



AN INTERVIEW WITH COSTA BOOK AWARD SHORTLISTED AUTHOR JENNY PEARSON

By *AndreaMReece*

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Article Author:

[Clare Zinkin](#) [1]

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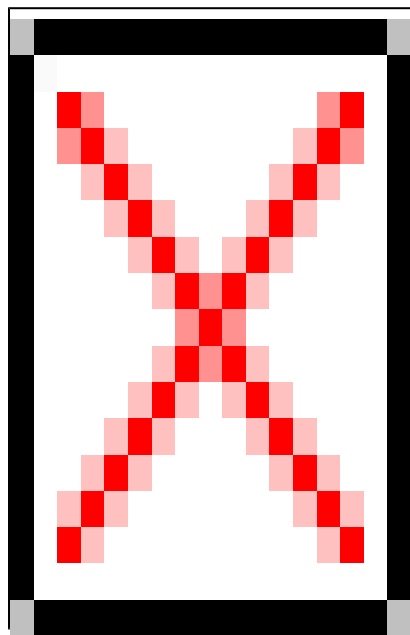
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Part of our spotlight on the authors shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award**, **Clare Zinkin** interviews **Jenny Pearson**.

*It's been quite a year for **Jenny Pearson**. Her debut novel, [The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates](#) [3], was published in Spring and then selected as one of four novels shortlisted for the **2020 Costa Children's Book Award**. In the next of our features on those four authors, **Clare Zinkin** interviews Jenny for *Books for Keeps*.*



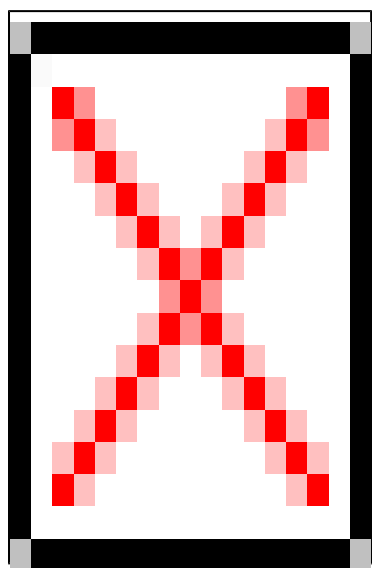
Although Jenny Pearson says she's staggered to be on the shortlist for the **2020 Costa Children's Book Award** for her debut, [The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates](#) [3], illustrated by [Rob Biddulph](#) [4], you get the impression that those around her will not be quite so surprised. Pearson is a doer, and once she sets her mind to something, she admits she becomes obsessive.

?I ran three marathons but gradually got slower so I didn't want to do that again, and I used to swim (I was the European backstroke champion), but that was a lot of effort and time away from my family, and the local rowing club was full despite me telling them about my long arms, and then I saw the writing course.?

?It seemed impossible to write 40,000 words, but then my husband pointed out that I didn't think I could run very far??

and the rest is history. That writing course led to an agent, and to **Freddie Yates**, and now to the **Costa Children's Book Award** shortlist.

My family was bemused about me being published. And I've been very lucky about how things slotted into place. When I was swimming it was all the time, and when I was running, I would read up on technique, and with writing I had to read everything about writing, and this one seems to be sticking. After all, there are so many things you can write about and explore.?



Pearson voyages to many different places in her writing, but it is her narrative voice that pulls in the reader. The conversational tone comes naturally to her. My characters are written in first person reflective? telling another child the story? she says, I am so lucky that I have this great resource having been a teacher for years and being around children. You don't write exactly how they speak, you write how they think they sound. I love it when they get words slightly wrong, or use different tones. You can do a lot with that voice.?

Pearson is still teaching (KS2) and continues to find it rewarding.

The classroom is a great place. The children are very funny, and since I've been writing I've noticed it more and more. Some of the things they come out with!?

Her new book, **The Incredible Record Smashers**, illustrated by Erica Salcedo, to be published in March 2021, is as funny as **Freddie Yates**, using clever humour as well as toilet humour, because she thinks we sometimes underestimate children's wit and sophistication. But the books aren't just full of jokes. The brilliance of **Freddie Yates**, and the reason why it's captured so many children's hearts as well as securing that shortlisting, is because of the underlying themes that Pearson weaves into her storylines.

I use funny as a comfort blanket to deal with the bigger issues. It gives children a safe zone, a layer of trust. And then you can explore the harder things to talk about because you can always fall back on the humour. The humour lets you know that there's still joy out there even at the hardest times.?

[The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates](#) [3] explores how to deal with grief, something Pearson took from personal experience.

I wanted to explain to my son that even though my stepdad wasn't there anymore, I could still love him. It's important to speak to children seriously about death and grief, but also to remember the joyful, nice bits about that person.?

With **The Incredible Record Smashers**, Pearson again deals with the harder stuff in life; protagonist Lucy wants to fix her Mum's depression:

Writing about mental health is a big deal and I wanted to get it right. It was good to have the charity [Our Time](#) [5] (a

charity helping young people deal with parental mental illness) behind me, as it gave me more confidence. It's such a responsibility writing for kids and you want to check that you're getting it right.?

One of the most impressive aspects of Pearson's writing is her ability to portray children's friendships. She says she loves writing this bit best, and it shows. 'In my classroom children are generally lovely to each other. If someone falls over or someone's upset, they are there for each other. I mean, they do have spats, but over literally nothing. And I say to them, 'what are you bringing to me? This isn't a problem' on the continuum of problems 'bitten by a shark or lost a sock', this is nearer the sock end isn't it??'

Pearson also keeps children hooked by her ability to tie her books to something that children really love, be it facts in **Freddie Yates**, or record breaking in **Record Smashers**. Her son inspired both.

'My eldest will sit and say 'did you know??' with adults, and it's a confidence thing. The desire to tell facts or records is how children approach conversations - it's them taking the talking stick. That's why I like putting them in the books.'

Another attraction has to be the amount of food in her books, whether it's the onion-eating competition in **Freddie Yates**, or the rather weird cooking that Lucy's Aunt Sheila gets up to in **The Incredible Record Smashers**. In both books, the tangy memories stick. Pearson claims she doesn't consciously write about food.

'I just think it's a good time when you're eating. You are talking and sharing, and that's when feelings can come out. And also, food roots books in reality. If you mention Monster Munch or something, it brings you into that world because you understand the reference.'

Jenny Pearson's worlds are tangible and real, more tangible than winning the **Costa** perhaps. Jenny would love a funny book to win, but feels that the other authors are all 'so lovely' and have such strong books, that it might take a miracle. Although miracles are what **Freddie Yates** is all about. Pearson's own choice of miracle would be for everyone to be happy. Well, she's halfway there, as her books make readers happy. And that's got to be better than any award.

Clare Zinkin is a children's book consultant, writer and editor.

[The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates](#) [3] is published by Usborne, 978-1474974042, £6.99 pbk.

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