



LIVING THE DREAM: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSS WELFORD

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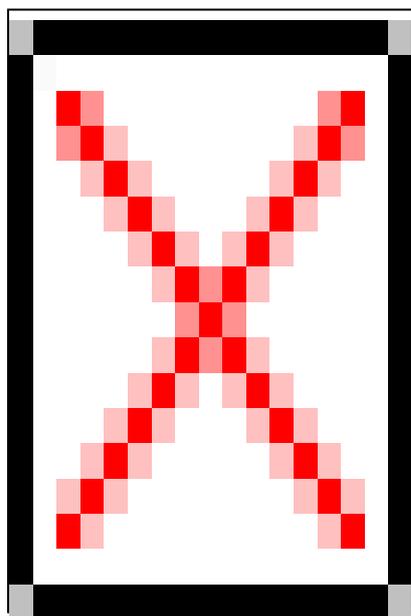
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Author **Ross Welford** interviewed about his new book **When We Got Lost in Dreamland**.

Books for Keeps first [interviewed Ross Welford](#) [3] in 2016 when his debut novel for children [Time Travelling with a Hamster](#) [4] was shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award**. We catch up with him five years and five books later, on publication of **When We Got Lost in Dreamland** and talk stories, dreaming and magic.

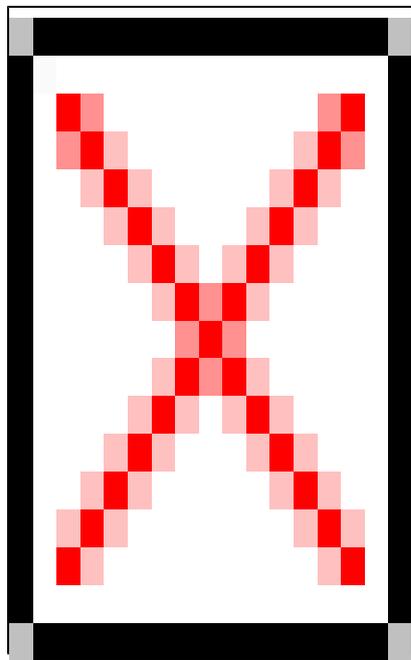


Time travel, eternal life, and turning invisible? Ross Welford's books tend to feature big ideas and his latest, **When We Got Lost in Dreamland**, is no different. Eleven nearly twelve-year old Malky comes into possession of a machine, a Dreaminator no less, which gives him the ability to live in and control his dreams. What's more, he can take his little brother Seb with him. At first, this is simply great fun, and the two boys have fabulous adventures, but Malky's control over what's happening begins to wane and then Seb is taken prisoner in Dreamland, falling into a coma in real life. Saving his brother means facing up to some of Malky's own nightmares. As always with Ross's stories, the starting point would seem to be a glorious, 'What if?'. Is that how his ideas come to him?

'For the first two or three books, I didn't really have to think about it, they were just ideas that popped into my head. I say that like it was easy, and it wasn't. Now that we're six books in, I understand better than I did what my brand is. I don't mean to sound cynical, but I suppose I know now what people want from a Ross Welford book. So yes, it does

tend to start from a big 'what if' - they're getting bigger and bigger - but it is a good point to start?.

'Very often with my books, we're exploring an entirely different life or an entirely different world and there needs to be a mechanism for getting into it. I can't remember where I got the idea for doing it through dreams, it will probably be a half-remembered conversation or something I saw on television. But I ended up buying a couple of books about lucid dreaming. I'd heard of that before and I'd always thought maybe I could use it, but I didn't have an idea for exactly how to do it, until I thought about a contraption. I often shy away from contraptions; I think they should be used very sparingly but the Dreaminator just came to me one night. I thought you could hang it above your bed, a bit like a native American dream catcher?.'



No matter the worlds in which they're set, all of Ross's books have family relationships at their heart, and father son relationships in particular. The key to Malky's nightmare and to saving Seb lies in his relationship with his father, and the eccentric creator of the Dreaminator, Kenneth McKinley has his own special, and for this reader at least, intensely moving reasons for keeping his machine close.

'Both of those relationships emerged during the writing' says Ross. 'I didn't set out at chapter one with any particular notion of writing about father son relationships, and it was only when I got to the end of draft one' - he corrects himself - 'I say draft one, it was draft minus one, the stuff that I write just for myself to see. It was only when I got to the end of that that I realised, 'Oh yes, there's something going on there' and went back to work on it more. The bit with McKinley was the bit I was most uncertain about in the book. I wished I had another whole chapter, another 1,000 words to explore that a bit more but I struggle to get my word count down, this is 75,000 words it could easily have been 95,000 and I don't want to write a book that long.'

Another common feature is that all the books are set in the north east, which is where Ross grew up. It certainly helps root his books in a very stable here and now, no matter what's going on, and it's lovely to hear the Geordie accent too. 'I like playing with the accents.' says Ross, 'I've got to be a little bit careful of how much I do it, but I think ten/eleven-year-olds are able to understand hints of accents. You can put in a 'Howay' that will suggest that the character is Geordie without having to go and laboriously research the dialect.' Irvine Welsh he cheerfully isn't!

Reading up about Ross's childhood I discovered an extraordinary fact: at the age of six, he discovered and fell in love with magic. It's been 'an obsession' ever since, and he's now so good at magic tricks that in 2019 he was admitted to the Magic Circle. (He performed a rope trick at the audition which you're pretty well guaranteed to see if you book Ross for a school visit ?). That knowledge suddenly seemed to make his books move into even sharper focus.

'It took me by surprise too! It was only once I'd written two books that I realised that my magic obsession did inform my writing in some way. I thought 'There's a theme here, with impossible things happening, time travel and

invisibility??. Magicians are always making things disappear and in some ways that does make it a little bit easier when it comes to coming up with ideas. I can think about what would be impossible, and if it actually happened in the real, contemporary world, how would it play out, because people in my stories don't just accept that these things can happen. For example, I've been trying and failing to write a story about a boy or a girl who could fly, and I might end up writing it but at the moment I'm stuck on the question of what if somebody sees him. In most kids' books - I'm generalising, but if a kid somehow starts flapping his wings and flying, everyone around him goes 'Woaah, look at little Billy, he can fly!' And well, that wouldn't really happen! He'd be on **This Morning** with Phil and Holly demonstrating it over the Thames, the **Daily Mail** would come outside his house and there'd be scientists with probes and all sorts. So yeah, making something impossible play out in real life is a bit like a magic trick.?

Ross has been happily performing this kind of magic trick in his writing now for six years, and, fortunately for readers, is set to carry on. The more mind-expanding, heart-warming stories he pulls out of his hat, the better.

Andrea Reece is managing editor of **Books for Keeps**.

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