



A village of secrets

F E Higgins

The Black Book of Secrets
(Macmillan Children's
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The Black Book of Secrets was one of the most talked-about books at Bologna Children's Book Fair earlier this year—an even greater achievement since it is a debut, the first in a trilogy. Publisher Macmillan is so confident about the novel that it has brought publication forward from March to January so that it can be a contender for the Waterstone's Children's Book Award.

The book is set in an unhappy 18th-century village and follows the fortunes of the villagers after the arrival of pawnbroker Joe Zabbidou. Zabbidou turns the traditional image of the pawnbroker on its head. Instead of greed, he offers the villagers compassion, and invites each of the villagers to “pawn” their secrets, which he writes down in his “black book”.

Through the villagers' confessions, we discover that each of them is indebted to the ruthless Jeremiah Ratchet. Zabbidou's presence, and the money he pays for their secrets, enrages Ratchet, driving him to confront the pawnbroker and thereby seal his own fate.

Higgins has written children's titles before, all of which were rejected, but she felt that this book would be different.

“I always have a lot of characters going through my mind, but from the start I felt that this one—the pawnbroker who helps people—was more interesting. Joe Zabbidou is a kind of Clint Eastwood character who rolls into town, sorts out the problems, and leaves. The villagers see Zabbidou as a ‘quick fix’, someone who will come in and kill off Ratchet, but I see him more as a sort of fate, or destiny. He puts things into motion.

“I wanted the story to be



Higgins: “I wanted to have the whole setting steeped in misery”

set in the past and to have the whole setting steeped in misery. I did some research into what it would have been like living at this time: I drew on snippets of information from a variety of sources about living in London, although the setting could be anywhere.

Sleepless nights

“The secrets and the dismal setting mean it is quite a dark book, although there is also humour. The characters are all in dire circumstances and each of them has a secret—I had the idea of a village where all the lights are on at night because no one can sleep. But they all have the chance to redeem themselves, even Ratchet, although he doesn't take it.

“My second story, which I have just delivered to Macmillan, is set in the city at a parallel time to this book, so some of the characters appear in both. The third book will be set some time later and will resolve all the mysteries—especially that of the wooden leg that appears at the start of *The Black Book of Secrets*. Actually, I'm not entirely sure how that will be resolved, but whenever I struggle with plots I normally have an epiphany at three in the morning—so I hope that happens for this book!”

Caroline Horn