

## Q&A with Melina Marchetta

Author of *Finnikin of the Rock*, Viking, October 2008, \$24.95

### **When did you first hear/know that you had Finnikin's voice?**

It was three months after taking long service leave from teaching. I remember just walking hours and hours every day and clearing my head of students' voices. The moment I lost those voices, Finnikin, and the character of Evanjalin, slipped in. It was as if they were waiting. I knew their story was going to be about the loss of homeland, that they were refugees of some sort and that I would focus on their journey back home. New York (where I was at the time) is a very socially aware city; there were posters of Darfur on the trains and it's the most multi-cultural place I've ever visited. I was certain it would be about displacement of some sort but it took a while to accept that it would be a fantasy.

### **Of all the characters—who was the most favourite/frustrating for you to write and why?**

Finnikin was definitely a challenge, especially because he had to keep up with a personality as strong as Evanjalin's. In the early drafts he came across too weak because she was running around and doing all the work, but in other drafts he came across too strong and arrogant, saving the day. I had to find the middle ground with Finn and make sure that he wasn't the all-knowing all-powerful one. I'm not a very pragmatic person and he is, so it was difficult to deal with him. I'm used to having highly emotional narrators so I didn't really understand Finnikin for a long time and we clashed a lot.

### **Describe how *Finnikin of the Rock* has been a natural progression for you as a writer:**

With *Finnikin* I really wanted to challenge myself beyond the natural style evident in *Alibrandi* and *Francesca*. I would never have been able to write *Finnikin* if I hadn't written *On the Jellicoe Road*. While my first two novels were driven by character and dialogue, in *Jellicoe* there were very surreal moments that seemed quite mythical and I was forced to bring the novel to life through descriptive and figurative language. *Jellicoe* was also set outside my very familiar world of Sydney so with *Finnikin* I took a step further and created a land. That doesn't mean I'm going to constantly move further away with every novel I write. It just means there's a link between my works. The novel I'm writing at the moment is set in contemporary Sydney and explores relationships between fathers and sons. I would never have been able to tackle that if I hadn't explored the relationship between Finnikin and his father.

### **Why was it so important to give Finnikin's story a fantasy setting?**

The characters came to me first, then the story and then the genre. In *Finnikin*, there are scenes in refugee camps, displaced people, people who are ostracised in their own country, kingdoms surrounded by enemies, and superpowers – not unlike our world today. But I knew that if I set it in the present day, fact and politics would get in the way and I wanted the freedom to write what I wanted. Functional monarchies were important for this story to work, because they make great drama, whereas democracy is a bore to write about so I knew I had to move away from the here and the now.

The great thing about fantasy is the lack of boundaries, but the hardest thing is to set up your own and stick to them. I was determined not to get carried away with magic and sorcery and battles because I wanted control over the story. You can't write about magic if you don't understand where it comes from, what it costs the individual and who it affects. The first rule of writing for me is to stick to what I know. So I stuck to what I understood and played with that and what I understood was displacement, faith, lack of faith, love, hate, fear and guilt and everything else that sums up the human condition.

### **The fantasy book or movie that has most affected/inspired you and why?**

I love the *King of Attolia* by Megan Whalen Turner. I find myself going back to it over and over again. She writes very character-based stories and reading her work taught me that fantasy novels can be written as stand alones and they didn't have to have eight hundred pages and names with no vowels. I also love Lois McMaster Bujold's fantasy for the same reason – characterisation and accessibility.

**How have you found writing fantasy different/similar to fiction set in the real world?**

Creating a kingdom and its people is not easy because each must have its own personality for a particular reason, whether it's climate or geography. My biggest problem was visualizing forests and rivers and rock villages while living in inner city Sydney. So I travelled extensively and officially began the first chapter in France when I visited the abbey at Mont St Michel. I spent time in the Perigord area amongst the ruins of rock villages at Roque St Christophe and Roque Gageac, and travelled down the Dordogne River visiting castles and cave dwellings. It was there I decided that Finnikin would come from a rock village and that this would set him apart from his father who came from the River.

**How does the story of *Finnikin of the Rock* relate to other displaced peoples, especially children who grow up between a new land and their parents' memories of the old homeland?**

I always tackle identity; it seems to be the major theme in every one of my novels. Identity is so important to Australian people because of our history. It's so important to me because my father and grandparents were migrants and regardless of how much one loves their own country or their father's homeland, we're constantly trying to work out where we fit. I don't think that's good or bad, it just is.

*Finnikin* is exploring the exact same themes as *Alibrandi*. I call it the *Alibrandi* of the fantasy world. It's about displacement, conflict, being judged on where you live and the gap between young and old. It's about grappling with religion and paving your own path, as Josie Alibrandi would say, and more than anything, it's about two very hormonal young people who are trying to work out their place in the world.

**As a child in exile Finnikin begins compiling the *Book of Lumatere* recording the stories of his people. What role does language play in nurturing a sense of identity and a sense of home?**

As wonderful as migration can be for some, much gets lost in the journey. The first casualty of displacement and loss of homeland is language and then identity. I've experienced this first hand with my grandparents. I was close to my grandfather, but because my Sicilian was so poor, there was no strong dialogue between us, and I often wonder about the brilliant conversations we could have had.

In *Finnikin* the exiles stop speaking the language of their homeland for fear of persecution or because they are shamed by what took place there, but nor do they pick up the language of their second homeland because they believe one day they'll return to their motherland. Their children, as a result, have no language at all and Finnikin and Sir Topher find that only silence greets them at the camps.

**"What needs to be done" is a refrain used by both the exiles and those inside Lumatere. To what extent does this refrain extend from your own experience as the child of immigrants?**

My grandfather was interned in both Cowra and South Australia during World War II and my grandmother lived two states away in North Queensland. She just had to get on with things and do what she needed to take care of her children. I was brought up to believe that if you sit around too much and think woe is me, you become reactive rather than proactive. In *Finnikin of the Rock*, Evanjalin accuses the exiles that their children "wear your coat of dissatisfaction and grief tightly over their bodies...". With this novel, I wanted to look at how exiles or migrants or refugees were treated, but also, how they reacted and the mentality they carry with them.

**How does the music you listen to when writing influence your characters/story?**

Music has always played a big part in my novels as I use it as a way into the mood and tone of the writing and characterisation. Peter Gabriel's *Don't Give Up* became Trevanion's song because it reminds me of Thatcher's England at the end of the 80's with men losing their jobs, identity and their role in life. I wanted to explore a man's loss of identity through the loss of his homeland. I played the lyrics "the place that I was born, on the lakeside, As daylight broke, I saw the earth, the trees had burned down to the ground" many times before writing the crucial scene when Trevanion is faced with the reality of what's taken place by his river.

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