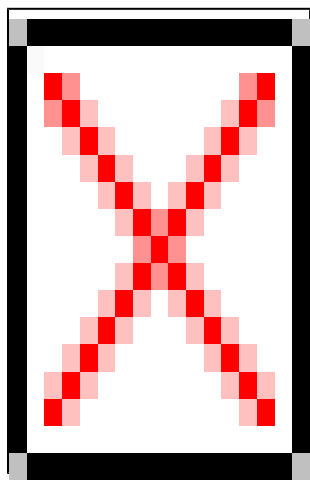
What resonances are there between the climate crisis happening now and the flooding of 1607?

Somerset has suffered some terrible flooding in recent years ? let alone the rest of the world, and places like Bangladesh. Though tsunamis aren?t necessarily related to climate change, these kinds of catastrophic events are ? and the idea of people in crisis, having their homes destroyed, their livelihoods washed away, is something that?s very pertinent ? as is the idea that somehow, instead of addressing the issue itself, we blame somebody, or attack somebody for it. (I?m

thinking in particular of how a lot of our more right-wing politicians, or people who are less convinced by climate change, react to young Greta [Thunberg].) With historical fiction, my angle is always let's have a really good story, first and foremost, but let's also look at bits of history that are relevant or have echoes of the modern day, so that it doesn't feel too distant.

Your heroine, Fortune, comes from a hamlet populated almost entirely by women ? which makes them a prime target for witch hunters. Was that something that actually happened?

[Laughs] No, that's completely made up! But when you start to look at who were the targets for witch-hunters, it was women who were either old, maybe dementing or ill; when you read accounts of people who are being interrogated as witches, it often sounds a lot like psychosis. And it was also people who were somehow a threat; and a woman who was capable and determined and had a talent didn't fit in with the seventeenth century idea of how women should behave. So the idea [in **The Somerset Tsunami**] that the women are quite able to survive without men, and that they own their own land, makes them very unusual ? and the fact that men are interested in owning their land makes them a target.



What else might expose women or girls to suspicion of witchcraft?

With Fortune, it's her appearance, because, again, she doesn't fit in; she's not particularly feminine, or particularly interested in domestic tasks ? she prefers trousers and doing 'boyish' stuff. When the witch-hunt starts at the beginning of the book, the first thing her mother does is try to make her wear a dress and go to church ? and then, when she realises that isn't going to work, she says 'Well, let's get you out of here, then, because you're going to be the next one [the witch-hunters take].'

Your descriptions of the pause before the tsunami strikes, of the way in which the sea just goes away, are fantastically eerie. What kind of research did you do?

I watched lots of film of tsunamis, and read lots of accounts. There're two major tsunamis in recent history, the one on Boxing Day in 2004 and the one that hit Japan [in 2011] ? and there's footage of both of those which is quite incredible. Although on my book's cover there's a beautiful Hokusai-esque wave, actually when you see a proper tsunami it's not really a wave, it's more of a kind of surge of water ? so it's dramatic, but not in the same way. It's not like watching Hawaiian surfers on those enormous waves; it's very different. And for me, the idea of the sea disappearing for half an hour or forty-five minutes before it comes back in again ? I just thought it would be so *odd* to see. If it happened in the seventeenth century and you've already got this toxic kind of mix of suspicion and witchcraft and people talking about magic ? it just would be the most bizarre and terrifying thing to witness. I loved writing that bit.

And in the aftermath ? were people really looking to find a supernatural cause, with human agents to blame?

There are written accounts [of the Somerset Tsunami] which are still available to read, and people were calling it a punishment from God, using that kind of religious language; but the idea of turning it into the focus of a witch hunt was mine, based on what was happening elsewhere in the British Isles at that time. I also came to it from reading accounts of

extreme weather elsewhere, in Germany and other places in Europe ? and in those countries there were people were blaming it on magic and women trying to control the weather. I got the idea from that.

Susannah, an aristocratic girl who becomes Fortune?s unlikely friend, is known for her embroidered crewel work ? which has an uncanny ability to predict the future. Where did the idea of that come from?

When I start writing a book, I often make a Pinterest board of all the sort of things that I want to include in the world; so I looked at seventeenth-century houses, fashion, domestic interiors, and I came across these images of crewel work, and I thought ? how am I going to get that into a story? Because my readers aren?t going to be particularly interested in: ?Ooh, riveting, she?s going to sit down and have a sew.? So I thought it would be interesting if something *happened* when Susannah sewed. And my mind is always working towards the spooky encounter, because that?s just how I was as a child ? ?Ooh, let?s go and have a look in that room where no one goes? ? tapping into that sense of the slightly unnerving and slightly uncanny. The research took me so far, and then my twelve-year-old self kicked in ? as it always does!

Was there really such a person as Maira, the brave brown-skinned captain of The Songbird, who refuses to carry slaves to work on sugar plantations ? and if not, who or what inspired her?

No, there wasn?t a Maira, but she?s inspired by women standing up to tyranny and horrible men, basically. I wanted the story to have strong women all the way through, and for women to prove to be the ones who get it done, and for the men not to be particularly pleasant ? though the younger men are, so there?s a promise of betterness coming along. Maira is the link to the world beyond Somerset; she?s where Fortune might end up going; she also represents the person that Fortune would quite like to be, because she?s quite gender neutral, she?s very capable and brave, and has wide horizons (and Fortune has a bit of a crush on her, too!) In terms of the narrative, she offers Fortune a way out.

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

[The Somerset Tsunami](#) [5] is published by Faber and Faber 978-0571332816 £6.99pbk.

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