

MEET THE AUTHORS

EVA IBBOTSON (PROGRAMME 2)

CHILD

Meet the Authors, meets Eva Ibbotson

CHILD

My favourite book of Eva Ibbotson's is *Which Witch*. There's this wizard called Arriman who wants a wife so he's having a contest about it.

CHILD

Belladonna tried to do magic but she accidentally turned it into perfumed flowers instead of a blood sucking vampire. It was really funny.

CHILD

My favourite book is *Not Just a Witch*. If I could be a character I'd be Heckie because I think her toe of transformation and her knuckle of power are really good and I'd be very, very careful not to use up my friends.

CHILD

My favourite character was Mr. Gurgle. I found it very funny when he was trying to make cheese tap dance. He also got this cheese which had a really poisonous stink, so I really liked him.

CHILD

My favourite of Eva Ibbotson's books is *Journey to the River Sea* because it's more realistic and very exciting. If I could be a character I would be Maia because she wants to learn about Brazilian life, and that's the sort of thing that I would like to do.

CHILD

One of the books I've read is *The Secret of Platform 13*. This book is full of ghosts and hags, like Odge.

READER – EXTRACT FROM ‘THE SECRET OF PLATFORM 13’

CHILD

Eva Ibbotson was born in 1925 in Vienna, in Austria. When she was only 8 she came to live in Britain with her father, who was a scientist. They wanted to get away from Hitler and the Nazis who were becoming very powerful in her country. Eva has written many books for adults and children and even though she is now an elderly woman Eva is still writing.

CHILD

Eva Ibbotson lives in Newcastle, not far from our school, West Jesmond Primary and today some of us are off to visit her at her home. See you there.

CHILDREN: I’m Sophie, I’m Wilham and I’m Catherine, and here we are at Eva Ibbotson’s house.

EVA IBBOTSON

Hello, how nice to see you, come on in. Right, I’ll take you up to my sitting room on the first floor where I write. It’s a sort of study. I like to be able to look out the window.

CHILD

It’s nice to have a sea view.

EVA IBBOTSON

I just sit there, and I stare at the trees until I get an idea. I like to sit at the same place every day, then I feel the idea can possibly come and find me, you know?

CHILD

This is a really odd desk.

EVA IBBOTSON

It is, it’s very old. It must be more than 100 years old. It belonged to my mother and it came from Vienna and then to London and now up here to Newcastle.

CHILD

Do you write with pen?

EVA IBBOTSON

I do, I do. I always start with a pen, in fact with about 15 pens and then I have a special notebook. A lot of writers are very fussy about their notebook.

CHILD

What's this old book here?

EVA IBBOTSON

Well, I have that because it's very precious to me. It was made by my mother for her younger sister and it must be 90 years old, this book, or more. My mother wrote it when she was about your age, and as you see, it's all illustrated. It's a fairy story, but as you see it's in German and the script is very difficult. But it says Kitty's birthday story, because Kitty was her name.

CHILD

It's beautiful.

EVA IBBOTSON

Lovely, isn't it?

CHILD

It's got beautiful pictures too.

EVA IBBOTSON

This is a china dog with lopped ears, and one of the very few things my family brought from Vienna, because they left with very little luggage and we were very, very fond of it, and underneath for years it used to say Eva's Hunte, which is Eva's doggie, but it's got rubbed out now.

CHILD

Eva, we've got lots of questions we want to ask you.

EVA IBBOTSON

Yes, do sit down on the sofa and ask me anything you like.

CHILD

Your mother was a successful writer and so are you. Do you think writing can run in the family?

EVA IBBOTSON

I think it probably can, you know I think, you know, a tendency, if you like even a talent can run in the family. It does with sport you often see it and with music you see it very much. But the talent is only a little bit of it because then you have to start working very, very hard.

CHILD

How did you start writing, what gives you the idea of starting writing?

EVA IBBOTSON

I don't know, Catherine, it's an odd thing. I think writers are just people who just write, you know, like if you sing you suddenly find yourself singer or making up a song, and you don't ask why, it's just part of you, and I came over to England when I was 8, didn't I? And I found a notebook the other day when I was clearing out, and I'd scribbled a story in German, because of course that's what we spoke in Austria. Scribble, scribble, scribble, it wasn't very good, it was about a kitten or something, and then there was three month when I couldn't understand anything anybody said, because they were speaking England. And I wandered around saying, I don't understand, I don't understand and then a little bit towards the end of the notebook, there was another story. Scribble, scribble, scribble, only in England, you know. So I must have just gone on scribbling in whatever language I could talk, about why? I don't know why. I was amazed when I began to earn some money, I thought, no-ones going to give me money for scribbling, but in the end they did, so here I am, still doing it at my extreme old age. I'm very lucky.

CHILD

The children with the saddest backgrounds in your books seem to be very strong people, like Maia, in *The Journey to the River Sea* who has no parents. How do these characters relate to your own childhood and the kind of person you are?

EVA IBBOTSON

I had a childhood where I didn't see much of my parents. I was always going backwards and forwards on trains and across Europe and sometimes I'd catch one parent and sometimes I'd catch the other. So I've always felt, I suppose, very close to children who have to make their own families. Find their own people that they belong to or love and this is one of my beliefs that if you're unfortunate enough not to have a close family you can still make one for yourself.

CHILD

I've read the *Star of Kazan* and Vienna sounded like a lovely place to live. How many of your childhood memories are in the book?

EVA IBBOTSON

I was younger than you are now when I left Vienna and I do remember things, but not as, perhaps as much as you think. But my mother's stories and my aunt's stories and my grandmother's stories have all got joined up, you know, into a sort of family history. Like the fact that the cucumbers had to be sliced so thinly that you could read the newspaper through it, that comes from my own family. And there's a lot of stories like that. It was a very rich place to live.

READER – EXTRACT FROM 'THE STAR OF KAZAN'

CHILD

Have you used any other places where you've lived as a setting for a book?

EVA IBBOTSON

I do notice when I answer children's letters that I seem to have a bit of a passion for islands. There's an island in *Monster Mission* and there's an island in *The Secret of Platform 13* and we did used to go to a wonderful island in the Outer Hebrides when I was, when I first came to England. It was absolutely beautiful, like I've described, you know, white sand beaches and seals wandering round and watching us swim, and hundreds of birds and, you know, that's always been a bit of a dream to me, an island.

CHILD

Is it true that you've based some of the witches in your books on members of your own family? If so, why?

EVA IBBOTSON

I don't know why Sophie, but it's absolutely true, I'm afraid. My theory is that the world is full of witches and they aren't all bad and evil, or they're just people who are a little bit over the top, you know, and my relatives were very much over the top. In *Which Witch* there's a very old, old witch who keeps getting her spells wrong you could say she's a bit dotty. And I had a grandmother who was a bit like that.

And there was another witch in that, who's always rather wet and she has an octopus for a familiar and I had an aunt who kept an aquarium, she loved fish, and the aquarium always leaked and so she was always a bit wet. So, you know, they are a bit based, but they're very exaggerated. My grandmother wasn't quite so weird but, I'm afraid it's true, yes it is true. I find that the characters I like, whether they're witches or ghosts or anything are always the sort of the underdogs, the ones that don't quite make it, you know. I don't think I like people to be too successful.

CHILD

I like the hand in the *Haunting of Hiram*?

EVA IBBOTSON

Yes, I'd forgotten the hand. The hand of glory, it comes out from the bottom of the cinema. And it manages, but it has to write with one finger, with a lipstick on the screen. Yes, that's a very good example of people that I get quite fond of. I like people who overcome their difficulties, like, you know, being only a hand which is not at all easy.

CHILD

Do you believe in ghosts and witches, and did that inspire you to write about them in your books?

EVA IBBOTSON

Ah, yes, I'm quite often asked that and I have to say, I don't think I do believe in them, do you, can I ask you whether you believe in ghosts?

CHILD

Well, yes

EVA IBBOTSON

You'd be a no, and you'd be a yes. So what about you?

CHILD

I'd probably be a no, too.

EVA IBBOTSON

It's difficult isn't it because things happen that are very puzzling, don't they?

CHILD

I've read one of your ghost books, but now I'm reading *Journey to the River Sea* set in the Amazon in Brazil. Why did you suddenly change about what you wrote about?

EVA IBBOTSON

I didn't really do it on purpose but I had a husband I liked very much, I was very fond of him and he died quite suddenly and at the same time I got ill and although I didn't mind making jokes I sort of slightly felt it would be rather nice not to have to make jokes, you know. And my witch and ghost books are, I'm always trying to make children laugh, which is a good thing, but I slightly ran out of jokes and I thought well, I'd like to do something that's just about a real adventure, in a real place and I also wanted to write about animals and insects because my husband was a naturalist. And he loved animals and he turned over a stone or something, you know, it was a whole world underneath of grubs and, and things that other people would say "eeugh" about, you know, but they weren't to him, they were friends and they became friends to me.

READER – EXTRACT FROM 'JOURNEY TO THE RIVER SEA'

CHILD

How much research do you do for your books?

EVA IBBOTSON

A lot, actually. For *Journey to the River Sea* a tremendous amount, you know? Even books where you'd think I wouldn't have to research much like *The Secret of Platform 13* and I have some harpies in that book. And I didn't know very much about harpies, there's a lot written about you know, they're winged and they have claws and they're extremely unpleasant and they make awful smells but I read about Greek harpies and I read about harpies from the underworld. So, yes, I probably spent as much time researching as I do writing. The internet helps now, but I don't use it as much as I use books because there's always just a bit more in a book, you know.

CHILD

What things do you really care about?

EVA IBBOTSON

My family, obviously, very much. I have four children and seven grandchildren. I love music very much not messing up the world I care about. Peace I care about, very much. So I care about human life I suppose.

CHILD

Thank you Eva, we've really enjoyed talking to you.

EVA IBBOTSON

I've very much enjoyed talking to you, thank you for coming. It was good to see you.

CHILDREN

Thank you.

CHILD

Meet the Authors features author Eva Ibbotson, children from West Jesmond Primary School in Newcastle and the actress Alex Treguire. It was produced for BBC School Radio by Jo Daykin.