



AN INTERVIEW WITH NATASHA FARRANT

By *AndreaMReece*

Created *Sep '20*

Article Author:

[Michelle Pauli](#) [1]

[245](#) [2]

Article Category:

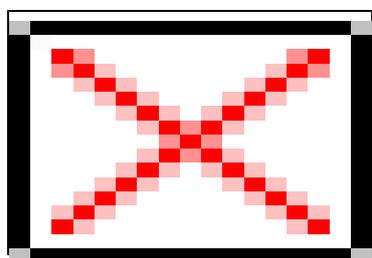
Featured author

Byline:

Michelle Pauli talks to Natasha Farrant about her new book, **Voyage of the Sparrowhawk**, which is now shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award**.

Michelle Pauli talks to **Natasha Farrant** about her new book, **Voyage of the Sparrowhawk**, now shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award**.

Natasha Farrant's [Voyage of the Sparrowhawk](#) [3] might just be the perfect book for these trying times. An epic, against-the-odds adventure featuring gutsy orphaned children sailing a barge across the channel, intense friendship, a feisty chihuahua and puppies (puppies!), it transports readers to a world of hope and heart-stealing delight.



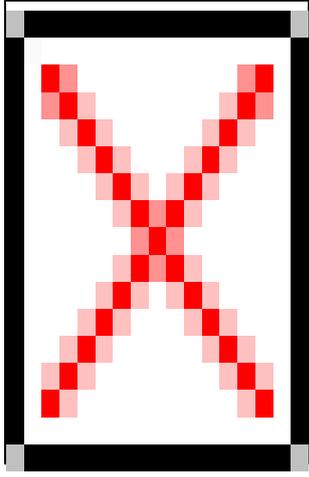
Set in England and France in the aftermath of the Great War, as the world is coming to terms with the society-shaking change that has taken place, the book nonetheless has a curiously timeless feel, much like Farrant's previous acclaimed adventure story, **Children of Castle Rock**. Despite differences in location and era, there are threads that link both books, not least the notion of children as a force for good and for change in the world.

For Farrant, the key is children's agency. It is critical now more than ever, she explains on the phone from her London home.

'I'm interested more and more in children's empowerment, particularly around climate and children, the youth climate movement. I feel like we're handing kids such a messed-up world, they're going to need all the courage and wit, bravery and resilience, friendships and working together? and they're going to need it in spades. That's informed both of these books. It feels very important to me that children should be given a model of agency.'

This focus on children taking control of their own destinies is at the heart of **Voyage of the Sparrowhawk**, as friends Lottie and Ben set off on a perilous journey in search of long-lost and beloved family members. Through sheer force of personality and the power of their cause they also recruit some unlikely, and quite wonderful, grown-ups along the way. As in [Children of Castle Rock](#) [4], Farrant's characterisation is masterful. In developing the characters she drew on the two years she recently spent training as a psychotherapist, using methods learnt on the course to bring the characters to

life, from stream of consciousness point-of-view writing to literally drawing them at one point.



‘Lottie I was able to draw just like that, like clicking my fingers. She just popped out of the end of my pencil,’ says Farrant. ‘Ben did too, and it was interesting to see what came out. I think that’s one of the joys of having been doing this for a while, having the confidence to recognise, ‘ok. That’s what my subconscious wants?’

While **Sparrowhawk** was written well before the pandemic struck, and its publication, as with so many other books, was delayed as a result of it, Farrant’s preoccupation with how we deal with change, a theme also clearly present in her earlier YA novel, **The Things We Do for Love**, is also pertinent to our times.

‘I’m interested in what happens after disasters, how people pick their lives up again after a cataclysm. I’m not comparing the pandemic to the first world war; that would be disrespectful. But it is a catalyst for social change. It is certainly it is one of the most memorable things that will have happened in many of our lifetimes. It’s this enormous global and collective experience again, after which things will be different ? at least, I hope so.’

The timelessness and sheer joyful nature of Farrant’s tales has drawn comparisons with Eva Ibbotson and it’s one Farrant’s more than happy with: ‘I love her writing, I go back to it over and over again, especially [Journey to the River Sea](#) [5]. She’s just perfect. I love her combination of very Middle-European sentimentality that’s always tempered with that very British self-deprecating and quite ironic humour. It’s a wonderful balance. She also puts her characters in real jeopardy in the children’s books ? they have to suffer for their eventual happy ending.’

She also acknowledges a debt to Enid Blyton, who ‘made me a reader. I just devoured everything, every series I could get my hands on, and longed to go Mallory Towers.’ Farrant discovered Blyton in French first, at her French school in London: hers was a bilingual childhood, filled with books and stories. She tells of a grandmother who was reading **War and Peace** for the third time when she died, a father who cultivated an ‘amazing love of stories’ with the bedtime tales he made up about animals who broke into London Zoo, and a Russian-teacher mother who would translate lavishly illustrated Russian picture books into French for Farrant and her siblings.

It was perhaps inevitable that she would end up working in publishing. Following a French and Spanish degree and a master’s in social anthropology, Farrant worked in the rights departments of Orion and HarperCollins for 10 years before, in 2001, becoming a literary scout specialising in children’s and young adult fiction. She also wrote two adult books, in 2008 and 2010, before her agent suggested she try writing a children’s book. **The Things We Do for Love** followed and then the teen [Bluebell Gadsby](#) [6] series.

Steeped in the children’s book world as she is, what has Farrant drawn from her years of working as a literary scout? She thinks hard, mentioning contacts gained and the benefits of a working life spent reading untold numbers of children’s books, before finally musing,

‘There’s no real rhyme or reason as to what works, what sells. I think the most successful children’s books are the ones which are completely true to themselves. All you can do as a writer is write what you want to write, and write it

absolutely as best you possibly can, in the way only you can do it.?

Fortunately, that's exactly what Farrant has done with [Voyage of the Sparrowhawk](#) [3] and the result is an absolute joy.

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

[Voyage of the Sparrowhawk](#) [3] is published by Faber and Faber, 978-0571348763, £7.99 pbk.

Page Number:

41

Source URL (retrieved on Feb '21): <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/245/childrens-books/articles/featured-author/an-interview-with-natasha-farrant>

Links:

[1] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/michelle-pauli>

[2] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/245>

[3] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/245/childrens-books/reviews/voyage-of-the-sparrowhawk>

[4] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/229/childrens-books/reviews/the-children-of-castle-rock>

[5] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/130/childrens-books/reviews/journey-to-the-river-sea>

[6] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/201/childrens-books/reviews/the-diaries-of-bluebell-gadsby-after-iris>