

PLAIN KATE reads very much like a traditional, though much fleshed-out, folktale. Did any folktale traditions or mythic cycles especially inspire you to write this novel?

Right before I started *Plain Kate*, I read this huge collection of Russian fairy tales. I love fairy tales and I thought I knew them, but the Russian ones blew me away. They are like dark chocolate — very dark chocolate. They're full of white nights and strange transformations, villains that read as tragic heroes, doomed heroes that still stand tall.

Plain Kate ended up with a setting that's more Eastern European than anything, but that book of Russian tales cast the spell under which I wrote it. I know I got their weather and the garlic and a minor character named Niki. I hope I got some of their sad triumph, too.

Your story begins “a long time ago...” but it seems to take place in another, more magical world. Do you envision *Plain Kate*'s world as a different one, or, just as in fairy tales and folklore, our world viewed differently?

I think Kate's world of “a long time ago” is the same world as “once upon a time.” It's not our world, in the same way “the king of that country” is never one of the ones on the list from school. But it's not really a world I invented either; it's one I inherited and explored a little.

Kate and her father are carvers, and it is her primary identity. Why carving or woodworking? Why did you think this craft and art form would help you tell the story and explain who Kate is?

Right before I started *Plain Kate* I'd been talking to my dad about his latest woodworking project — he was making a cradle. And then this girl waltzed into my head, and she was a carver and the daughter of a carver. I didn't really think it through; it just happened. It probably reflects deep psychological issues on my part.

I think the nature and function of art and artists is one of my obsessions as a writer, though. There's a character in my work in progress who's a story teller, and one in the book on the backburner who embroiders with feathers. I'm really not sure why I do this, or what it says about me.

Though Kate's world seems in some ways very unfamiliar, the persecution of witches is all too familiar in various cultures around the world. Were there any particular witch-hunting examples, historical or fictional, that you relied on in writing this book?

I read quite a bit about the European witch craze while writing *Plain Kate*, but in the end I deliberately steered clear of modeling the persecution that plagues Kate's world on that history. It was just too great a tragedy to tackle head on. I didn't want to imply that the people who died in the witch craze were really witches, as Linay and Lenore are. And I certainly didn't want to get tangled up in the complicated ways that bit of history feeds into current politics: modern Wiccans use it; feminists use it; even the Nazis used it. Right: backing away . . .

One thing I did do was transplant the prejudice against people with albinism from Tanzania — where being albino can still get you killed as a witch — to Kate's world. I'm sorry that I did that, because albino witches turn out to be a whole cliché of their own. But I wasn't aware of that when I started, and by the time I did learn it, the detail was enmeshed in the plot and I couldn't get it out.

There seems to be two concepts of witchcraft in the story, and they are at odds with each other. One form is of destruction, vengeance, blood and violence, and one is based on healing and arts. Was it important to you to show two sides of the magical coin, or to show the idea of magic and witchcraft from two perspectives?

I think they really are two sides of the same coin, rather than two concepts at odds with each other. They come out of the body in the same way — with blood, tears, and breath — and they operate by the same rule that magic is an exchange of gifts.

What the two takes on the one magic might be about (and I'm making this up on the spot, so bear with me) is two takes on death and grief. There's a bit at the end where Drina cries because "hope will break the heart better than any sorrow." And likewise the heart can break into hope, which is what happens to Kate. Linay's broken heart, on the other hand — well, he could be a manual for what not to do with grief.

Do you have any favorite fairy or folktales?

It's hard to pick a favorite. "Beauty and the Beast" is usually near the top of the list. So is "Puss in Boots." I like Traveller's Return stories, of which Rip Van Winkle is the best known example, and "Oisín in Tir na nÓg" is my favorite. Right now I'm interested in the Godfather Death-type stories, of which "Dr. Urrsenbeck Spins the Bed" from the Grimm tales is the most fleshed-out version. The godson of Death who grows up to become a physician, who cheats Death himself at a crucial moment and then pays dearly for it . . . I might do something with that some day.

Just as with some of the themes and motifs, some of your characters' names seem familiar and others very original. How did you choose those names?

Most of my characters come with names. Katerina Svetlana came into my head with that name, and I decided to keep it, even though Russians don't use middle names in quite that fashion and "Kate" is not a Russian diminutive. Linay came with a name, too — his is entirely invented — and his sister's name, Lenore, came soon after, probably influenced by that Edgar Allen Poe poem on obsessive grief. I kept it, too, even though it doesn't sound Romani. Once characters have names, it's hard to change them.

If characters don't come with names, I look in history books, baby name books, and old maps and lexicons. Usually when I spot the right name, I know it. Drina, Stivo, and Niki were all named that way. Sometimes I have to work on it a little bit. "Daj" really does mean "mother," but the way I use it as a title is an invention. "Baro," likewise, means "big." "Behjet" is an anglicized version of "Behxet," which I thought young readers would stumble over.

Taggle is named after a cat in a poem of mine, Tagglebones. Where that came from, I don't know, but you can still see the echo of it in the three kittens: "Raggle, Taggle, and Bone."

While you have written other books, this is your first novel. How is writing fiction different from writing a memoir or poetry?

Writing fiction and writing poetry aren't as different as you might think. The process is more or less the same. I sit down with a pen and paper — yes, I write novels long hand — and write it down, one magic word at a time.

The difference, of course, is that novels have plot. On the one hand, plot makes it easier — it gives you a place to start writing each day, which in poetry can be very hard to find, and only happens one day in ten or twenty. On the other, to create a spell of that size, to

make something seamless and whole and RIGHT, is very hard. For *Plain Kate*, it took me six years and four different endings.

Talk about writing Taggle, the talking cat, and the role he plays in the novel.

From the moment I started *Plain Kate*, I knew there was a talking cat in it. I don't know where he came from. If I'd thought about whether to include him I'd probably have decided against it — too Disney — but he was part of the original equipment.

Taggle pretty much steals the book. I intended him to be a sidekick, a Sancho Panza type, but he grabbed himself a character arc, and then made a fair bid to be the hero.

He was a hoot to write. While Kate was closing down in the face of strong emotion and Linay was trying to deceive people (and himself) about what his strong emotions were, Taggle was perfectly straightforward. He says exactly what he's thinking; he does exactly what he wants to do. He doesn't care what you think of him — or rather, he assumes you admire and worship him. And, guess what, most people do.

Do you have a sense of what happens to Kate and Taggle after PLAIN KATE ends?

Oh, yes, I know what happens to everyone. I know what happens to the *river*, for heaven's sake: It winds down to Vilroosh, the city of red roofs, where it goes under four bridges and into the ice-bound sea. But if I tell you who follows the river to Vilroosh and why, you'll know too much about the ending of the book. It's not a journey that any of the characters could have imagined for themselves at the beginning.

I don't actually intend to write this, mind you: I don't see *Plain Kate* as needing a sequel. But I know it anyway, because I'm a little bit crazy.

Do you have plans for another novel? If so, will you write for young readers again?

Absolutely. I write what I love to read, and I love to read YA. I'm nearly done with a draft of a book called *Sorrow's Knot*, which will also be published with Arthur A. Levine Books at Scholastic. Here's the pitch:

In the world of Sorrow's Knot, the dead do not rest easy. Every patch of shadow might be home to something hungry and nearly invisible, something deadly. The dead can only be repelled or destroyed with magically knotted cords and yarns. The women who tie these knots are called binders.

Otter is the daughter of Willow, a binder of great power. She's a proud and privileged girl who takes it for granted that she will be a binder some day herself. But when Willow's power begins to turn inward and tear her apart, Otter finds herself trapped with a responsibility she's not ready for, and a power she no longer wants.