



Ghost Knight at Salisbury Cathedral

By *AndreaMReece*

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Article Author:

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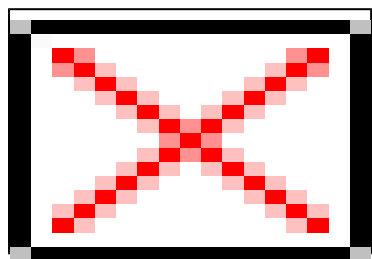
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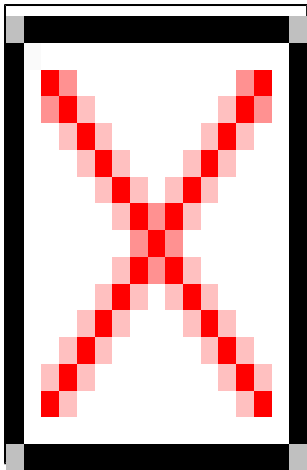
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Cornelia Funke's latest novel **Ghost Knight** has just been launched at Salisbury cathedral. Clive Barnes reports for **Books for Keeps**.

The medieval cathedral at Salisbury has long been a source of inspiration for writers and artists - William Golding, Anthony Trollope and John Constable, to name three - as the Dean of the Cathedral, the Very Reverend June Osborne, reminded an invited audience a few weeks ago. She was beginning a conversation with [Cornelia Funke](#) [3], the latest writer to be brought under the cathedral's spell; and the conversation was part of two days of events in Salisbury to mark the British launch of Cornelia's [Ghost Knight: A Perfect English Ghost Story](#) [4]. On the previous evening Cornelia had the joy of seeing the major figure of her novel, the twelfth century nobleman knight, William Longespee, brought to life in front of a family audience in the nave of the church. And, for subsequent visitors, there is a children's activity trail, published by the cathedral in association with Orion Children's Books, which guides children to the characters and locations within the building that feature in the story.



Cornelia had come dressed for the two days in a shimmering medieval dress, created for her by Jenny Beavan, an Oscar-winning costume designer. Cornelia is used to wearing such costumes at public readings of her work in front of packed theatres of children and their parents in Germany, but she confided that the Salisbury events had a particular meaning for her: 'Of the many enchantments in my life, to see the children in the cathedral yesterday afternoon was one of the strongest. To have children say to me, I thought this was a boring building, and then, you know, open their eyes to the magic. That is what you always hope, because so many of our children believe there is no magic in the world.'



The book has been ten years in the making, beginning when Cornelia visited the cathedral as a tourist and felt that it held a story for her: "It happens very rarely that a place has that impact on you: only three times in my career, in Moscow, in Venice and here." The story began to crystallize around Longespee, whose tomb was introduced to Cornelia by a Cathedral guide and whose life and mysterious death began to fascinate her. Her subsequent research drew in other figures from Salisbury's history: Ela, Longespee's wife, who entered Lacock Abbey as a nun after her husband's death and reputedly buried his heart there; and the villainous Lord Stourton, also with a memorial in the cathedral, who was hanged with four of his servants for a brutal murder three centuries after Longespee's death. Cornelia visited Lacock and also nearby Kilmington, where Stourton's crime took place.

Cornelia had based a previous novel, [The Thief Lord](#) [5], very closely on real places in Venice, and the city had used the novel as the basis of a children's guide. Families had eagerly retraced the steps of her characters through the streets and canals of the city and Cornelia had realised that "children love to find fiction in reality". But the amount of historical research which went into *Ghost Knight* was unprecedented for her; and she wanted to get it right. Her conviction that children should know about the real stories that "whisper from the walls in the cathedral" is reflected in the short notes on the historical characters in the story at the back of *Ghost Knight*.

She describes the emergence of a story as like finding your way in a labyrinth: "You have to be very patient. You don't know yet what is waiting there. Stories love to hide." She began with the idea of a modern boy "Jon" running into the cathedral to ask the knight for help. So it was always going to be a ghost story, and her first true exploration of the genre. Originally she thought it might be for older children (as most of her recent work is), only "the story very determinedly said, "No. I want to be younger. I want to be simple"."

At each stage of the writing, she kept in touch with Salisbury, returning to attend Salisbury ghost tours, to visit the Cathedral School when she realised that Jon would be a boarder there, and to check with the Dean on the practical details of how children might get into the Cathedral after locking up, and where might be a good place to hide. She gave her lonely boy hero a resourceful girl companion, called Ella like her redoubtable medieval antecedent; and she couldn't resist sending them to Stonehenge, on what turns out in the story to be a fool's errand. She confesses she wasn't sure about that, and took the episode out and put it back three times. "It's a complete diversion, but then I thought, no, if part of your reason for writing is to encourage children to discover these places for themselves, you can't cut out Stonehenge. And now it's in the story and I'm happy about that because I want my readers to go there."

Remarkably, for the first time, Cornelia found herself writing in the first person, and searching for the right voice for Jon as narrator. She eventually settled on that of a youngish adult looking back on a childhood experience: "So I could make him reflect on some of the deeper themes in the book while still being able to remember vividly how it felt." Although the book can be read by children as young as nine, Cornelia wanted to make the scenes when the children are confronted by the ghosts of Lord Stourton and his men truly "dark and haunting, because I knew that this generation of children expect that". More profoundly, she wanted to touch on the questions of mortality, guilt and redemption that any ghost story implies and on the moral ambivalence of medieval knighthood: "It is such an interesting phenomenon. We all know about the chivalrous knight, protecting the weak and so on. But we all know about the other reality. They were war machines. They could be cruel and violent. Remember, too, their part in the crusades where they believed that they would find salvation in the slaughter of unbelievers."

Cornelia believes that children are well able to appreciate these deeper themes: 'They look at the big questions. They don't hide from them as easily as we do. They are not so sure of who they are, which is much better. You should not underestimate children. Every story should in some sense be for all ages. If you were telling stories around the fire, you would not say, 'Oh the five year olds leave now, this is only for this and that age group.' You try to talk to every age. I love it when I get letters and they say we read your story aloud to four generations in our family. That's my ideal for every story.'

If Cornelia acknowledges that in some ways *Ghost Knight* is a new departure in her writing, she is not sure if it will lead anywhere else. She says that she has long had an interest in historical fiction and has been working on and off on a novel of the French Revolution, which, if it is ever published, would probably be a work for adults. But at the moment, the launch of *Ghost Knight* in Britain, already published in Germany and the USA, is a deep breath of another time and place, before she immerses herself again in *The Mirrorworld*, a fantasy for older children which takes its inspiration from European folk tales. The first book of the series, *Reckless*, was published in Britain in 2010. The second book, *Fearless*, is to be published early next year, she is hard at work on the third; and there will be two more after that.

Cornelia, who moved from Germany to Los Angeles some years ago, recognises that there is a sense in which both *Ghost Knight*, which she calls 'my little love letter to Britain', and *The Mirrorworld* reflect the longing of an exile for her European heritage. But more than that, and maybe perversely for a ghost story, *Ghost Knight*, is intended to draw children back to reality and experience the world about them more directly and intensely. She is emphatic about her desire to see her readers retrace the steps of her characters: 'All the magic we have, all the magic we can conjure, is based in this world. I hope children come here and kneel at Longespee's tomb as Jon does, I hope they go to Lacock and to Kilmington. I am often asked, 'Cornelia, do you worry that children read less?' No, I worry that children live less, because they are in fictional realities. They are either on the TV or on the computer, as I am. To touch something, to smell it, to see it, to feel it, I think we are all in danger of losing that.'

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

Ghost Knight (978 1 4440 0823 4) is published by Orion at £9.99 hbk.

[Click here for details of a special **Ghost Knight** short story competition.](#) [6]

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