

Q&A with S. C. Ransom

What inspired you to write this book?

'I wrote it as a birthday present for my daughter, Ellie. She loves reading, and lots of her books seemed to feature American girls and American cultural references. I wanted her to have something that reflected what she and her friends know, the places where they go, and the way that they might behave. As nothing seemed to fit the bill, I decided to have a go at writing a story for her, and it just kept on growing!'

There's also quite a story on not just why you wrote the book, but *how* you wrote the book...

'I know! Having decided to write the story, the next challenge was finding some time in my day. I work full time and commute most days into London, so instead of reading whilst I was sitting on my train, I realized that was the perfect time to write. So every day I got out my BlackBerry and started tapping away. At the end of every journey I emailed the latest file to myself. I ended up with hundreds of emails with little bits of novel in them, which I then had to pull together and edit into something readable.'

Is there any significance to the names you've chosen for the main characters, like Alex, Callum or Grace?

'Before she knew what I was doing I asked Ellie what her favorite boy's name was, and at the time it was Callum. I expect it would be quite different if I asked her today. For the best friend, I didn't want to use one of Ellie's current best friends (although they do all appear as other characters), so I used the name of a friend who had moved away, Grace. Alex is a name I like, and thought about using when my kids were born.'

Callum is a trapped soul – one of the Dirges. If you were to have that amulet and were able to see someone who had passed, who would you hope to see?

'Well, I wouldn't want anyone I love to have the sort of existence that Callum has, but the person I miss most is my Dad, who died when Ellie was a baby. He drew the picture of St Paul's which helped to inspire me, and Mum says that he would have been really proud of the fact that I wrote something publishable. He (and Mum still) used to have his nose in a book all the time, and that's where I got my love of reading. I think it would be just a bit strange if he appeared behind me one day though! I'm not sure I'd deal with it as well as Alex does.'

What was it like to see the bracelet made to your design – the amulet shown on the cover of the book?

That was brilliant. I couldn't believe it when Nosy Crow said that they were really going to get it made. I sent them some sketches of how I imagined the amulet, and then chose between two potential designers. I also got to choose the stone. It was important to me that it was as close to the description as possible, because in the story the bracelet pulled out of the mud is fantastic, with beautiful silverwork and a mysterious stone. It's something that any girl would love to find, regardless of any apparitions that came with it, and the bracelet that we have made definitely fits into that category.'

Are any of the characters modeled after anyone you know, physical and personality-wise?

'I described Alex to look like Ellie will look like when she's seventeen, and I thought that would be how she might react to situations too. The mother says and does the kind of things I would do. But Ellie thinks that Alex's personality is more like mine, not hers.

Callum is Ellie's idea of perfection, and we have had some fun debating which hot young actor would be most like him. She's made me promise that, if we are ever lucky enough for it to get put into production, she gets to go to all the auditions!'

Let's talk about you for a little bit – What does the "C" in "S.C. Ransom" stand for?

'My full name is Susan Claire Ransom, but everyone calls me Sue, even my Mum. I'm married to Pete and have a son, Jake, as well as Ellie. We live to the west of London near to a small town called Shepperton.'

You have two teenagers – Do you hang out with them a lot? Do you ever feel like they say things, where you're like... what?

'(I just asked them that, and they both looked at me, open mouthed and horrified!) They have both reached the age where being with their mother is deeply uncool. I sometimes go to the cinema with Ellie, but that's about it. Generally, I can understand what they are saying, apart from having to mentally edit out "like" from every other word they say, but the text and Facebook speak is a whole new language. I have no idea what they are on about!'

Did you ever do any creative writing prior to tackling *Small Blue Thing*?

'No! Only at school, and that's a long time ago now. I did have a job as a Technical Writer years and years ago, when I wrote very boring computer manuals, but that's it. That was no help at all in the creative side of things, but it did help with learning how to plot and plan.'

Tell us about your writing process. Do you outline first, or just plow through?

'I thought about the whole plot first, and started breaking it down into chapters quite early on. Doing that meant that I could dive in and write the exciting bits first, or whenever I got fed up with the bit I was currently writing, and could fit it all together later. Inevitably the plot evolved though, and some of the stuff I wrote early on ended up being cut out because I changed my mind about what was happening – but not huge amounts.'

Do you have any tips for aspiring writers?

'If you want to write a novel, plan, plan some more, write about something you are passionate about, plan again, and make sure you are enjoying it. It's also really important to be clear in your mind about who you are writing for – who do you expect to read your book? Don't try for too broad an audience either. I originally wrote *Small Blue Thing* for one specific girl, and that really helps to clarify your thinking. One final point: did I mention planning already?'

Is there anything you can tell us about *Perfectly Reflected*, or the third book in the series?

'I didn't originally plan to produce a trilogy, but I realized very early on in writing *Small Blue Thing* how I wanted it to end, and when I got there I knew that there was more of the story. I waited until Ellie had read it, and she begged me to carry on and write the others, so that's what I'm now doing on the train every day. The second book is already done, and will be published in the summer, and the third, which is called *Scattering Like Light*, is in progress. The books continue exploring the difficulties of life with a Dirge, and how Alex and Callum might achieve what they want. I love writing for horrible characters, so there are some new ones who are determined to make life awful and who want to make sure that certain secrets remain just that – secret.'

Was Perfectly Reflected harder to write than Small Blue Thing?

'In some ways yes. I knew that I could do it, and the process was faster, but the pressure was greater too. With SBT I only had to make one person happy – my daughter Ellis. With PR I have thousands of readers waiting to see what happens to Alex, and that's a bit scary!'

The tone of this book is quite a bit darker to that of the last one – is that something you set out to achieve or did it just come with the story?

'I knew that I wanted to write a trilogy, and therefore quite a lot has to happen in PR to keep the story alive. SBT is about betrayal, but the main theme for PR is theft and lies. I knew Alex a lot better this time, and I knew how she would react to these situations. As a result it's inevitably darker.'

There are some great villains in *Perfectly Reflected* – was it fun creating those kinds of characters? What other villains were you inspired by?

'I just love writing the nasty characters! All the waspish retorts, the evil plotting, the sneering – bad guys are so much easier than the good ones! It gives me the chance to use all those great put-downs I've thought of over the years which I came up with far too late to use. Great villains – well, Cruella de Vil is up there, and Bellatrix Lestrange; both women who don't give two hoots for what anyone else thinks of them. And of course, schoolgirls can be the worst of all to each other...'

We find out quite a bit more about Dirges and the amulet in this instalment – will there still be surprises to come in *Scattering Like Light*?

'Oh yes! You get to find out lots more. Hopefully almost all of the questions about them will be answered.'

Was it easy to find a way to end *Perfectly Reflected* so that it built up to the final book while still 'working' on its own?

'For me, yes, and I hope that readers feel the same. There's a lot more action this time, and some of the details of the end changed as the book evolved, but I really hope that the readers enjoy it for itself as well as being keen to read on to the final instalment.'

What did it feel like to finish *Scattering Like Light*, and the trilogy as a whole? Was it hard to say goodbye?

'It was strange – exciting, because I'd been thinking about the ending since I finished *Small Blue Thing*, and it was great to actually get to write it. But it was sad too, knowing that it was the end and that my time with the characters was finishing.'

Did anything that happens in the final book take you by surprise?

'No, not really. It had been planned as a whole along with *Perfectly Reflected*, so I was pretty sure that I knew where I was going. The editor suggested some changes which were a good addition. I always like that when it happens. Just because I come up with the original idea doesn't mean that others can't help me to improve it.'

Did you answer all the questions you wanted to?

Yes, I don't think anything was left dangling. You'll have to let me know if I've missed anything! I like creating a certain symmetry and that's a lot easier to achieve if you are planning a whole series of books in advance.'

What have you enjoyed most about writing these books? What have you found most difficult?

'I've loved getting to know the characters. In fact, I know them so well now that I instinctively understand how they will react in a given situation, which makes the writing really easy. I've also loved meeting the readers. *Scattering Like Light* was written last year, after the publication of *Small Blue Thing*, and I was getting a lot of feedback from fans. I was able to take some of that feedback on board and adapt things. I also used a few names from girls who had written me my first fan mail – see if you can spot yourselves!

The most difficult thing had been fitting it all in. As I'm now out and about talking to people about the books as well as still doing my day job, it squeezes the time I have for writing.'

Is your daughter Ellie happy with how the trilogy ended?

'Mostly, although it did make her cry! She gave some very important feedback on the ending, which gave me the confidence to change it. I know there are some other details which she would change though.'

What do you have planned next? And would you ever consider revisiting the world of Callum and Alex?

'I've been planning another London-based series, and I'm about to start writing that. I also have lots of other ideas which are fighting to be heard.

I have toyed with the idea of doing a Dirge-related book, maybe with some of their back stories, but I'd need a good plot to go alongside that to make it interesting, and I've not thought that through yet. And I don't know if anyone would be interested either!'