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Liz Flanagan Imagining Dragons

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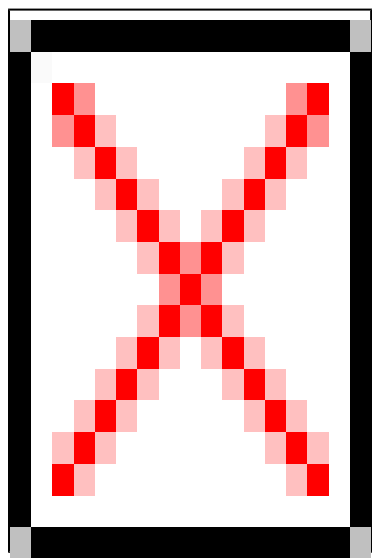
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Byline:

Author **Liz Flanagan** ponders our love of dragons

*Dragons have never been so popular: Edgar, star of the **John Lewis** advert is melting hearts everywhere while a new animation of Michael Morpurgo's **Mimi and the Mountain Dragon** promises to be unmissable Christmas Day viewing ? and we're not even going to mention **Game of Thrones** . Liz Flanagan, author of **Dragon Daughter** and the forthcoming **Rise of the Shadow Dragons** , has worked out the reasons for their special appeal.*



Why do we love dragons? I always ask this question in every school assembly talk and a sea of hands goes up. Children tend to have very clear ideas about this, though the answers can vary wildly. Some recent answers have been: ?Because they have amazing scales! ?Because they can fly and do fire!? ?Because they're magic!? Sometimes a child might describe ? with beautiful specificity and detail ? a certain dragon who burns brightly in their imagination. I tell them all their answers are right.

For surely that is exactly why we love dragons: for their seemingly infinite capacity for reimagination, for their power, and for the magic and transformation they possess.

As those children know, many different cultures have imagined dragons, over millennia, and each has its own particular relationship to its own particular dragons, from the many kinds of long in China, to the three-clawed Japanese Ry?, from the red dragon we see on the Welsh flag, to the Hungarian Sárkány, and many more from all round the world. In some tales, the dragon is associated with evil to be vanquished, while in others they bring wisdom and luck.

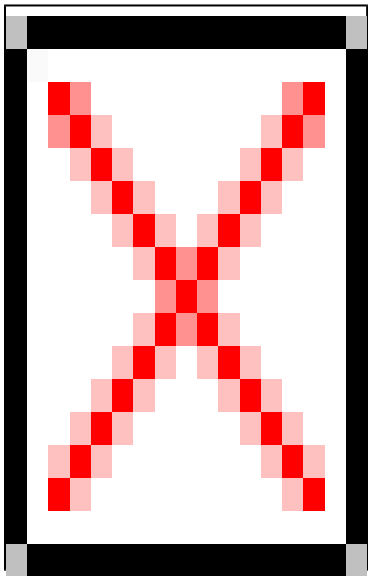
I am fascinated by the dragon?s capacity to be whatever we need it to be, as if dragons might be a shimmering

projection of our most intense fears and desires, whether that's an apex predator who could burn and devour us; or a powerful ally to be tamed and ridden; or a vulnerable and precious source of magical gifts to be nurtured and protected.

Looking back, I don't recall ever not knowing about dragons. From my earliest experience of being read to, dragons prowled intertextually between the pages of picture books, fairy tales, and finally novels. You could say I grew up with dragons, encountering Tolkien's Smaug and Le Guin's Kalessin, and more recently the glorious, self-obsessed creatures of Robin Hobb's extraordinary series. With my daughters, I discovered Cornelia Funke's [Dragon Rider \[3\]](#), Paolini's [Eragon \[4\]](#) series and the luminous dragons which burst from the pages of Jackie Morris's [Tell Me a Dragon](#).

It was partly the dragon's power to transform which attracted me to its story potential – after all, an egg doesn't appear in a story, unless something is going to hatch. Having watched my hens' chicks hatch – seeing their damp vulnerability and exhaustion after the work of tapping through their eggs – I made my dragons weak and helpless in their first moments. Then, clearly influenced by the series by Anne McCaffrey which I devoured as a teen, I decided the newly-hatched dragon must select a human in its first moments, with whom they bond for life. There is something irresistible about the idea of being selected, of finding that connection with a wild and different creature – so gorgeously imagined by Cressida Cowell in her [How to Train Your Dragon \[5\]](#) series. Don't we all want to be chosen and found worthy?

My protagonist Milla in **Dragon Daughter** is a servant when she is chosen by her dragon Iggie, and her life is transformed by the bond she shares with him. From a story point of view, dragons can be a fantastic catalyst, creating revolution, redistributing power and privilege, but also bringing the potential for abuse – as explored so dramatically by George R. R. Martin and other writers with a grown-up audience.



With their capacity for flight, dragons also symbolise freedom. If we can't have wings of our own, maybe through reading, we can experience the next best thing: to be invited onto a dragon's back to soar beyond the clouds and experience the exhilaration of flying. I loved writing the scenes – both in **Dragon Daughter** and **Rise of the Shadow Dragons** – where my protagonists finally get to ride their dragons. It's a coming of age moment for each, coming into independence, freedom and possibility. It's also quite handy for getting characters swiftly from A to B when the plot demands it.

However, not all dragons are huge and powerful. There are some charming examples of small and cheeky dragons, including Ed Clarke's little Welsh dragon in **The Secret Dragon**, found by fossil-hunting Mari, or the chaotic dragons with incendiary poos in Andy Shepherd's current series. So dragons can also symbolise mischief and misrule, carnival and chaos, a much-needed escape from rules and regulations – surely one of the reasons why they are so beloved of middle-grade readers.

Ultimately though, many literary dragons are dangerous beasts – as with Rowling's fierce creatures. They are carnivores who kill, firebreathers with the capacity to destroy and burn all we hold dear. So perhaps another purpose of the dragon

is to remind us that we too are vulnerable. And, in a world that is heating beyond the point of recovery, to warn us to recognise and rein in our own capacity for destruction.

Whatever the answer may be, I am never bored of reading dragons. A glance in any bookshop or library today will reveal a hoard of glittering dragon stories. They continue to delight us, allowing us endless flights of escape, as we continue to invent the dragons we need. Long may their enchantment continue.

Dragon Daughter by Liz Flanagan is available now, 978-1788450218, £6.99 pbk and **Rise of the Shadow Dragons** will publish in May 2020. Both are published by **David Fickling Books**.

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