



# Authorgraph 196: Catherine Fisher

By *AndreaMReece*

Created *Sep '12*

Article Author:

[Clive Barnes](#) [1]

[196](#) [2]

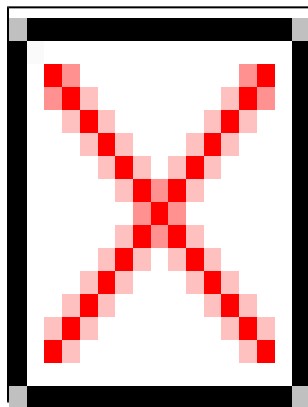
Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

**Authorgraph No.196** Catherine Fisher interviewed by **Clive Barnes**

## Authorgraph No.196



**Catherine Fisher** interviewed by **Clive Barnes**.

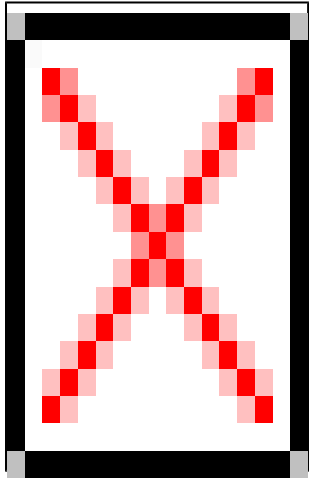
I meet Catherine Fisher at Tredegar House, just outside Newport where she lives. It's a place that means a lot to her. One of the great stately piles in South Wales and now administered by the National Trust, it was also for a time in the last century the local Catholic comprehensive, where Catherine went to school. Over her writing career it has appeared in various guises in her books, and emerges again in her latest novel, **The Obsidian Mirror**, where it becomes the secluded Wintercombe Abbey in the depths of Dartmoor. Catherine describes the preoccupations in her writing as time and buildings (and you could add landscape, too), but above all it is time. Buildings like Tredegar House or Wintercombe Abbey, and the landscapes in which they sit, have been shaped and reshaped through time. Here the past is layered in the fabric of the buildings and is entirely present; as, if you use your imagination, are the people who built their walls and walked in their corridors.

Catherine spent some time in her younger days as an archaeologist ? ?well, a humble digger,? she says. And when she talks about that experience, it is less about history as an abstract notion or the discovery of the past than about being physically in touch with it: ?It's very hands on, you experience it all: the weather, the soil, washing and cleaning the finds. It's good for poetry. It's good for writing.? Similarly, she describes the way in which she has re-worked the themes that characterise her writing, through her twenty year career and nineteen novels, as shaping the same ball of clay into different forms.

Catherine began by writing poetry and continues to write it, with four published collections for adults to her name. Now, as a writer of novels too, if it can be difficult for her to move from prose to poetry, it is also refreshing and reinvigorating: ?Sometimes a book stops and you think it's time for poetry. And then I write lots of poetry. As if it has

to come out. And that's wonderful.?

From a very young age she was 'obsessed with poetry' and, again, as a sensual experience, 'the rhythm of it, the sound of it'. In her poetry, as in her novels for young people, it is the immediacy of the relationship with the past that is so striking; often through the mediation of myth, legend and folklore: 'As a child, I read books and books of folk tales; absolutely fascinated?I really enjoyed the patterns. Things come in threes. There's always a taboo, something you mustn't do, a place you must not go. Objects turning into something else: cones into forests, mirrors into lakes. I loved that. And the clarity of it. That was where I started.' She believes that myths and legends 'express truth that can only be expressed in a story'. Her first published book, **The Conjuror's Game** (shortlisted for The Smarties Prize), took a tale from the **Mabinogi** about a board game that plays itself and used it as the basis for a modern story: 'I like the idea of taking these old half-forgotten stories and re-exploring them, transforming them, bringing them up-to-date. It is as if there is something eternal about them and each generation has to rework them.'



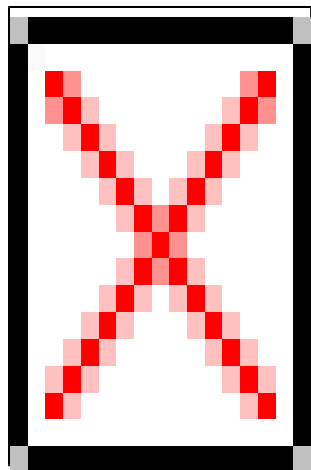
Recently, Catherine has been appointed the first Welsh Young People's Laureate 'writing in English, she hastens to tell me, since there has long been a Laureate for children's writing in Welsh (at least for poetry). She naturally feels very honoured. As long ago as 1989 she won both the Welsh Arts Council Young Writer's Prize and the Cardiff International Poetry Competition. 'I am Welsh and I have always lived in Wales and I write about Welsh themes, particularly mythology and the landscape. There aren't many Welsh children's writers and I am proud to be one.' But if you look at the landscape that features in Catherine's books, which includes Avebury, Cornwall, Bath, Glastonbury and Wells alongside Caerleon and Chepstow then her work perhaps honours an ancient notion of Wales that owes more to Celtic Arthurian legend than modern boundaries.

While poetry was her first love and brought her the first recognition as a writer, she realised that she couldn't make a living from it, and so began to write novels, something that she found difficult at first. She didn't consciously set out to write for children, it was just that the kind of books that she wanted to write seemed to belong in that market. Her models were writers who were also interested in the way the past intersected with the present. She mentions William Mayne, but, above all, Alan Garner, and **The Owl Service**, a book that explored the place where past, myth and landscape meet explosively in the present day: 'He took the myth seriously. It's not twee. It's not coy. It matters. It's important. It's real.' And she admired that style of writing: 'The intensity and power. They wrote books you had to read carefully. I felt that a spoonful of their prose was really heavy and dense. They took no prisoners.'

Much of her early novels might be said to aim at that same mix of myth and reality and **Corbenic**, published in 2002, which uses the legend of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King to illuminate the life of a young boy struggling in a council flat with an alcoholic and psychotic mother, is the book she is most proud of. Four years before, however, with **The Relic Master**, her writing had taken a slightly different turn. This, the first in a four book series, collectively called 'The Book of the Crow', saw her for the first time creating her own 'whole new world and everything in it'. She had previously published 'The Snow Walker Trilogy' which was also set entirely in a fantasy world but one based securely on Norse and Anglo-Saxon myth and legend. In **The Relic Master** she drew on her passion for folklore and myth to create a new society, with its own history, rites and lore.



of pent-up energy and gave her a new sense of freedom. She has gone on to create a number of other worlds in: 'The Oracle Trilogy' (2003 - 2005), the first book of which was shortlisted for the Whitbread Children's Prize; then **Incarceron** and its sequel, **Sapphique** (2007 and 2008); and now **The Obsidian Mirror**, the first book of 'The Chronoptika'. These epic fantasy creations, which involve her living imaginatively in the same society and with the same characters for some years, have alternated with the single novels in which fantasy and reality continue to entwine, like, most recently, **The Crown of Acorns** (2010), a novel with three parallel narratives from the present and the past inspired by Bath's Georgian architecture.



These different approaches to fantasy, one tied to reality the other removed from it, seem to give her different satisfactions as a writer, and even as she is writing the second book of 'The Chronoptika' to follow **The Obsidian Mirror**, she has a notebook in which an idea is developing for the other kind of novel: 'I like to keep doing both. They are different things. The books set just in fantasy worlds are lighter books, perhaps. You are free. You can do anything almost. It's just a lot of fun. Those where the supernatural comes into this world are perhaps darker, deeper, more psychological.' She talks, too, of the different types of characterisation required by each sort of book. Cal, the boy in **Corbenic**, she regards as the best character she has created. 'He's the most alive. I feel I got into his mind-set. That's one of the differences between the two sorts of books. With a book like **Corbenic** which is set in the real world with a boy who has real problems you have to make a character that's true to everyday life. In the fantasy books you have to have larger than life characters. The fantasy characters inhabit their world but they wouldn't necessarily inhabit the real world.'

In both kinds of novels, character matters, of course: 'The plot can be as wild and whirling and breathless as you like, but if you're not interested in the characters, then the story will be boring.' And the characters in **Incarceron**, her most popular novel to date, etched themselves so securely in some young people's minds that, in anticipation of any film that might be made, they set themselves up as casting directors on YouTube selecting the actors that best fit the parts. **Incarceron** itself, selected as the Times Children's Book of the Year in 2007, must be one of most ingenious and compelling fantasy novels in contemporary children's literature. It has two parallel narratives that, initially, seem unconnected: one set in a Perrault fairy tale world that is yet, it appears, an artificial creation; and the other taking place in an apparently underground prison so vast that it has its own topography and warring tribes. In **Incarceron** and its sequel, Catherine's creation of credible worlds with their own mythologies and histories and her command of action, character and narrative, show a writer at the very top of her game. Its popularity in the United States - it was on The New York Times bestseller list - surprised her: 'My books have always been well received critically. They have never had mega sales. When I wrote **Incarceron**, I didn't think it was the sort of book to change things: too complicated, perhaps. But I couldn't have been more wrong. Four out of five of the e-mails I get from fans even now are about **Incarceron**. It's taken off with a life of its own. It's great but it does create pressure for another book in the series, and I feel the story has ended.'

As one story ends, so another begins. In her latest novel **The Obsidian Mirror**, Catherine explores the idea of time travel, suggested by the works of writers like Stevenson and Wells, but combining these with her own notion of the timelessness of myth and folktale, so that while Wintercombe Abbey is the centre of experiments in time travel through an ancient mirror, the woods around it shelter a faery society, The Shee, that lives outside linear time. Like **Incarceron** before it, it is a tale that effortlessly combines a number of narratives, voices and modes of storytelling, (including a visit

to the foggy lamp-lit streets of Victorian London), moves at breakneck pace and constantly springs surprises. Even with these tales that have to be carried over a number of books, Catherine herself doesn't have an exact idea how the story will develop or what the characters will do, and seems to relish the risk that this entails: 'It's so big, it's scary. There is so much you can do with it. And there are so many characters'. And Catherine likes each character to have 'their own personality, their own voice, their own problem, their own agenda, and then you wind them all up and set them off and see what happens.' Even as she works on the second book, she is not entirely sure what will happen or how many books of 'The Chronoptika' there might be, although she is thinking of four, and, as **The Obsidian Mirror** is set in winter, there may be one for each season of the year.

Now, while work on the second book is mixed with poetry, she also has the Laureateship to consider, which she regards as a serious responsibility as well as a tremendous honour. It is an initiative that is aimed at teenagers rather than children and Catherine will be one of a range of creative people, including performance poets, rappers, writers and musicians, working with Welsh young people in situations where they wouldn't necessarily come across a writer, particularly in areas of social deprivation, to inspire them to become more involved with reading and creative writing. She recognises that this isn't an easy task: 'You can bring them to reading, you can enthuse about reading, and you can talk about books and writing. You may not convince vast numbers of those who otherwise would not be interested but if you just get a few kids who have not had that opportunity, that would be great.' And, sitting outside the building where she spent much of her teenage years she thinks back to her own childhood: 'I couldn't imagine being a young person and not reading for pleasure?' 'reading that has contributed so much to the writer she has become.'

#### **A selection of Catherine Fisher Titles:**

**The Obsidian Mirror**, Hodder, 978 0 3409 7008 9, £6.99 pbk

**The Crown of Acorns**, Hodder, 978 0 3409 7007 2, £5.99 pbk

**[Incarceron](#)** [3], Hodder, 978 0 3408 9360 9, £5.99 pbk

**Sapphique**, Hodder, 978 0 3408 9361 6, £5.99 pbk

**[The Relic Master](#)** [4], Red Fox, 978 0 0992 6393 7, £7.99 pbk

**Corbenic**, Red Fox, 978 0 0994 3848 9, £5.99 pbk

**The Conjuror's Game**, Red Fox, 978 0 0998 5960 4 OP

**Clive Barnes**, formerly Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City is a freelance researcher and writer.

Page Number:

14

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Oct '21):** <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/196/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-196-catherine-fisher>

#### **Links:**

[1] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/clive-barnes>

[2] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/196>

[3] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/165/childrens-books/reviews/incarceron>

[4] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/116/childrens-books/reviews/the-interrex-the-relic-master>