



BfK Profile: Kevin Crossley-Holland

Article Author:

[Colin Mills](#) [1]

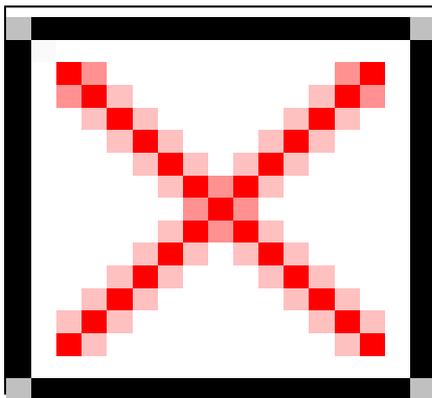
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Colin Mills discusses Kevin Crossley-Holland's sequel to his 'Arthur' trilogy, **Gatty's Tale**.



Gatty is a supporting character in Kevin Crossley-Holland's award winning 'Arthur' trilogy of books, set in the Marches (located in a recent interview as the 'magical borderlands between England and Wales?'). She is twelve when we meet her in the first volume, **The Seeing Stone**: unworldly, but with a passion to explore life beyond her village. 'Where is Jerusalem anyhow?' she asks Arthur? 'Instead of Ludlow Fair, let's go to Jerusalem.' Gatty weaves in and out of the trilogy. Unstintingly loyal to the hero of the stories, she has a feistiness that's still too rare in girl characters.

For two terms, I have been reading the trilogy with Year 5 and 6 children (9-11 year-olds), as part of the Teme Valley Project to explore the stories in their setting (still known, in my neck of the woods, as The Marches). Lots of children (boys *and* girls!) wanted to know 'What happened to Gatty?' Kevin Crossley-Holland says, 'The fact that my readers wanted to know more of her fired my *own* curiosity!'

Gatty centre stage

Whereas Arthur has a great deal of the action in the trilogy, Gatty is centre stage in the new book. Transported from her village as a travelling companion to a grand lady, she is selected as one of a motley group on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She gets to see Jerusalem! She obviously has a special place in her creator's heart! He talks about her as 'beloved Gatty; eager, spirited and resilient, the salt of the earth?.'

Crossley-Holland is candid about his pride in this novel. A published writer, translator and adaptor for over 40 years, **Gatty's Tale** is, *he* thinks, his first fully original book: 'an out and out blazing historical novel? not drawing heavily on historical fact or Arthurian legend?. He's excited at having given his young readers what he calls 'a 'transformation? novel, about someone who made a journey in the Middle Ages, and who discovers there is far more richness in life; and discovers within herself the ability to grow?.'

The journey gives Gatty's creator an opportunity to depict a breathtakingly vivid journey and its landscapes. Chapters are wonderfully crafted, short and accessible as in the trilogy. Passages on Gatty's experiences in London ('Under the sky's leaden lid, all London's foul odours swarmed and stewed around them?'), Venice and Jerusalem are startling in

their beauty and musicality.

Though the new novel can be read and enjoyed in its own right, I would strongly recommend reading the trilogy first ? as would its many admirers I know from 9-year-olds upwards. One of the special joys is the combination of broad-ranging historical and geographical grandeur ? in the second and third books, we are transported with Arthur to the Crusades ? with the fine detail of everyday life. The writer Anne Fine called the depiction of ?Caldicot? (Stokesay, for literary sightseers!) ?a world so real you can feel its morning frost bite at your throat?. That sense of the community?s ?felt life? is strong in **Gatty?s Tale**. It?s a feature of his writing in which Crossley-Holland takes special pride: ?It is important for me to do a great deal of research and to really tell it ?like it was?.

Contemporary issues

Gatty?s discoveries about the wider world have a sharp contemporary tang for her young readers, and for their teachers. One is about storytelling?s potential in changing our lives. Early in her journey, Gatty asks her mistress ?Is our pilgrimage a kind of story?? Through the many people she meets, and the situations she comes up against, she makes sense of the world by joining together what she calls ?bits and pieces of all kinds of other stories?.

Gatty learns a vital lesson that the novel?s readers may need now, more than ever. She has to reconcile the ?common sense? stereotypes about people from other cultures (remember, this was the 12th century) with the peace-loving and humane people she encounters on her journey. She connects with new people, places and ideas, and has to learn to live with people with other belief systems. As Crossley-Holland says: ?Once she leaves the rhythm of her predictable days, she has to interpret and re-interpret the things she has been told.?

One of the ?Saracens?, a learned Astronomer, Osman, who befriends Gatty, tells her towards the end of the tale, ?I believe more unites us than separates us.? Can you think of any more timely things for a children?s book to be helping the young, and us, to understand in 2006?

Gatty?s Tale by Kevin Crossley-Holland (1 84255 273 2, £12.99 hbk) is published by Orion as is the ?Arthur? trilogy:

The Seeing Stone, 2001, 1 85881 397 2, £10.99 hbk, 0 75284 429 6, £5.99 pbk

At the Crossing Places, 2002, 1 84255 200 7, £5.99 pbk

King of the Middle March, 2004, 1 84255 060 8, £12.99 hbk, 1 84255 155 8, £5.99 pbk

Audio CDs or tapes are also available.

Details of the Teme Valley Project ?*Stories from the Stones*? are available from www.temevalley.org.uk [3]

www.kevincrossley-holland.com [4] has useful notes on background and sources of the ?Arthur? trilogy and **Gatty?s Tale**.

Colin Mills is Senior Lecturer at the University of Worcester, where he teaches initial teacher education and Masters courses in Children's Literature and Literacy. He is the editor, with Margaret Meek, of **Language and Literacy in the Primary School**.

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