



Authorgraph No.134: Eva Ibbotson

By *admin*

Created *Oct '09*

Article Author:

[Elizabeth Hammill](#) [1]

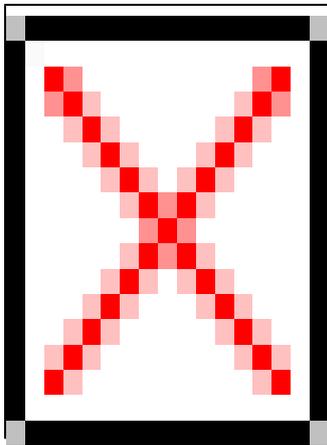
[134](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

Eva Ibbotson interviewed by **Elizabeth Hammill**.



Eva Ibbotson interviewed by Elizabeth Hammill

'Ghosts have had a very bad press' declares Eva Ibbotson emphatically with a mischievous glint in her eye. Elsewhere perhaps, but not in the Ibbotson household. For Eva, whose children's books from **The Great Ghost Rescue** to **Monster Mission** are populated with displaced ghosts, worried witches, 'peculiar people, people who are different?', ghosts and their otherworldly kin have been fertile subject matter for a writer intent on exploring our world through topsy-turvy eyes and entertaining readers in the process.

A visit with Eva in her terrace house in a Victorian suburb of Newcastle upon Tyne where she and her ecologist husband brought up their four children, raises other ghosts - ghosts from a past which provides the creative, sometimes dark, underpinnings of her children's books and her adult historical romances.

Born in Vienna in 1925, Eva grew up in a 'Bohemian, left wing family' at the centre of the Viennese intelligentsia?. Her father was a scientist and her mother a successful novelist and playwright who worked with Brecht, Eisenstein and Pabst. Their marriage was not a success. Eva was shunted between homes with aunts and grandmothers - some of whom were 'exceedingly odd' - and sent to boarding school - a *kinderheim* - at six. Two years later in 1933, the Nazi threat drove the family to England - her father to Edinburgh, her mother, remarried to a Russian, to Hampstead and Eva to Dartington Hall, the newly founded progressive school which became her 'home' for the next eight years - a place filled with a heady mixture of 'idealism, idiocy, wealth and amazingly good teaching'.

Eva describes her childhood as a 'privileged' one, filled with wit, humour, eccentric people and stories. Her mother had 'this absolute ability to turn anything into a story'. Her tales were not the 'Once upon a time' variety but took the truth and 'embroidered' it. 'My grandfather would have a carp delivered at Christmas - a live carp - and he'd keep it in the bath, but when Christmas came, nobody could kill it. That sort of thing?? Her grandfather, his carp and other 'odd'

relations later made embroidered appearances in Eva's early short stories for **Good Housekeeping** and then in her novels and children's books. Her mother's Viennese stories gave her an 'almost imaginary country, a country of the heart' to draw on 'one to which she has returned regularly in her historical romances and, for the first time, in her next book for children.

But her childhood was also filled with a deep insecurity. Her children's books, despite their surface humour, are about children whose 'parents aren't there' and characters who are 'displaced and looking for a home as I was'. She vividly remembers 'this very strong physical feeling of being lost' as a child, of 'rushing out into the street' from her *kinderheim*, 'thinking that I'd seen my mother pass and it was somebody else'. That longing 'a kind of anguish really' 'has never left her. 'You're always trying to be loved and to love other people and to be reassured. That's probably why I always try to write books with happy endings for children and adults. I can't imagine what you'd have to pay me to write an unhappy ending. I just want to reassure people and reassure myself. I want my characters to find love and safety.'

Eva herself found these when she met Alan Ibbotson at Cambridge where she was doing research after taking a degree in Physiology at London University and he was working as an ecologist. Marriage 'set me free for the first time in my life. I felt secure, emotionally secure' and she turned from physiology which 'distressed me' to writing.

Perhaps that is why Eva sees her stories as fairytales. Like Bruno Bettelheim, she believes that fairytales are 'the best thing' for children. While 'you can't deviate too far from a fairytale structure ' otherwise you're in freefall, in anarchy and children get worried and upset', she does enjoy upending traditional expectations and making mayhem with magic, but not from a desire to 'mock'. Accustomed to wit and parents who 'could see humour in everything', Eva, early on, absorbed the idea that if you tell a tale or 'write a book with no humour in it, you've let people down'.

While Cinderella variants abound in **Which Witch?** and **Journey to the River Sea**, for instance, she has also used witches and ghosts as a 'way of writing about people like us but over the top, over the edge'. 'After all,' she muses, 'why shouldn't witches and ghosts be as desperate and worried about things as any of us? Thinking like this, taking a new angle makes you much freer. You've got to see through other people's eyes?' Hence, the alternative delights of Hag's perfumes 'crushed pig's bladder with unbrushed teeth' 'in **The Great Ghost Rescue** or the Wizard Arriman the Awful's spell-casting competition to find himself the blackest witch of all for a wife in **Which Witch?** Outrageous human behaviour 'greed, snobbery, pompousness, the misuse of power ' are fair game. Politicians, in particular, are unrepentantly in Eva's firing line: Margaret Thatcher makes a cameo appearance in **The Secret of Platform 13** as a harpy with a handbag and the balloons in **Not Just a Witch** are inflated by politicians' hot air.

She passionately champions 'the poor and the underdog' 'in particular, orphaned, mistreated or unappreciated children who long, as she did, to find an adult who will recognize their worth and uniqueness. Like Roald Dahl, she is on the side of the child but with an important difference. 'He wants the put-upon children to fight the adults, to show you're just as strong, you'll whirl the headmistress round ' I'm not quite doing that. I'm hoping that the headmistress will fall over a cliff or see the error of her ways. I want children or ghosts to be rescuers either of themselves or of others.' Alone, relying on their resources, her children do just that, aided from unexpected quarters. Her 'fairy godmothers', like Eva herself, believe in children. Aunt Etta, a kidnapper with an unusual rescue operation to mount in **Monster Mission**, reflects: 'You'd be surprised. There are children all over the world whose parents don't know how lucky they are.' Miss Minton, the indomitable governess in **Journey to the River Sea**, muses: 'I may be mad but I think children should lead big lives.'

Eva inherited her husband's 'strong line on having to live in harmony with animals, witches, ghosts, worms, everything ' whatever their essence'. Alan introduced her to the natural world on country walks when they were courting: 'He used to turn up stones and there would be a whole world ' spiders' eggs, little worms, beetles and bits of fungus and he knew them all just like I knew my friends.' Later, 'when they started spraying DDT and messing up the sea, I was indignant perhaps earlier than some people.' This ecological indignation finds voice in **The Great Ghost Rescue** when a national ghost refuge must be found for spirits whose haunts have been reclaimed and gentrified and in **Monster Mission** when an unusual rescue operation is mounted to save mermaids and other creatures in distress.

In **Journey to the River Sea**, Eva's underlying subject is man's relation to the natural world – a relationship that has often defined characters in earlier books. After her husband's death, she found that she wanted to write, not another witch tale, but 'an old fashioned story of the kind I had by my bed' – **Anne of Green Gables, The Secret Garden** – a lovely homespun book rooted in a sound moral framework with humour and adventure. For years she had been intrigued by tales of Manaus, a city carved out of the jungle a thousand miles up the Amazon, built by the rubber barons in the nineteenth century where there was a 'fantastic opera house with grass growing through cracks in the stone and howler monkeys screeching on the roof'. Forgoing fantasy for historical adventure, she found herself in new literary country where her historical romances, her love of Frances Hodgson Burnett and her personal ghosts all met. The fate of each exotic cast member is determined by their response to the jungle: 'For whether a place is a heaven or a hell rests in yourself and those who go with courage and an open mind may find themselves in Paradise.' Through Maia, the orphaned heroine who sails to Manaus to find a Paradise, Eva grew herself 'for I allowed my heroine not to be safe. So maybe I'm at last laying my ghosts.'

The success of **Journey to the River Sea** surprises her. She never expected to win the Smarties Gold Medal or to be 'sitting at the Whitbread dinner'. The J K Rowling phenomenon has propelled her books onto the best seller list in America and she finds herself 'in extreme old age back in the swim again'.

Sitting in the first floor drawing room where Eva has written for the last forty years at her mother's desk, we discuss the business of writing. 'I start with an atmosphere and a place – sometimes a writer whose work is seminal like Margaret Mead who can give you the smell, the taste of a place. I know the shape of the book although it often alters. I knew about Maia but not about Clovis. Beginnings always make me so distressed because I know so little. It's as though the book is lying at the bottom of the sea waiting for me to dredge it up.' Then, it's 'trial and error, trial and error' – on through eight or nine versions, paragraph by paragraph. Each time 'I'm seeing more' until it's 'absolutely right'. The words are vital. She still remembers in her teens being 'dazzled and awed by the sheer beauty of the English language' and, like the poet Edward Thomas, she writes with 'a feeling of being chosen by the words rather than you choosing the words'. She still starts with a pen and pencil and 'this business of it going down my arm from my brain'. She used to transfer to an old Olivetti but now uses a computer. She has never written a book in less than a year. 'I'm very fussy, very painstaking. If there was an epitaph on my tombstone, it would say: She took trouble. Not: She was a great writer but: She took trouble.'

Looking around Eva's 'writing room', there are signs that she has taken trouble with her life too. Her husband's desk sits with hers in front of the double windows. Here he would join her and they would read finished chapters together. On the walls are Viennese prints and paintings by Eva's mother, husband and sons. On the mantle are cards from friends and family and a wonderful 'writer's block' made for her by one of her seven grandchildren. Eva may finally be 'laying her ghosts' but here, nonetheless, they feel very much alive in the home they have made for her and she for them.

Elizabeth Hammill is Artistic Executive of the Centre for the Children's Book.

Photograph courtesy of Macmillan Children's Books.

The Books

(published by Macmillan Children's Books, £9.99 hbk and £4.99 pbk)

Dial a Ghost, 0 330 39826 1 pbk

The Great Ghost Rescue, 0 330 39828 8 pbk

The Haunting of Hiram, 0 330 39842 3 pbk

Journey to the River Sea, 0 333 94740 1 hbk, 0 330 39715 X pbk

Monster Mission, 0 330 37262 9 pbk

Not Just a Witch, 0 330 39799 0 pbk

The Secret of Platform 13, 0 330 39801 6 pbk

Which Witch?, 0 330 39800 8 pbk

[Click here to see all of Eva's books BfK reviewed](#) [3].



[Eva Ibbotson.JPG](#) [4]

Page Number:

12

Source URL (retrieved on Dec '21): <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/134/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no134-eva-ibbotson>

Links:

[1] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/elizabeth-hammill>

[2] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/134>

[3] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/eva-ibbotson>

[4] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Eva Ibbotson.JPG>