

# Author Interview with Helen Peters

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**Hello everybody! Today, I'm very excited to be sharing an author interview with the amazing Helen Peters. Onto the post!**



**1. Hi Helen, thanks so much for being here today! I know this might be tricky given you write across varying age ranges and genres, but how would you describe your writing in 5 words?**

Thank you so much for having me, Amy! Five words is tricky! But if I had to narrow it down to five things my books have in common, I'd say adventure, bravery, families, friendship and nature.

**2. Your early reader series about Jasmine Green, which I need to get properly caught up on, are all focused around different animals. What made you want to write an Animal Ark-esque series? What are the most interesting animal facts you've come across while researching?**

Spookily, my editor and I separately came up with the same idea at the same time – a nine-year-old girl with a vet mum and a farmer dad, who loves animals and gets into all sorts of scrapes while rescuing them. My editor pitched me this idea in a meeting about another book, and when I opened my notebook on the train home I saw I'd scribbled down exactly the same idea a couple of weeks earlier! I suppose it's not as coincidental as it sounds, as I had wanted to write a younger series for ages, and this was an obvious idea for me: I grew up on a farm and have a sister who's a vet's nurse and a farmer brother, so I knew I could rely on them to inspire stories and fact-check them! I love researching the title animal for each book.

Probably the most incredible facts I've discovered are about the extraordinary abilities of assistance dogs. When I was researching *A Puppy Called Sparkle*, I attended a fascinating webinar hosted by the charity Support Dogs, and discovered how support dogs can change the lives of people with epilepsy. One woman talked about how she couldn't leave her house before she got her dog, in case she had a fit in public. Now her dog alerts her exactly twenty-five minutes before she has a fit, so she can get to a safe place and alert people around her. The dog gets it right every single time. It's amazing to think that a dog's sense of smell is so good that scientists are learning from dogs how to detect scents that are currently undetectable by technology. Dogs can detect diseases in

such tiny amounts that it's equivalent to a human detecting half a teaspoonful of sugar in an Olympic-sized swimming pool full of water. (I could go on forever about the abilities of dogs!)

### **3. On that note, who are some special animals you've known throughout your life? I always LOVE asking this question!!**

The first special animals I remember were two orphaned lambs that my sister and I hand-reared when we were very young. We called them Jane and Susan without checking their gender, so we ended up with two enormous rams called Jane and Susan. They were very tame even when they grew up, and let us ride on their backs – until they sped up and threw us off! I also had a cat called Noddy who was incredibly sweet-natured, and had regular litters of such lovely kittens that it was always easy to find good homes for them. My sister later had a wonderful tame sheep called Jasper whom she'd hand-reared. He made friends with a duckling, who used to ride around on his back, and they became the inspiration for Jasper and Lucy in *The Secret Hen House Theatre*.

I now have two gorgeous cats, a brother and sister called Inka and Boris. They have completely different personalities but get on together brilliantly, and they always sleep curled up together on the sofa, which is so sweet to see. They're really gentle and affectionate, and just love to be around us, so if I go out to the garden to read or write, both cats will follow me out and snuggle up on either side of me. They're really lovely companions.

### **4. I'm such a huge fan of your older middle grade too, and there's so much of it to enjoy. The Secret Hen House Theatre is reminiscent of classic stories like those by Noel Streatfield, so I'd love to know which books you consider modern classics? And which older classics do you love?**

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Thank you! I couldn't wish for a lovelier compliment than to be compared

with Noel Streatfeild, who is one of my all-time favourite authors. I love the way her characters, both children and adults, are so real and rounded. Apart from Noel Streatfeild's books, two of my favourite classics are *The Railway Children* and *Little Women*. I love that they feature strong female characters without much money, trying to make a living from their talents. The worlds in these books are so fully drawn and the family relationships feel realistic and unsentimental. I also adore *Just William* and *Pippi Longstocking*; they're so funny, fierce and original. Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* trilogy is wonderful. And *Winnie the Pooh* is genius.

In terms of modern classics, I adore Frank Cottrell Boyce's *Framed*, and the audiobook is perfection too. *Holes* by Louis Sachar is plotted with jaw-dropping brilliance, and Hilary McKay's *The Skylarks' War* blew me away with the deceptively simple beauty of the writing. I think Judith Eagle is fantastic too, and her books have the feel of modern classics. That's just a few that come to mind – there are so many wonderful children's books to choose from!

**5. Another of your books is time slip story *Evie's Ghost*, which would be perfect to read around this time of year. How do you feel about ghosts? What's your favourite/least favourite thing about Halloween?**

I'm not a big fan of Halloween (I save my energy for Christmas, which I love) but I do like a pumpkin lantern, and I really enjoyed writing about Jasmine and Tom planning a secret Halloween party in *An Owl Called Star*.

And I've always been interested in ghost stories; I love how a writer can conjure up such an intense and unnerving atmosphere when there are supernatural forces at work. Whether or not the reader or writer believes in ghosts, I think ghost stories are a great way to explore the idea of how the past can come back to haunt us. But it was the time slip element that I really wanted to explore in *Evie's Ghost*. I love the idea of being able to travel back to the past (temporarily!) and I often think about how that experience would change our perspective on our own lives. And I'm fascinated by the ghostly echoes of the past that are all around us every

day: Roman mosaics found by builders; crockery dug up in gardens; an old diary found in an attic, that sort of thing.

My new older middle grade novel, *Friends and Traitors*, is set in a stately home that dates back to Elizabethan times, complete with ghost stories and a secret passage. I love visiting old houses; it's that feeling of literally stepping into the past. So I always love setting a story in a house with a long history.

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**6. My personal favourite of your books is *Anna at War*, which focuses on a very overlooked part of world war two: the lead up to the holocaust and then the kindertransport. What made you want to write about it, especially Kristallnacht? Are there any other underrepresented parts of history you'd like to shine a spotlight on in future books?**

A few things led me to writing *Anna at War*. After *Evie's Ghost*, my editor asked if I'd like to write another historical novel, about any period I was interested in. I've always been interested in the World War 2 Home Front, so I started there. Then I happened to be re-reading Anne Frank's diary, and I was so struck by Anne's bravery, honesty and hope, and her ability to articulate her feelings and experiences in writing at such a young age. I started to wonder if I could write about a child a bit like Anne. Around that time, my husband, who's the headmaster of a boarding school, met a woman in her nineties who wanted to thank the school for taking her in as a refugee from Nazi Germany. She told him about her terrifying journey to England by train and boat, and this got me interested in the Kindertransport. Many people who came to England on Kindertransports have written and spoken very powerfully about their experiences, so I was able to do a lot of research, and the character of Anna came from that. In so many cases, the life-changing event that led to parents making the decision to send their children to England was the horrific experience of

Kristallnacht, so that's where I decided to begin Anna's story.

There are definitely under-represented parts of history that I'd like to shine a spotlight on in future books – what a great question! *Friends and Traitors* deals with the subject of British Nazi sympathisers in World War 2, an aspect of the war that was little known until recent years and still isn't discussed much, for obvious reasons. I also love writing about people whose lives aren't often documented in traditional history – children and servants, for example. The two protagonists in *Friends and Traitors* are both fourteen-year-old girls, one a servant and one a schoolgirl, who stumble upon a plot that could change the course of history.

**7. Your books are so varied in genre and age range, and I was wondering about how you recommend other writers maintain versatility in their work? What are the main differences for you when writing early readers instead of middle grade, and vice versa?**

I think every writer has to do what works for them, but I would definitely recommend reading a lot in your chosen genre or age range before you start. I'd been reading aloud to my kids for many years when I began the *Jasmine Green* series, so I had a sense of what appealed to children in that age range, and how to pace a chapter book.

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As for writing in different genres, I just write about things that interest me – social history, theatre, farming, family and friendship, for example. So I'd recommend following your own interests and obsessions. Also I like to set myself a new challenge in each book, to stop myself from getting bored or stale. So in *Friends and Traitors*, I've switched between the points of view of two characters for the first time, which has been a really difficult but very valuable learning curve! I love writing for different age ranges, because having a series of younger chapter books on the go means I'm constantly switching between genres and age ranges – I can write a draft

of a younger book in between drafts of an older book, so I always have work to do and I never get bored.

The main difference when writing early readers rather than middle grade is the obvious one, that they're much shorter. This means I focus on one main plot and far fewer characters, aiming for plenty of action and adventure in each chapter to keep the reader engaged. For some reason I find the characters in the younger stories much easier to create. The whole process just feels much more straightforward and less agonising. The older books take me FAR longer to write, and there's a lot more hair-pulling and despair involved! You need a lot more plot, depth and detail in an older book, and because I'm always juggling different storylines, it's very easy to go off on a tangent and then realise that the carefully crafted chapters I've spent weeks writing are actually not necessary for the story at all. But I love the challenge of the older books, and it's hugely satisfying once they're finally done.

## **8. Another writing question now, what is your writing routine like, if you have one? Do you have any unusual habits or quirks?**

I wish I could say I write by candlelight in a treehouse, watched over by my companion owl, but in fact my writing routine is very dull and predictable. I do my best to keep mornings free for writing, starting straight after breakfast (breakfast is VERY important to me), and writing until lunchtime. I try not to get distracted by emails or Twitter (except for emails from my editors, which I can never resist looking at immediately). By lunchtime I don't have much creative energy left so, unless I'm racing towards a deadline, the afternoons are for admin and other stuff. Whenever I have time, I go for an afternoon walk – I'm lucky enough to live between the South Downs and the sea, so it's a lovely place to walk. Many writers talk about having great ideas and fixing plot holes while walking, but that rarely happens to me – I just love being outdoors after being hunched up at my desk for hours, tensing my shoulders and forgetting to breathe.

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**9. Finally, can you tell us anything about what you're working on at the moment/will be releasing next? I'm so excited for your new upper middle grade next year!**

Thank you for being excited about the new book, Amy – that's so nice to hear! I've been working on Friends and Traitors for three years now, and I can't wait for it to be finally out in the world. In my head, I like to describe it as 'Malory Towers meets The Remains of the Day'.

The story starts in May 1940. In the midst of the Dunkirk evacuations, Sidney's boarding school is evacuated from the Sussex coast to the very grand Stanbrook House in Oxfordshire. On the same day, another fourteen-year-old girl, Nancy, arrives at Stanbrook to begin her first job as the earl's housemaid. Both girls overhear strange and shocking conversations involving the earl, but nobody will believe them when they report their suspicions. So, despite their mutual hostility, they have to join forces to concoct a daring plot to uncover what's really going on at Stanbrook House.

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**Favourite play/musical, in honour of the Secret Hen House Theatre?**

Matilda the Musical – just genius, and how brilliant to have a hit show where the heroes are a schoolgirl, a teacher and a librarian!

**Sunrise or sunset?**

Ooh, tough one. I used to be an evening person, but these days mornings are definitely my favourite, so I'd have to say sunrise.

**Animal you'd most like to be for the day?**

A swallow – I'd love to be able to fly like that!

**Top reads of 2022 so far?**



Strangely, three of my favourite reads this year have all been set in Paris. I loved *The Pear Affair* by Judith Eagle, *Libby and the Parisian Puzzle* by Jo Clarke and *Alice Éclair: Spy Extraordinaire* by Sarah Todd Taylor. I was also blown away this year by *King of Shadows*, by Susan Cooper – it was published in 1999 so I came to it late, but what a brilliant time slip story of a boy who goes back to Elizabethan London and performs in Shakespeare's first production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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And in adult novels, I loved *Small Miracles* by Anne Booth, about three nuns who win the lottery. It's a beautiful story, and who could resist that premise?! I'm currently enjoying Robin Stevens' new novel, *The Ministry of Unladylike Activity*. Robin writes such brilliant stories and I fell in love with May, the narrator, from the very first page.

### **3 upcoming releases you're excited for?**

The first one is a recent release: I'm really looking forward to reading Rosie Raja, *Churchill's Spy*, by Sufiya Ahmed. I've heard great things about it, and I'm always interested in fiction set in the Second World War. And I'm very excited for the release of *Libby and the Highland Heist* by Jo Clarke, and Sarah Todd Taylor's second *Alice Éclair* book, both due out early next year. I can't wait to see what Libby and Alice get up to next!

**Thank you so much for reading! Have you read Helen's books, and if so, which is your favourite? What's your favourite animal fact? I'd love to chat in the comments!**

Amy xx

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