



Fairytale Adventures

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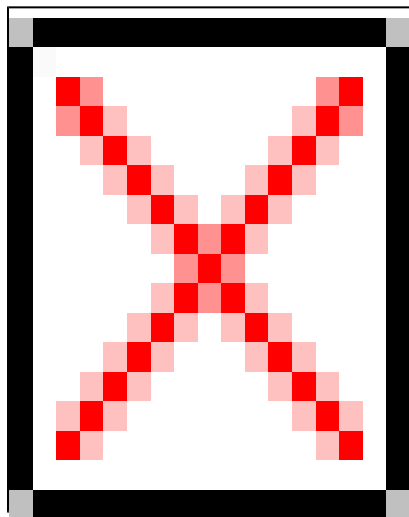
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Michelle Pauli interviews Ben Miller about his new book.

Michelle Pauli interviews **Ben Miller** about his new book, **The Day I Fell into a Fairytale**.



When the actor, director and comedian Ben Miller landed a two-book deal for **The Night I Met Father Christmas** and **The Boy Who Made the World Disappear**, which feature his two oldest sons as the main characters, he was left with a problem. What about his daughter, Lana?

?Awkward!? he laughs down the phone from Antwerp, on a day off from filming a new detective series for ITV. Fortunately for family harmony, Miller was commissioned to write another book ? in fact, three more ? after the first two were commercial and critical successes.

While it might be unusual for authors to involve their children so directly, Miller claims a solid pedigree.

?I always loved **The Princess Bride** and reading that William Goldman wrote it for his daughters, I thought, ?Oh, that's a fantastic idea,? because I could ask my kids what sort of story they would like to be in,? explains Miller. ?Famously, one of his daughters said, ?I want a story about a princess,? and the other said, ?I want a story about a bride,? so he wrote **The Princess Bride**. And I thought, ?Well, I could do that with my kids???

The result third time round is **The Day I Fell into a Fairytale**, in which Lana discovers a portal to the world of fairy tales in the pick n mix sweets counter of a magical ? yet strangely also Aldi-like ? supermarket, that emerges mysteriously out of a molehill-sized mound in the village. Called Grimm?s, it?s the starting point for an adventure that

melds a delicious blend of 'dangerous' fairy tales, revives the bond between brother and sister and celebrates the power of stories.

Miller knew Lana's book must be a portal story because of his daughter's love of Alice in Wonderland, but he reached back to his own childhood for the central theme of fairy tales, where he subverts some of the 'original' Grimm stories in ways that may surprise children more used to Disney's sugar-coated retellings, and draws on Bruno Bettelheim's classic analysis of fairy tales, **The Uses of Enchantment**.

'The crucial thing about a fairy tale is everything is so much larger than life so children know it's not real, and are, therefore, able to deal with things in a fairy tale that they couldn't deal with in a realistic story,' he says. 'They tap into something very deep within us.'

With English teachers as parents, Miller read a lot as a child – and certainly a lot of fairy tales.

'I loved fairy tales, my parents loved fairy tales, we read a lot of myths and legends and fairy tales, including some really, really weird Hungarian ones,' he recalls, laughing as he remembers a particular tale in which a horseman on a mission travels into the underworld and meets a terrifying creature who will let him go no further. 'To pass it, he takes his sword, lops off his own hand, and throws it to this monster. And when the monster's busy eating his hand, he just trots past on his horse. That's definitely been welded into my mind ever since?'

It's not just fairy tales, though. Miller is genuinely passionate and knowledgeable about a wide range of children's literature. He credits the mid-20th century classics he absorbed as a child as influences on his style today.

'There is a kind of Enid Blyton-y sound to the voice, sometimes,' he acknowledges. 'I do love those stories, that golden age of children's storytelling. They were old books even when I read them as a kid. Enid Blyton was out-of-date when I read it, **Swallows and Amazons** was ancient history. But they've certainly influenced me.'

But he also raves about contemporary writers, from Michael Morpurgo and Michael Rosen to Abi Elphinstone. And we share an emotional moment over the sheer perfection that is Julia Donaldson's **Paper Dolls**, which he describes as 'probably the most beautiful children's book I have ever read. It'll express something for you you've never been able to express for yourself, and yet which runs so deep. It's absolutely extraordinary.'

Unexpectedly, like so many things in 2020, **The Day I Fell into a Fairytale** was written in Morocco during lockdown, when a 10-day family holiday turned into a three and a half month stay after the borders closed. The ambiance fed into the story, from feelings of wanting to escape to a crucial plot twist: 'It gave me the idea for the ending, funnily enough, which ended up being Scheherazade's story, and I think being in the land of the **One Thousand and One Nights** was part of it.'

The stories within stories in Miller's magical tale weave together to, ultimately, create a message of empowerment, as Lana relies on her own storytelling powers to save herself and her brother from a very sticky situation. That, for Miller, is his underlying message for children who read **The Day I Fell into a Fairytale** – and one that's possibly never been so important to instil as now.

'I want them to feel like it doesn't matter what they come up against: when they rely on their own wit and judgment, they will prevail. That's the story of all fairy tales: the ultimate power is the stories themselves. It's all about reassuring children: you will do more than just survive the other world, you will prevail and then thrive,' says Miller. 'I'm immensely optimistic about our future, and our children's future. I think it's important to be optimistic. It's important to recognise that there ain't nothing we can't fix.'

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

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