

**Celia Rees** talks to Julia Miller from the Federation of Children's Book Groups about her new novel *The Fool's Girl* and about the value of reading.

Celia (below) explains how her book was derived from her favourite Shakespearean play, *Twelfth Night*, after watching an outdoor performance and finding herself wondering what happened in Illyria after the end of the play. I didn't want to write a simple re-working of the play, I wanted explore the story from the point of view of two survivors, Viola and Feste, who are my favourite characters in the play.



She continues: 'I wanted Shakespeare to be in the story, but before he was the Bard, the Soul of the Age, when he was just Will from Warwickshire trying to make his way in the cut-throat world of Elizabethan theatre. I was inspired by Anthony Burgess' portrayal of Shakespeare in *Nothing Like the Sun*, which I read as a teenager and which made Shakespeare come alive for me.

The book has a very strong sense of time and place. Shakespeare's Illyria was illusory, but historically Illyria was on the Dalmatian coast and on the Adriatic Sea so Celia decided to make Illyria as real as possible, basing it on the city of Dubrovnik and researching the history of the city in the last part of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

In fact, the book has been meticulously researched, with the whole process taking two years. Celia describes how she used a variety of sources: contemporary accounts, the plays themselves, biographies, histories of the period as well as internet research. She saw various productions of the play and visited Stratford-on-Avon, the Globe Theatre, Bankside and Borough in London and Dubrovnik, Mantua and Venice.

The characterization is also very strong. Malvolio's mixture of pompous hypocrisy and his zealous intolerance have been vividly represented through the use of religion and Sebastian takes an unexpected direction that Celia assures me follows lines that already exist in the text. The narrative itself is told through the voices of the different characters, although, Celia admits: *I usually have an idea of where the story will end, but I don't always know how I will get there*.

Celia is, of course, a well-known author, her works include *Sovay*, *Pirates!* and the award-winning *Witch Girl*. Her books tend to begin with an idea that gives her the characters, time, setting and the start of the story. She sees herself as a very visual writer, using paintings, period engravings and photographs as pictorial references. She is fascinated by writing about the past, that she believes not only tell us about where we come from, but also act as a warning about where we might be heading.

Reading is, for her, a vital element of becoming a fully developed, intellectually equipped and thinking human being. She has always read omnivorously, crime, historical, fantasy and literary novels, enjoying in particular Sarah Walters and Hilary Mantel, but also a great fan of American fiction, writers like Raymond Carver, Cormac McCarthy or Annie Proulx.

She feels strongly that children need access to books – lots of them and lots of different ones, with guides to help them share their choices and opinions with others, give expert advice and help them to explore the world of fiction. Children should feel that they want to be part of a reading community. Celia concludes: *'It worries me when I hear that school libraries are under attack and that librarians are being sacked. If a child becomes a real reader, then he or she will be a reader for life. If children cease to read, then our culture will die. It is as serious as that.'*