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Q & A with Frances Hardinge

By Alexis Burling, *Children's Bookshelf* -- *Publishers Weekly*, 6/26/2008

When it comes to spinning wild tales involving perilous quests and characters with a penchant for getting themselves into trouble, British novelist Frances Hardinge has had a lot of practice, thanks to her offbeat childhood and active imagination. Bookshelf caught up with Hardinge to discuss her second novel, *Well Witched* (HarperCollins, June), and the experiences that inspired it.

You grew up in Kent in southern England. Did your surroundings influence *Well Witched* at all?

Our house in Kent was a gray stone affair with half-ruined buddleia-covered walls, big chocolate-brown spiders, and weird moaning noises that sounded when the wind blew. I think this has probably shaped my interest in the gothic and supernatural, and my fascination with places that are half-functional and half-decayed. Kent also influenced some of *Fly by Night* [Hardinge's debut novel]. For example, the actual Chiding Stone in the first chapter can be found in Chiddingstone, not far from where we used to live.

I read that when you were six, you wrote a short story that included an attempted poisoning, a faked death, and a villain being thrown off a cliff—all in just one page! Would you say that your style has changed since then?

Yes. I have clearly become less concise.

Your books are so fanciful and deliciously descriptive. I bet your parents told you when you were little that you had a “wild imagination.” Did you ever get in trouble because of it?

My sister and I played a number of games set in intricate imaginary worlds when we were a lot younger, many of which somehow seemed to result in us accidentally breaking things. I know that I ran into a statue on my bike and broke it because my sister had tied something round my handlebars so I couldn't steer properly. (I think my bike may have been a “horse” at the time.) At another point, one of us was playing a slave, and made a dramatic attempt to escape our captivity. During the ensuing struggle, I'm afraid somebody's elbow went through a painting. Oops.

Can you tell us about some of your favorite things to do as a child?

I read a lot, sketched, painted and played computer games. My sister and I also wrote our own plays complete with songs, created tiny newspapers, constructed the world's least successful bows and arrows and hung out in our treehouse. At one point, we decided to become “detectives,” and spent time collecting newspaper clippings of local crimes. We made a stab at “following a suspect”—on one occasion, we even tried to take someone's fingerprints from a lawnmower handle using talcum powder and Sellotape. Our detection efforts never came to anything, though, which may be just as well.

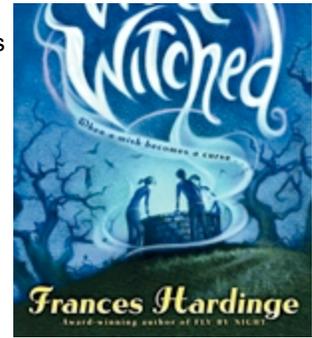
You've written a number of short stories, in between writing novels. Do you like one form over the other?



Frances Hardinge.



In many respects I find writing short stories a lot easier than writing a novel. My concepts tend to naturally suit the longer sort of short story. When I first started writing novels, I found that the only way I could overcome the initial vertigo brought on by the tower of imaginary unwritten pages was by treating each chapter as if it were a short story in its own right, at least until the momentum of the narrative took over. I now find that I enjoy writing novels more than short stories, in part because I still find it more challenging.



For *Fly by Night*, you and your publisher embarked on a tour with a stuffed goose. Are there plans for another tour for *Well Witched*, and, if so, what are you bringing with you this time around?

As a matter of fact, we were foolhardy enough to set off without a goose, but early on in our trip, Ms. Margaret, a teacher emeritus from Grace Lutheran School, kindly gave us a tiny Saracen, and he became the tour mascot. At present, there are no plans for a *Well Witched* tour, and even if there were, I'm not sure what I'd bring with me. There's a shortage of portable plush wells.

***Fly by Night* was a great success and won the Branford Boase Award. Since then [2006], how has your writing process changed?**

Although two years have passed, in many ways I feel as if I am still getting used to the idea of writing full-time. My self-discipline has improved, and I have become better at preventing myself from sliding into work-avoidance on the one hand and driving myself insane by trying to work 12-hour shifts on the other.

Speaking personally, I find it is vitally important for me to break up the day and do other things, so that I don't become hypnotized staring at the screen. It's a very lonely profession, so I make sure that my social life outside "work hours" is full and varied.

In many respects, my writing goals remain largely unchanged. My aim with each book is to write something that will entertain and surprise. I can't honestly claim that I have set my sights on a particular prize or award. On those occasions when I have been shortlisted, it has come as a wonderful surprise, and I regard it as something of a bonus.

You've also written a book called *Verdigris Deep* that was published in the U.K. last year. Is this a different book than *Well Witched*, or the same? If the same, why the title change?

Yes, *Well Witched* and *Verdigris Deep* are indeed the same book. My U.S. publisher changed the title because they felt that "verdigris" was too difficult and unfamiliar a word for many American readers, including adults.

In *Well Witched*, the three main characters all have special powers (Josh controls electricity; Chelle becomes a channeler for people and their wishes; Ryan grows mysterious "clairvoyant" warts on his hands). Can you explain how these ideas came about?

It became clear to me which power I should give each character, as their personalities became more defined. Extra eyes for watchful Ryan seemed appropriate, but I decided what form these eyes would take after suffering from an allergic rash on my hands and feet one summer. There's something particularly horrifying about the idea of one's own body changing, become unfamiliar and alien. As soon as I understood Chelle's personality, it seemed appropriate to have her leaking other people's thoughts as helplessly as she spilled her own. Josh does learn to use his powers but spends a long time accidentally affecting all the machines around him. I've been accused of being a techno-jinx on many occasions, and sometimes, if computers or other electrical equipment are playing up, my friends ask me to stand further away so I stop affecting them.

In *Fly by Night*, there were a ton of ideological themes floating throughout. The same goes for *Well Witched*, yes? How did you balance these while still making the story fun for kids to read?

It's very true that there are ideological themes, but I never set out to write manifestos disguised as stories. The story

always comes first. In addition, when I do explore ideological concepts I generally try to show that the issues aren't simple or straightforward.

You recently went on a trip around the world. Where did you go? What was your favorite spot?

We traveled for a year, visiting Canada, the United States, Central America and the Caribbean, New Zealand, Australia, and Southeast Asia. The countries I enjoyed visiting most were Guatemala, Thailand, and New Zealand. New Zealand, in particular, was exceptionally friendly and stunningly beautiful, and it's hard to dislike any country where you can clamber about on live volcanoes, see blue penguins, float down underground streams looking at glow worms, visit glaciers, swim with dolphins, eat food cooked in hot springs, and still find a decent cup of tea.

I know everyone must ask you this in interviews, but... what's with the black hat? I like it!

Thank you! I've always liked hats, and even some of my earliest baby photos show me in a hat. Hats are very useful, of course, for keeping out weather or avoiding eye contact if required. But more than that, a hat is a very definite statement of personality. I'm so used to wearing it that when I'm not, I feel as if part of my head is missing. I've always liked the Trilby/Fedora/1940s style hats, possibly as a result of watching a lot of film noir at an impressionable age.

If you could be any imaginary character from your childhood or beyond, who would you be and why?

There are lots of possible options, including Bugs Bunny, Rikki Tikki Tavi, and Long John Silver, but I'm tempted to choose Ginger from *Chicken Run*. She may, in fact, be my idea of the ultimate hero, because absolutely everything is stacked against her. She has no special powers, no special skills, no magical destiny, no money, no family, no fighting ability... and she's much smaller than her enemies because... *she's a chicken*. The friends she's so determined to save are featherheads, and her rooster boyfriend is unreliable. Against these odds, she pits her brains, stubbornness, loyalty, ingenuity and courage... and it's enough!

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