



# Interview of the month

April 2019

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Ellie Irving  
Author of 'The Matilda Effect'



**SheCanHeCan: As the author of books such as 'The Mute Button' and 'For the Record', you have had a lot of success writing for young children. Your book 'The Matilda Effect' is one that particularly struck a chord with SheCanHeCan. For our readers, can you tell us more about Matilda and your inspiration for creating her?**

Ellie Irving: When I was nine years old, I wrote a letter to the President of the United States, George Bush (which gives you an idea of how old I am) asking him to send me up on a rocket as part of his recently announced space programme. He didn't respond, but that didn't put me off. I continued to read all I could on stars and planets and constellations - so when my publisher asked, three years ago, what I was going to write for my next book, I knew that space would somehow be involved. As I was mulling over what exactly to write about, a play called Photograph 51 was staged in London, where I lived, starring Nicole Kidman as Rosalind Franklin, the first scientist to photograph DNA. The play dealt with how Mr Watson and Mr Crick used this photo in their own work, getting all the glory (and a Nobel Prize) for their breakthrough on DNA while Rosalind Franklin was somewhat overlooked. This premise intrigued me enough to do some more research. I soon learned about Jocelyn Bell Burnell, the first person to discover radio pulsars, but it was her boss, using Jocelyn's discovery in his own work, who went on to win the Nobel Prize in Physics, while again, Jocelyn Bell Burnell was somewhat overlooked. I could see a pattern emerging. And I wanted to write about this sort of injustice. At the same time, I discovered a movement called Let Toys Be Toys, which aims to stop manufacturers promoting some toys as 'Boys only' or 'Girls only' and there had also been a news article about how a little girl wrote to Clark's because she'd been told that the shoes she wanted - dinosaur ones - were only available for boys. It felt like a very timely book to write - about a girl who did something (inventing and engineering) most people thought was for boys - and all of these things sort of came together to inspire the story.

"I love the smell of books, there's nothing quite like holding the real thing in your hand."

**You've said that you mum enrolled you in a library before you were even born. Why do you believe that in today's technology-savvy society, it is still important for children to read diverse books?**

I think there are two strands to this – firstly; there is something quite magical about going into a library, or a bookshop; somewhere that has rows and rows and shelves and shelves of books.

I love the smell of books, and even though I think e-readers are great, for me, there's nothing quite like holding the real thing in your hand. Because we can access anything and everything at the click of a button these days, I think it's important to read a diverse range of books to help children navigate their way through the world. The great thing about reading is that books give you the chance to go on adventures you may never otherwise go on; they can take you to new worlds, parallel worlds, exotic places and give you all sorts of experiences. Particularly if you read books about characters that look different from you, or come from a different background, with a different cultural heritage. Books can make you walk in someone else's shoes and can enhance your understanding of the world and your place within it.

**Gender inequality in recent months has increasingly hit the headlines and the gender pay gap is an issue that affects the majority of women in most professions. Do you think the children's book writing industry also upholds gender inequality?**

I can only answer this using my personal experience, as I don't know figures across the whole industry. But the large majority of people that I work with in children's publishing – from my agent, to all of my editors, copy editors, publicists and marketing people – are all women. And commenting on the books I see on the shelves – there are many, many female writers doing excellent work right now, winning national book awards and appearing on bestseller lists. I think the biggest challenge to the book industry currently is making sure that all types of people's stories are being read; whether that's publishing more people of colour, or those from say, working class backgrounds. I also think we should get away from saying things like 'oh, boys only read books with a male central character,' because that's simply not true. Let's stop limiting what children want to read based on the gender of the main character, or of the author.

**Growing up, during your university years and early days of your career, are there any particular moments where you felt that your career dreams would be more difficult to achieve because of your gender?**

I've never had a moment where I've thought I'm not going to be a writer because I'm a woman, and luckily no-one's ever said that to me. I think there is a genuine meritocracy in publishing; if your book's good enough, someone will publish it... eventually. (I received a LOT of rejections before I sold 'For the Record'.)

**What potential do you think fiction writing has to change the way children think of themselves as individuals?**

There's a massive potential! I honestly believe that books, and the power of reading, can change the world! Think of all the books you loved as a child and would return to again and again – everybody has at least one. And the key is to keep children interested in reading and in stories. Books help to inspire empathy and understanding and we could all do with a little more of that in the world today.

# About Ellie Irving

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Ellie Irving was born in Bristol, but raised in a hamlet on the outskirts of Southend-on-Sea by a family of avid readers. So avid, in fact, her mum enrolled her in the local library before she'd even been born, which was awkward for all concerned. Ellie's passion for writing stories flourished aged seven, when her parents bought her a Petite Super International typewriter for Christmas, and there was no stopping her. After studying for a Broadcasting Degree at the University of Leeds, Ellie realised there were too few home makeover shows in the world, and worked on a number of DIY and Garden programmes for UK Style. She then returned to studying and completed an MA in Screenwriting in 2008. She lives in Southend-on-Sea with her husband and son.

Interviewed by Kasey Robinson  
Design by Sophie I. Nulli

