



# Authorgraph 212: Frances Hardinge

Article Author:

[Philip Womack](#) [1]

[212](#) [2]

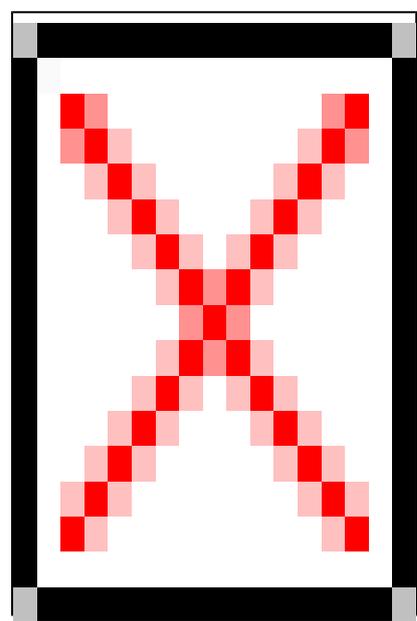
Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

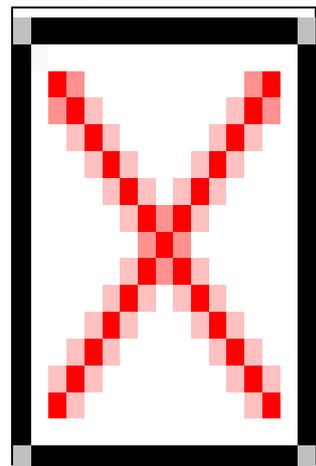
**Frances Hardinge** interviewed by **Philip Womack**

Interview by Philip Womack



In a liminal place near a train station, in a gastro-pub where you can order duck hearts on toast, I pour tea for the novelist Frances Hardinge. We had met earlier under the clock at Waterloo ? ?in time-honoured fashion,? as she punningly remarked ? and were now settling into a shady corner, whilst my lurcher puppy chewed on a bone under the table.

Hardinge is an author whose work gloriously defies convention and categories ? much like her heroines. From her



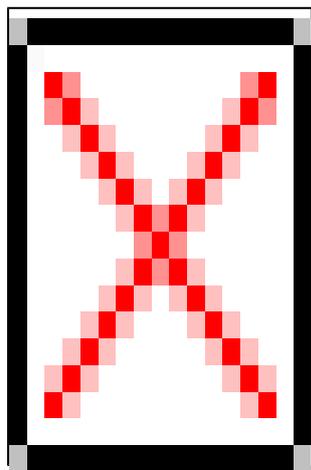
debut, [Fly By Night](#) [3], to her most recent work, **The Lie Tree**, her books have treated difficult subjects through the usage of highly distinctive language, and through rebellious, awkward protagonists who

bristle and stretch against the worlds into which they are shoehorned. Last year's [Cuckoo Song](#) [4], for example, saw an architect's daughter up against fairies in an askew 1920s Britain complete with motorbike-riding suffragettes. 2015's **The Lie Tree** is set in an alternative Victorian world, and follows Faith, the young daughter of a discredited natural scientist, as she discovers a tree which is fed by lies – a typically Hardinge-ian conception, in which the world is not quite as we know it.

In person, Hardinge exudes amiability, a black hat perched on top of a long, kindly face. As I turn on my dictaphone, she remarks, self-deprecatingly: "If it doesn't record and you can think of something more intelligent and eloquent than I actually said, feel free to put that instead, that's fine."

Since folklore is such an important strand in her work, I ask her how she came to it: "I was always fascinated by the fantastic and the macabre. I blame this partly on the fact that I spent part of my childhood living in a really weird grey gothic implausible house [in Penshurst, Kent] up on a hilltop, which actually did make the proper moaning wuthering sound when the wind blew. My imagination never stood a chance. A fascination with the macabre was pretty much inevitable." Her life there was full of imagination: intricate games she played with her little sister, to whom she also told stories. She wrote, always: "I think pretty much from the point when I could hold a pencil I was scribbling something."

Roald Dahl was the first author to take her "by storm ... because of the rule breaking. **James and the Giant Peach** – I started reading it, very young, and read this lovely description of this happy little boy with a happy little family in a happy house by the sea, and then his parents getting killed by a runaway rhinoceros, and there was this lovely feeling of gearshift, and a sense that this is not going to be the same kind of book. It was just very liberating." She reels off a list of classics, including Susan Cooper and John Masefield, that her parents read to her, all of which have left their mark on her writing mind. But it is that sense of bending the limits which is most pertinent to Hardinge's body of work.

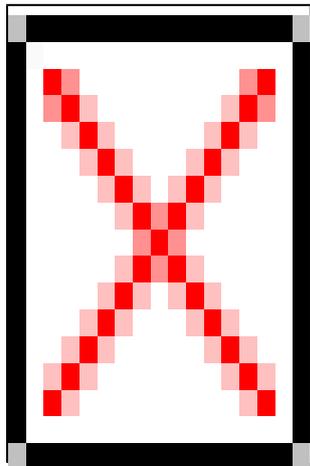


Hardinge's fiction deftly interweaves the fantastical and the real. How did she deal with the concept of evolution, which plays a big part in **The Lie Tree**? "At first I was considering playing it completely straight – having some fantasy world and actually not having the degree of ambiguity that you do end up having with this tree. I started thinking about it in a different way: where could I set it? What is the time when the Lie Tree would be particularly powerful? When there will be people who are desperately emotionally invested in being deceived, in clinging to something that is not true? When is there going to be a time when subterfuge is going to be natural or more easy or more socially condemned? And then I started thinking about a time where botany itself and associated natural science is – has elements of controversy. It just fitted much better. What had begun as quite a simple concept, but one I could definitely build an adventure off, became something with a lot more complexity or resonances."

Family relationships are often at the core of her novels. "They are one of the mechanisms by which we understand ourselves," she says. "And certainly for the age group I'm writing for, that is quite a transitional period, it is a point where it's not Rupert Bear any more. It's not "Rupert leaves happy safe little home, goes off has an adventure, comes back, happy safe home is there, and so is his tea? .... Middle grade – and particularly middle grade – (if these definitions even really work, and I'm not convinced they do), you're moving away from that. You can't quite come back like that because even if happy home hasn't changed, you have. Your dynamic has changed – It does become more natural to actually question and challenge."

There is always a tension, in her books, between the rational and the mysterious. 'In many respects I have a similar sort of conflict,' she says, sipping her tea. 'I have always found the fantastical, the folkloric, the magical, the supernatural, etc, extremely attractive and fascinating, though I am also extremely intrigued by people's reasons for believing, and the symbolism behind them, and social uses of different forms of folklore.'

The story of the Changeling is the source for **Cuckoo Song**. What is the social use for that, I wonder? 'Ooh that's



quite nasty ... I was expecting to find the folktales fairly chilling. What I hadn't expected was that I felt far more chilled by the anti-changeling strategies ' Because good grief, they're horrible! You have all these babies being thrown in the fire, or put on spades and held over the fire, or thrown into running water, or left on dung heaps to scream and ignored until ' it's either to force the changeling to go or to force the fairy parents to reclaim it ' And sometimes they are switched back and sometimes they're not, but they do get rid of the changeling. And there's this little chilling silence after that. And the horrible thing is there is every evidence that this happened.'

It doesn't bear thinking about. 'If you look at some of the ways that some of the changelings are described,' she continues, 'it tallies with descriptions of mental and physical disabilities. And if you have a family that's on the breadline ' and then you have one person who is not only not pulling their weight, but has to be supervised all the time ... What is noticeable is that an awful lot of the changeling tales describe the changeling as voraciously hungry. So it looks like they were a mechanism to psychologically justify infanticide. The families don't just act ' they get somebody else from outside saying, you've got a changeling, this is what you need to do. Shared responsibility. Again it's a displacement of blame, and it's a way that the family can psychologically cope with it and a way that the community can cope with it and continue to accept the family. Pretty chilling stuff!'

This darkness is prevalent in her work: 'I am always fascinated and horrified by people's ability to demonise each other, and to see each other as other than human, less than human, etc ' So where there is prejudice, where there is confusion, where there is alienation, I like to try and handle it in a two-handed way. I like to show where the prejudices are on both sides. I like to show where the communication failures are on both sides.'

So what drives her fiction, ultimately? She pauses, uncharacteristically, and thinks, her sensitive face alive with movement. Then she speaks, all at once. 'Anger, humour, the desire to overturn things.' It's looking underneath things, I say. She nods, enthusiastically. 'And sometimes what's underneath actually looks a little better than what's on top.' This upturning, though, does not confuse; rather, it seeks to understand and explore the nuanced, strange world that we live in. And that goes for all of Hardinge's books. Hers is an extraordinary talent, and her place in the roster of literature is assured.

[Philip Womack](#) [5] is a literary critic for the **Guardian**, **Telegraph** and a Contributing Editor to **Literary Review**. He is also a children's author, and his latest book **The King's Shadow**, is just out.

**Fly By Night**, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-0330418263, £7.99

**Cuckoo Song**, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-0330519731, £7.99

**The Lie Tree**, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1447264101 £6.99

Page Number:

10

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20):** <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/212/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-212-frances-hardinge>

**Links:**

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/philip-womack>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/212>

[3] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/156/childrens-books/reviews/fly-by-night>

[4] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/206/childrens-books/reviews/cuckoo-song>

[5] <http://philipwomack.blogspot.co.uk/>