

# Puppies, kittens and... MONSTERS FROM OUTER SPACE!

## Louise Jordan, from The Writers' Advice Centre for Children's Books, on the secret world of Series Fiction



Have you heard of *Animal Ark* or *Rainbow Magic*? If not, and you want to write for children, you should have done! *Animal Ark* has sold over 15 million copies worldwide. Together with its spin-off series it now comprises over 100 titles for readers aged 5-12. *Rainbow Magic*, a young fairy fiction series, has sold five million copies in the UK and Commonwealth. Translation rights have been licensed in 17 countries and that list looks sets to grow.

Both come from the book packager Working Partners - a team of editors who create new series fiction for children and teenagers.

Step forward, Cherith Baldry. She's my senior editor at The Writers' Advice Centre but you probably won't have heard of her. Yet Cherith is a bestselling author of more than 50 children's books. In the US, only JK Rowling sells more. But she isn't famous because she writes for a book packager and not directly for a publisher.

It works like this: Bill and Ben of Flowerpot Men International (a fictional UK packager) have just finished doing a presentation to the Editorial

Director of Gosling Books (a fictional big children's publisher). They have demonstrated that there is a gap in the pony books market for girls of around 8-10 years and have suggested a series of short books about a family who run a riding stables in a London suburb. The heroine of the series would be Pamela, the daughter.

'Great stuff!' says the Editorial Director. 'We'll do it.' (Of course in real life she would probably say, 'I'll get back to you next week,' and six months later Bill and Ben would be none the wiser.) So Bill and Ben go away and put together a proper brief, which they will send out to agents saying they are looking for writers. Or they may already have a 'bank' of their own authors whom they can call on.

The briefs for Series Fiction can vary but they are usually very specific. Bill and Ben's would say what sort of girl Pamela is (even describe what she looks like), give details of any family and friends they want included in the stories, describe what the riding stables is like and outline the plots of the first few books.

Interested authors submit a sample and, if this is satisfactory, they are commissioned to write the entire book. This will be edited by Bill

or Ben and presented to the publisher as a complete 'package'. The individual authors' names do not appear on the cover (although they are always credited inside) as the entire series is published under the name of a fictional author.

### WORK ETHIC

Cherith didn't start her working life writing for a packager - although many authors do. Before she came my way, at The Writers' Advice Centre, she had already published a children's science fiction series for Kingsway. As science fiction and fantasy was her main interest she seemed the perfect choice when Puffin came to me looking for authors for their



A few of Cherith's 50 books

new Surfers series. Her subsequent book for them, *Mutiny in Space*, was published in 1997.

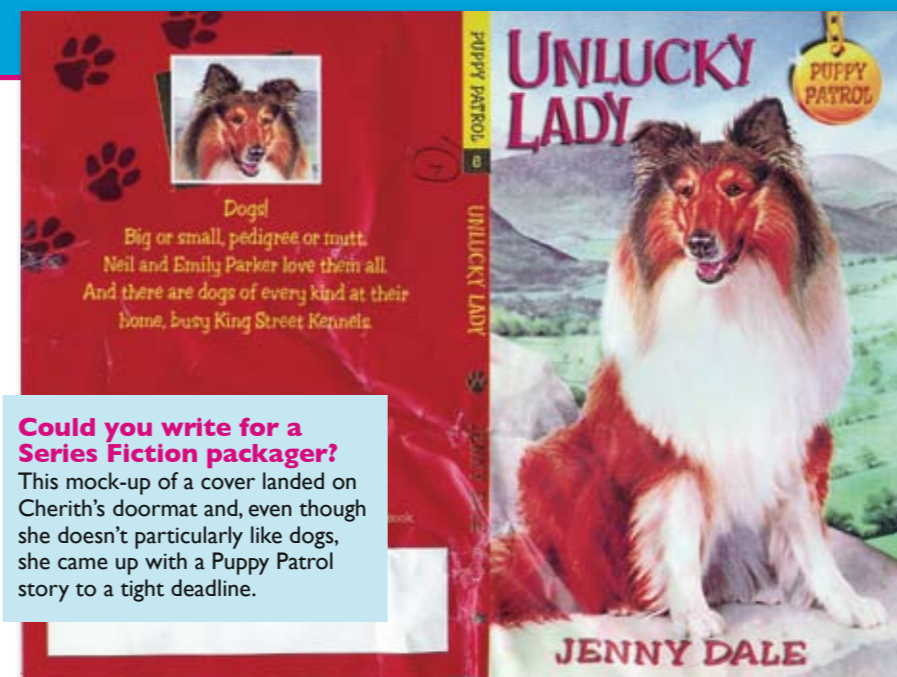
What impressed me most about Cherith, apart from her literary skills, was her professional attitude. As Cherith herself says: 'Don't ever underestimate being reliable, meeting deadlines and being easy to work with.'

She firmly believes, as do I, that there is much to be said for being pragmatic in one's approach, and treating writing as a working career rather than some sort of occasional creative bender. Cherith is at her desk by 9am, takes an hour for lunch and stops around 5pm. That's not to say she doesn't sometimes 'flex' her hours to fit in with other things (for example she works in an Oxfam shop one day a week), but, essentially, she sticks to the 'business' of writing, treating it as a properly paid job - which it now is for her.

It is to Cherith's credit that even when her husband tragically died in a cycling accident eight years ago she never let go of her strong work ethic.

'A few days after he died I remember I had to write a report for a Writers' Advice Centre author,' she tells me. 'I thought my head would explode but I knew I had to do it. Not for you, or even for the author concerned, but for me.'

As a literary consultancy service, publishers and agents often come to us seeking writers for



### Could you write for a Series Fiction packager?

This mock-up of a cover landed on Cherith's doormat and, even though she doesn't particularly like dogs, she came up with a Puppy Patrol story to a tight deadline.

particular projects. By chance our service was launched at around the same time as Working Partners and we were only too happy to help each other out. We gave Working Partners writers and they gave our writers work.

Cherith's first project for them was a series called *Survive*. These books were part fiction, part fact (commonly known as 'faction') and her contribution was a book about hurricanes, titled *Hurricane Horror*. *Volcanic Fury* and *Earthquake Alert* followed.

So far, so good. But what Cherith never suspected was the change of direction her career was about to take. Working Partners presented her with a cover design of a cute-looking dog and the working title *Unlucky Lady*, and told her to write a story for their Puppy Patrol series.

Cherith's initial thoughts were: I can't! 'I'm not a dog lover,' she explains. 'And the whole idea behind Puppy Patrol was about as far away from science as you can get.'

However Cherith rose to the challenge and, against an extremely tight deadline, came up with a story about dogs and sheep-worrying, which was released as *Saving Skye*. Twelve more Puppy Patrol books followed, together with a special edition to finish the series - all published under the author name Jenny Dale.

Cherith has mixed feelings about not writing under her own name. 'Part of me would like the public recognition,' she admits. 'But I look at authors like JK Rowling, who can't even go out without being mobbed, and then I'm quite grateful for the anonymity writing under a pseudonym can offer.'

Once Cherith had established herself writing the Puppy Patrol series, Working Partners were only too happy to offer her more work. *Beast Quest* and *The Abbey Mysteries* followed and, more unusually, a science-fiction series translated into German for sale only in Germany and Austria. 'I can't speak German,' explains Cherith, 'so I can't read my own published work, which feels a little strange.'

However, Cherith's greatest success has come with the creation of *Warriors* - now in its third series and selling second only to Harry Potter in the States. The *Warriors* books are written under the name of Erin Hunter but, like many of

Working Partners' creations, the author doesn't exist. Instead the books are written by a team of three writers - Victoria Holmes, Kate Cary and Cherith. Victoria - a senior editor at Working Partners - comes up with the storylines and a detailed synopsis. And I do mean detailed. The synopsis alone can often be as long as 30,000 words! Cherith and Kate then breathe life into the synopsis to come up with the finished books - some as long as 70,000 words in total.

Working Partners are very open about the fact that their books are written by 'teams' of writers. 'In our experience children aren't particularly interested in the author as an individual,' explains Victoria. 'What they are interested in is good, strong, consistently written stories.'

Because there are three 'Erins', writing the *Warriors* books is all about teamwork. Victoria Holmes may have come up with the concept for the first series but, now the series is established, Cherith and Kate often make development suggestions of their own.

### GAS BILL MONEY

Series Fiction is excellent experience for the new writer and can provide a steady income in an otherwise uncertain market. Top children's agent Lesley Hacroft, of Laurence Pollinger, calls it 'gas bill money'. However many authors are 'sniffy' about this type of work. Some feel that because the idea has already been thought through in detail, it would not be 'their' work. Others find the discipline of working to a brief too demanding. Some even believe that such a commercial form of fiction is demeaning and writing under a pseudonym insulting.

Cherith is robust in her defense of what she does. 'If authors want to make it in the children's publishing world they can't afford to sit around in ivory towers waiting for inspiration to strike,' she says.

Victoria Holmes agrees. 'Writing is about learning a craft and not being precious. Cherith is a superb writer, yet when she needs to she is able to abandon her ego and put aside her own voice.' She also points out that writing for packagers such as Working Partners is great experience and does no harm to an author's CV. 'Every single one of our authors has been

offered work in their own right,' she says.

Cherith is no exception. Aside from *Mutiny in Space* and her series for Kingsway, Macmillan commissioned her to write an animal fantasy trilogy called *Eaglesmount*.

The question I get asked most frequently at The Writers' Advice Centre is 'Can I write?' What authors want to know is if I think they have a reasonable shot at being published. In other words, if they have the 'X Factor'. But it's not a question I can ever answer, because, as Cherith has demonstrated, you don't necessarily need the 'X Factor' to get published.

'Let's face it, I would never have set the world alight as Cherith Baldry,' says Cherith. 'But as Erin Hunter I'm scaling new heights as a writer all the time.'

Personally I think Cherith is being unfair on herself, but she has a point. I've come across many authors, who I would not have credited with any sort of 'X Factor', working hard and persistently and wanting only one thing - to get published. Writing to a brief, for a packager, is an excellent way to reach that goal.

• *Working Partners are always looking for new authors. If you think you've got what it takes to write series fiction for children visit [www.workingpartnersltd.co.uk](http://www.workingpartnersltd.co.uk). Please note that they do NOT accept unsolicited manuscripts.*

## TIPS FOR SEPTEMBER

### 1 Jog your brain every day

The most important time to write is when you don't really feel like it, even if it's just a few sentences. Like exercise, writing is a discipline and unless you make it part of your routine it's all too easy to give up.

### 2 Don't be precious

If someone offers advice, be it a friend or an agent, accept it with good grace. It never fails to amaze me how many people approach us at the Writers' Advice Centre clearly just wanting to be told how great their work is. If you truly think your work is beyond criticism, go and find a publisher. Even if you do succeed, a good editor will usually insist on changes.

### 3 Remember size matters

In the latest *Children's Bookseller*, Caroline Horn comments that 'the days of a 40,000 word cut-off for children's books are over'. The *Warriors* series mentioned here and the *Harry Potter* novels seem to bear her opinion out. But as a new writer be wary of writing books of much over 60,000 words. Big books dictate big cover prices and it can prove hard to persuade a 10-year-old (and a publisher) to gamble lots of money on a book by an author they've never heard of.

As Head Reader for Puffin, Louise Jordan rejected lots of books but wished she had time to give feedback. So in 1994 she set up **The Writers' Advice Centre for Children's Books** (tel 07979 905353, [writersadvice.co.uk](http://writersadvice.co.uk)) and has been helping people get published ever since. She is also the author of **How to Write for Children and Get Published** (Piatkus).



In America, Cherith's books are outsold only by Harry Potter