



# Authorgraph No.180: Cressida Cowell

By *Richard Hill*

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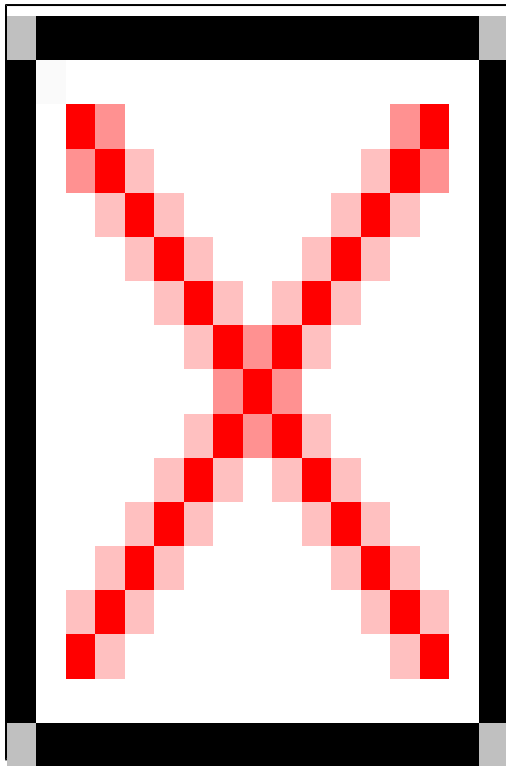
[180](#) [2]

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**Cressida Cowell** interviewed by **Clive Barnes**



Imagine that, as a small child, you went every summer camping as the only family on a tiny isolated island off the coast of Scotland. What would it be like? Well, exciting, yes; but also, maybe, ?a bit dangerous?. What if one of you fell off a cliff? If, like young Cressida Cowell, you had been hearing stories about Vikings and dragons, you might even think about what you would do if a Viking sail appeared on the horizon. You would certainly understand the challenges of living like a Viking.

Cressida is talking about the genesis of Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III. She has lived with this character for the last ten years; and, in March, he appears in a new incarnation as the hero of **How to Train Your Dragon**, a Hollywood animation feature film from DreamWorks, the company that brought you **Toy Story** and **Shrek**. Hiccup is a young Viking, of the tribe of Hooligans. His own island, Berk, is in an imagined archipelago, whose predominant climate, like the west coast of Scotland on a bad day, is cold, wet and windy; but, unlike Scotland, is populated by an amazing variety of dragons, from the small and weedy to the big, bad and ugly.

Hiccup, in contrast to his father Stoick the Vast, is not your stereotypical all brawn and little brain Norseman. Although

a good swordsman, and more loyal, brave and determined than most in a tight spot, he is small and decidedly unheroic in appearance, given to being blown about by the winds of circumstance and to being careful and thoughtful. Hiccup, as Cressida says, is 'feeling his way', like most of us.

**How to Train Your Dragon**, published in 2003, was the first of the now eight Hiccup books for readers of about 8-12 years old, which are also available in spoken word, with a brilliant rendition by David Tennant. But Hiccup himself appeared first three years earlier in a picture book for younger readers, **Hiccup: The Viking Who Was Seasick**. This first appearance is dedicated to Cressida's father, a keen bird-watcher, who first took his family to that remote island. Her father, she says, is a bit of an adventurer, 'the kind of person who thinks bungee jumping is a great plan'; and her description of him wrestling a conger eel aboard the family's boat for supper contains exactly the mixture of incomprehension and admiration you might expect from a rather more cautious daughter.

The picture book introduced two of the themes which provide the comic business and emotional undertow of the later books. There is the sometimes fraught relationship between parent and child; and there is the contrast between our heroic expectations of ourselves, particularly if you are a boy caught up in the heady atmosphere of Viking machismo, and our vulnerability to life's ordinary hazards. Around these real anxieties, Cressida has created a comic tour de force, in which outsize characters with frankly disrespectful names are thrown hilariously into more and more extravagant forms of nail-biting peril. And the interview is buffeted throughout by squalls of her emphatic, irresistible laughter.

The stories have a recognisable structure, with each book beginning with Hiccup at Viking training school, failing utterly, for example, at herding reindeer or pirating innocent fishing vessels and, then, somehow or other, being whisked off to face death in a exploding volcano or a floating gladiatorial arena. There are friends and enemies: Fishlegs, who looks like 'a runner bean with glasses' and 'has asthma, short-sight, flat-feet, knock-knees, an allergy to reptiles, heather and animal fur' and can't swim. And Snotface Snotlout: 'A delightful boy if you happen to like unpleasant teenagers with skull tattoos who bully anything that moves.'

In each book, the chief villain, Alvin the Treacherous, makes an appearance in some sneaky disguise, and has Hiccup in his clutches, only to face a fate that looks like certain death *this time*, but means that he turns up yet again in the next book minus another limb or organ as a result of his narrow escape. Then there are the dragons. Hiccup has his own companion, Toothless, an ugly little specimen of the 'Common or Garden' variety who is annoyingly self-absorbed and given to referring to himself in the third person, and each book introduces us to new species in new environments. Every dragon appears with its own field notes, detailing how good it is, for instance, at flying and fighting. And these are only some examples of a wealth of joyously funny interruptions and extensions to the story. Cressida's exploration of Dragonese, the language of dragons, for instance, by the time of the sixth book, has extended to a twenty-two page addendum. A glance here will reveal that a headache is an 'ow-indi-brainbox' and that a belch is a 'gobfart'.

For all the 'bonkers elements', as Cressida calls them, she is also intent on preserving a kind of 'veracity', so that children (and their parents) will recognise that Hiccup and his friends and family, in all their mad adventures, face essentially the same dilemmas as their readers. She tries to tell the Hiccup and Stoick story 'from both points of view' and as a parent herself now she recognises that the 'urge in us' to want our children to be like us is 'not just narcissism' but a desire for closeness, and that the child's natural instinct to fight against it creates a 'difficult moment' for both. She provides another twist to the adult and child relationship by prefacing and concluding each adventure with a few pages written by an older Hiccup, now an established hero, reflecting, quite seriously, from an adult perspective, on aspects of his childhood. Of her ambitions for the books, she says, 'I am trying to do quite a lot. I am trying to make them funny, and epic, and touching, and moving, all at the same time, packed in a teeny-weeny little space.'

Cressida provides all the illustrations for the stories herself and recalls, with glee, an American reviewer's comment that 'Cowell has intentionally drawn in the style of a slightly backward ten-year-old'. She is not sure about the 'intentionally' bit 'I do absolutely draw like that anyway?' but she is clear that she wanted to make books that would appeal to as wide a range of readers as possible, particularly reluctant boy readers. The illustrations use exactly the right tools for the job: pencil, ink and rubber: 'I almost carve them out. I really let rip. Turning blots, in a dreamlike way, into dragons and things like that. Almost as if you had gone wild on your school books.'

She wanted to break up the text and create something in which illustration played an equal part. The design of the books turned out to be 'hugely time consuming' but worthwhile: 'I get a lot of letters, which I love, from mothers of reluctant readers who say that Hiccup has got them into books for the first time.' And she has done it without any compromise in the level of language that she uses: 'A big fight with the editor at the beginning. My feeling about that is that as long as the plot is zippy and the vision thing is zippy, and you can identify with the characters, then you can get away with interesting language.'

Writing and illustration have gone hand in hand in Cressida's career. She changed school so that she could study art in the sixth form, read English Literature at university, and then studied graphic design and illustration. She had a picture book, **Little Bo Peep's Library Book**, accepted for publication when she was still in art school and had another, the provocatively titled **Never Play Poker with Strangers** (any guesses why it was never published?) shortlisted for the Macmillan Prize for Children's Illustration. She began her career as a creator of picture books, but, once the Hiccup books took off and she had three children of her own to look after, the careful and relatively long-drawn out process involved in watercolour, her preferred medium, proved too difficult to continue. She may, she thinks, go back to it eventually. In the meantime, she has provided very successful picture book texts for other illustrators, most notably for the three Emily Brown stories illustrated by Neal Layton.

A contrasting character to Hiccup and written for younger readers, Emily Brown is a feisty little girl who knows her own mind. As Cressida says, 'Emily is *firm*.' In the first book, **That Rabbit Belongs to Emily Brown**, she resists the designs of the queen on Stanley, her favourite soft toy. In the very latest title, **Emily Brown and the Elephant Emergency**, she deals resolutely but sensitively with the anxious mother of her friend Matilda the Elephant. This variation on the parent and child relationship with a mother both too anxious and too busy to enter her child's world of play begged an obvious question, and when I asked it, Cressida replied without hesitation: 'Yes. Absolutely. Yes, yes, yes. I am definitely Matilda's mummy! Oh dear! Well, there are aspects of yourself in lots of characters you write. But, you know, that is something that I do recognise very clearly in myself.'

Writing texts for other people to illustrate has meant that Cressida has had to come to terms with a slightly different 'maternal' problem: 'It does involve you giving up your baby for adoption, as it were. You have to talk sternly to yourself. The lovely thing about it is that you can be surprised by what comes back. It can bring you something you had never imagined.'

This discipline has served her well in appreciating the new spin which the DreamWorks team have brought to Hiccup. 'The film is its own thing. It's very close to the spirit of the book. It's exciting and funny and has that sense of wonder. And it has the awkwardness of the relationship between the boy and his father. And it has the relationship between the boy and the dragon and the boy and his peers. What I wanted out of it was a good movie and that does require the people who are making the movie to make it their own.' Cressida is in awe of the skill and imagination that DreamWorks have brought to **How to Train Your Dragon**. She is much more excited by the capacity of the animators to register even the tiniest flicker of emotion on a character's face, and conversely, to choreograph the details of a convincing disaster scene, than she is about the prospect of walking up the red carpet at a Hollywood premiere. It is the respect of one consummate creator for her peers in another field.

There is the same respect and generosity in the tribute she pays Neal Layton, her partner in the Emily Brown stories. 'I love his illustrations. He has a sort of anarchic feeling about him, but also a sort of gentleness about his work. That childlike thing: sort of subversive and sort of tender. That is wonderful.' Although she doesn't say it, these are, of course, some of the qualities of her own stories, whether about Emily or Hiccup: the qualities that make them so enjoyable and, in their quiet way, so thought provoking, for both children and their parents.

**Clive Barnes** has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's librarian, and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

## The Books

*(published by Hodder Children's Books)*

**How to Train Your Dragon**, 978 0 340 99907 3, £5.99 pbk, 978 1 840 32969 8, £13.99 CD

**How to Be a Pirate**, 978 0 340 99908 0, £5.99 pbk, 978 1 840 32968 1, £9.99 CD

**How to Speak Dragonese**, 978 0 340 99909 7, £5.99 pbk, 978 1 840 32975 9, £9.99 CD

**How to Cheat a Dragon's Curse**, 978 0 340 99910 3, £5.99 pbk, 978 1 844 56260 2, £13.99 CD

**How to Twist a Dragon's Tale**, 978 0 340 99911 0, £5.99 pbk, 978 1 844 56287 9, £8.99 CD

**How to Ride a Dragon's Storm**, 978 0 340 99912 7, £5.99 pbk

**A Hero's Guide to Deadly Dragons**, 978 0 340 99913 4, £5.99 pbk

**How to Break a Dragon's Heart**, 978 0 340 99692 8, £5.99 pbk

**Hiccup: The Viking Who Was Seasick**, 978 0 340 96999 1, £5.99 pbk

**Little Bo Peep's Troublesome Sheep**, 978 0 340 91820 8, £6.99 pbk

*Emily Brown titles, illustrated by Neal Layton, published by Orchard:*

**That Rabbit Belongs to Emily Brown**, 978 1 84362 453 0, £5.99 pbk

**Emily Brown and the Thing**, 978 1 84616 694 5, £5.99 pbk

**Emily Brown and the Elephant Emergency**, 978 1 40830 202 6, £10.99 hbk (978 1 40830 203 3 £5.99 pbk, May 2010)



[Cressida Cowell 2.jpg](#) [3]

Cressida Cowell

Page Number:

10

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