



AN INTERVIEW WITH SEBASTIEN DE CASTELL

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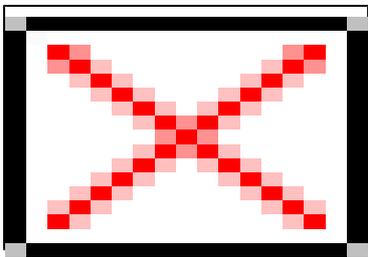
Article Category:

Featured author

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An interview with the author of **Spellslinger**

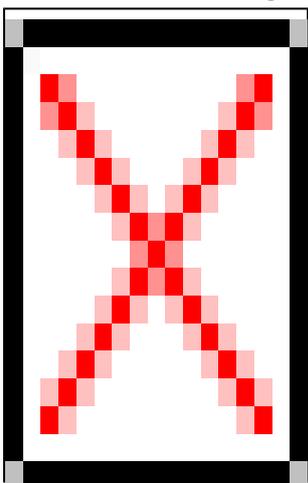
Spellslinger is the first in a compelling new fantasy series bursting with tricks, traps and a devious talking squirrel cat. **Anna James** interviews author **Sebastien de Castell** for **Books for Keeps**.



Sebastien de Castell is no stranger to writing fantasy, but with **Spellslinger**, the first in a new six book series for Hot Key, he's turned his pen to YA for the first time. Having said that, it didn't start out as YA: "As an author, there's a part of you that says I just write the story, to hell with genre or categories, but I found with the first draft that I was writing a hyper-cynical character, and really it was an adult looking back and remembering what happened and it wasn't working. And so I went back and thought about what it would look like when you were in that moment."

What emerged was the story of Kellen, a fifteen-year-old member of the Jan'Tep society where your worth is proved through your magical ability. Everyone is tattooed with bands symbolising the six sources of magic; iron, ember, silk, sand, blood and breath, but not everyone can use them all and as teenagers approach sixteen, they are expected to "spark" their bands, which demonstrates their ability to master that type of magic. If you don't manage any magic, you're relegated to a lower class of citizen and Kellen, perilously close to his sixteenth birthday, has sparked none. To make matters worse his precocious little sister Shalla has already sparked several of hers way ahead of schedule. When Kellen attempts to bluster and con his way through his first mage trial, everything starts to derail and the stage is set for adventure.

The details of the magic system were nailed down out of necessity at the behest of De Castell's editor at Hot Key, Tilda



Johnson: "I'm incredibly belligerent about this stuff. As a writer, I'm a servant of drama. I will

write that which is dramatic, everything else is left out unless it's needed in the moment. But Tilda pointed out we actually do need to know - so I went through and built out this system. I thought about it in terms of a system that would be relevant to you as a teenager when you're building your own identity. Having said that, De Castell is happy for readers to see whatever they need or want in the book: "I believe that once you write it down, the text is the only thing that exists, and it's open to all forms of interpretation. I'm not a postmodernist by any stretch of the imagination, but I do believe that every reader has an equal right to interpret the text, and the author's intent ceases to have any relevance."

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De Castell describes **Spellslinger** as "Harry Potter in reverse. He explains: "If you think about **Harry Potter** it's all about thinking you're mediocre, but realising you're the most powerful wizard, that your parents loved you more than anyone's parents ever loved them, and also you're secretly rich. Kellen's the exact opposite of that - he thought everything was in line but it all turns out to be rubbish." De Castell is a big fan of **Harry Potter**, and loves a well-executed "chosen one" narrative, but he wanted to try and subvert that idea with Kellen - who in many ways is aggressively normal: "I can distinctly remember going to high school and looking around and realising I wasn't the strongest, or the smartest, or the best looking and thinking what do I do? You're brought up to think you're special, but you have to work out how to make yourself special, and that's kind of the ultimate coming-of-age quest of every teenager."

Although De Castell had this very universal teenage experience, much of his upbringing was more unusual: "My father passed away when I was nine, and my mother was 44 when I was born and had MS so it was a real struggle. So during my key teenage years, I was really raised by my sister, who's a feminist scholar, and her partner, a wonderful woman who was a feminist activist. They were the people who took me aside and pointed out the things I didn't see as a teenage boy." A lot of this was channelled into the character of Ferius Parfax, a mysterious woman who emerges just as Kellen's trial starts to go awry: "She comes in and, very gently, starts peeling away the layers for Kellen. She doesn't say this is how it is, this is who you are, she asks him questions, and she's really a composite of all the amazing women I grew up around. In many ways, she's my favourite character to write."

After an unusual childhood, De Castell's also had an unusual career which has spanned archaeology, music, teaching, acting, and fight choreography before turning his hand to writing. It's the latter which he feels has had the biggest impact on his books: "When you're writing a sword fight for the stage, you learn that every move has to reveal character, and the fight itself has to tell a story. Every choice is revelatory of character." De Castell repeatedly emphasises ideas on this theme: "I'm not trying to be a great writer, I'm trying to write great books. I'm collaborative as a writer, I'm happy for an editor to tell me what sucks and what needs improving. I guess for me it's that each book is sort of a journey, a marathon - you can travel the 26.2 miles running, but you can get just as far walking or crawling. So sometimes I crawl, and sometimes I run."

Anna James is a writer and journalist. Her debut children's novel book **Pages & Co** will be published in September 2018 by HarperCollins.

Spellslinger is published by Hot Key Books, 978-1785761317, £12.99 hbk.

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Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20): <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/224/childrens-books/articles/featured-author/an-interview-with-sebastien-de-castell>

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