



AN INTERVIEW WITH BRANFORD BOASE AWARD WINNER LIZ HYDER

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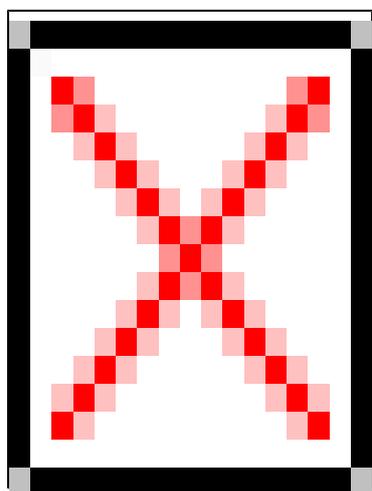
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An interview with the winner of the 2020 **Branford Boase Award**.

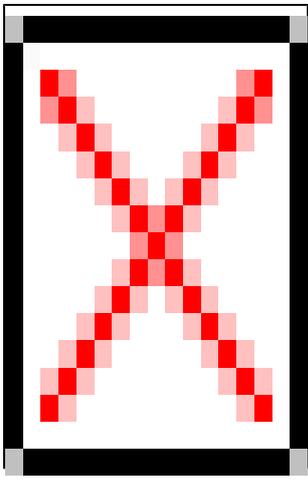


Liz Hyder has just been named winner of the **2020 Branford Boase Award** for her novel **Bearmouth** (Pushkin Press). The book tells the story of Newt Coombes who, since the age of four, has worked in the labyrinthine coalmine of the title, ruthlessly exploited in appalling conditions and a virtual prisoner for life. The **Branford Boase Award** is for author and editor and is shared with Hyder's editor Sarah Odedina. The judges described the book as original and unforgettable, while Julia Eccleshare, founder of the award, described it as a hugely brave and impressive piece of writing.

Julia Eccleshare put questions to Liz Hyder for Books for Keeps.

The world of Bearmouth is a really visceral one ? what was the inspiration?

The original inspiration was a trip down the Llanfair Slate Caverns, just south of Harlech in North Wales. It's incredibly atmospheric, dripping walls, green moss, abandoned carts and equipment rusting away. There's a 'figure' in the rocks that the workers used to doff their caps to at the end of their shifts, which inspired the idea of the Mayker, and the young boys used to have their right nostril slit on their first day in the mine, just like Newt and the boys in Bearmouth do. It's a powerful place to visit and it made me think of exploitation, how it's not really gone away but has instead been 'rebranded' as opportunity. I thought it would be a fantastic place to set a story and I wondered if I could set a page-turner down there that also had elements of a fable.



It feels as though it was written in a headlong stream ? how complete was your vision for the book when you started it?

I knew the feeling I wanted to create in the book, the sense of claustrophobia, of danger and of light at the end of the tunnel and I knew too that my characters would effectively be trapped in the mine, living as well as working down there. I wrote the Mayker's Prayer and the first 1,000 words or so in a frenzy and then stopped. I realised that in order to make that world feel genuine, I needed to go away and do a lot more research. I spent probably a year or so on research before plotting out the book. By the time I came to the actual writing of it, the vision was very clear, so much so that I wrote it in four weeks. It was a sort of binge writing really, I couldn't get the words on the page fast enough.

It's a book about ?revolushun? and is actually a very political book. Was that your intention from the beginning? Do you think it's important to address these kind of issues for children?

Absolutely! I think the young generation now are much more engaged in political issues and world events than I ever was at that age. I look at teenagers like Greta Thunberg and Dara McAnulty, young activists like Joshua Wong and Vanessa Nakate, and am in awe of their commitment and determination. When you talk to younger people about the environment, about political issues, they're very well informed. I want people who read the book to feel empowered ? one person really can make a difference.

Did you have a model for Newt?

Not particularly, Newt sort of sprang into my head. The voice is inspired by a mix of dialects, Shropshire, London, Lake District and with elements of things like Blake and Shakespeare. Some of that distinctive voice came out of the real-life accounts of children working down the mines in early Victorian times. It's heartbreaking to read. I did find an emaciated newt in a pile of rubble in the garden before I wrote the book though, and I think that's where the name came from - although I'd forgotten that there's a character with the same name in *Aliens* too.

You've said that *Bearmouth*

was the seventh book you've written, though of course the first to be taken on for publication ? how did you persevere?

I think either you write or you don't. It's an impulse with me, I feel the need to create and write stories and have done so ever since I could hold a pencil. I tried out lots of other forms of writing over the years, poems, plays, short films and so on before trying my hand at books but novels have always been where my heart lies. I don't regret anything that I've written because all of it has been useful in honing my storytelling. I think the 'overnight success' idea is very often a myth. There are a handful of amazing writers who pop up fully formed and really young, people like Zadie Smith and Alice Oseman, but for most of us it's more a case of years of work beforehand. So to other budding writers I'd say, keep going! Don't give up!

Can you tell us something about what you're working on now, or what your next book will be?

My next book is a book for grown-ups. I'll be able to reveal a bit more about it later this year, but it's sort of historical fiction with a twist. I've started work on another YA book too but it's very early days. I thought it would be a book for eight-12 year olds with a John Masefield vibe, but instead it's very much for YA readers and has more of a John Wyndham, disturbing vibe! It's thrown my plans up into disarray because it's not what I was expecting to write ? so it might be a while yet on that one...

Bearmouth is published by Pushkin Press, 978-1782692430, £7.99 pbk.

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