

The BiblioFiles: Lissa Evans

Premiere date: May 16, 2015

DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents the BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Lissa Evans, author of Horten's Miraculous Mechanisms, and its sequel, Horten's Incredible Illusions.

Stuart Horten has problems. First, he's short-- very short. Second, he's just moved to a new town, and is bored-- very bored. Third, the triplet girls who live next door appear to have some sort of journalistic vendetta against him. They're relentless.

But everything changes when Stuart discovers a cache of old coins and a hidden message from his Great Uncle Tony. Great Uncle Tony was a renowned stage magician, illusionist, and creator of fabulous contraptions. He mysteriously disappeared in 1940, leaving behind a secret workshop. If Stuart can follow the clues and solve the puzzles, he'll find the workshop.

In the sequel, Stuart, accompanied by his friend April, once again finds himself on a mysterious adventure. This time, the clues are embedded in a series of Great Uncle Tony's custom-build stage illusions. But the magic is real, and in some cases, dangerous. And Stuart and April aren't the only ones interested in getting their hands on what Great Uncle Tony has hidden.

These books are so much fun to read, and to read aloud, to kids. They are creative, humorous, intriguing, and perfectly paced. Stuart and April are wonderful characters who squabble and reconcile so realistically you feel like you're joining a pair of old friends. The clever clues, puzzles, and the mysteries they unveil will keep you intrigued until the very end.

Horten's Miraculous Mechanisms was short-listed for the Carnegie Medal and the Costa Book Awards. Lissa Evans joins us from London, England. Welcome to the BiblioFiles!

LISSA EVANS: Well, thank you very much. I'm honored.

DR. DANA: There are quite a few types of magic in these books. There are stage illusions, and tricks we all know and have seen, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat and sawing a lady in half. But there is what you refer to as Victorian stage illusions, and then there's a deeper, more supernatural magic. Was it difficult to put the different types of magic together and still keep everything balanced and believable?

LISSA EVANS: I think about this question a lot, because all those different types of magic were magic in a way that I grew up with. I was quite a solitary child, like Stuart. And like Stuart, I moved house when I was nine to a new place, where I was very unhappy. And I did a lot of wandering around hoping that something magic would happen. And my means of escape was

reading books in which magic happens in real life. That's what I really, really loved, and I kept hoping something wonderful would happen.

But as well as wandering around and hoping, I also read an enormous amount. And there was a secondhand bookshop in the town I moved to. And I would get out anything that caught my fancy-- not just stories, but nonfiction and grown-up books as well. And I found a book there which was an instruction manual for stage magic for stage magicians. It was about some 30 years old then, so it'd be very old now. But it was a very simple sort of stage magic-- the scarves up sleeves and doves in bowls, and things like that. And it was a slightly cynical book. It told you exactly how things were supposed to be done on stage and how you could fool an audience. And that knowledge stayed with me. And the wish for a deeper magic stayed with me.

And I also read a story written by a writer called H. G. Wells called the "The Magic Shop." And very recently I realized that I'd read that story and that it had stayed with me. And it's about a little boy who, with his dad, goes to a shop that sells magic tricks. But within the shop, real magic things happen. And the little boy only seems them because he's the right sort of boy. And I had obviously been thinking about those things. They'd been sitting in the back of my brain for years and years and years, like an egg about to hatch. And all those types of magic mixed up in my head and resulted into Stuart.

DR. DANA: The coins that start Stuart's adventures are threepenny bits. This is English money-- something American readers might not be familiar with. Did your publishers debate converting the money to American coins when the book was set to be published in the US?

LISSA EVANS: I don't think so, because three pence coins are actually called thrupence in this country, I think-- thrupenny bits. I have no idea why, but that's what they're always called. And thrupenny bits haven't been legal tender in this country for about 40 years. So even in this country, they're as old and as magical as ancient coins. And there's something rather wonderful about them. There's an illustration of them in the book, I think. And they've got 12 sides, and they're a kind of bronzy color. And they're not like any other coins. And I think because they are such an unusual shape and they've got such an unusual design, I think it was decided that we'd keep the same coins in the American edition because they were just as old in England as they are in America.

DR. DANA: In the second book, Stuart and April and a few unsuspecting others travel into the magical realms that Great Uncle Tony has created. There's a vast desert, a room that animates all one's different personality traits, a maze with some truly bizarre turns. Which room was the hardest to create?

LISSA EVANS: I think the first one-- the Pharaoh's Pyramid in which Stuart is sent catapulting into a desert. Because it was the first one that I created, and I was just beginning to understand what the book was about. And I realized that when I wrote the first book, *Horten's Incredible Illusions*, at the end of it, Stuart finds his Great Uncle Tony's workshop. And we just get a little glimpse of what's in there. And as I wrote it, I mentioned the things that he could see. There was an extraordinary black book-- a giant book with a front cover that opened that said, "Open at Your Peril" on the front. And there was a mirrored arch, and a rose bower made out of silver.

And I mention them in passing. When I started writing the second book, Horten's Incredible Illusions, the first book was just about being published. And when I realized that Stuart was going to find magical adventures in these tricks, those tricks had already been written. I couldn't make up new illusions. I had to use the ones that were there in the first book, and that was a great starting point for me. Because it gave me something that was fixed and firm, and each of those would have to open into a new world. And I tried to link the new world into the description of the trick in the first book. So it was a complicated birth-- the second book. But it was quite fun in that I had to rely on what I had written in passing.

DR. DANA: Would you be willing to read a passage that describes one of my favorite magical realms?

LISSA EVANS: Sure.

DR. DANA: The maze that goes through the different rooms?

LISSA EVANS: Yes. The Fan of Fantasticness. Yes, of course I would.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce this passage by saying that Stuart is transported to this maze with his unsuspecting father. Stuart's father creates crossword puzzle clues for a living, and the running joke in the book is that he can't speak normally. He uses very large and unusual words for everything, even the most common things. In this magical adventure, Stuart is stuck in this maze, and his father is stuck in the balcony of a tower high above the maze.

LISSA EVANS: "Hi, Dad!" yelled Stuart, waving. "Are you all right?"

Rather hesitantly, his father waved back. "This is most odd," he called down, his voice faint with distance. "What is this place and how did I get here?"

Stuart tried to think of a simple way of explaining the vast and complicated truth, and then decided that he couldn't. "You're in a dream," he yelled. "A very peculiar dream. Can you get down from there?"

"There's a steep set of stairs with a door at the base, but the door has a bolt that is not on my side. I'm stuck here, I think."

His father sounded disorientated and a bit wobbly, and Stuart realized that he would have to take charge himself; after all, it was his third magical adventure—he should know something about it by now. "Dad, can you see I'm in a sort of weird maze?"

"Yes."

"Can you work out which way I should go? You must have a really good view from up there."

There was a pause while his father peered down, moving his head as if following a path. He walked right around the balcony at the top of the tower, disappearing from view for a few seconds, before he reappeared and called down to Stuart.

"Yes, I think I can see where you should go. You would end up at the foot of this thing."

"What thing?"

"The thing that I'm on. This tall thing."

"The tower, you mean?"

"Yes."

Stuart stared up at him. He couldn't see his father's expression from this distance, but it was clear that something was very wrong.

"Why didn't you say *tower*?" he asked.

"I can't," said his father.

"Why can't you?"

"I just can't. It seems that in this dream, my mouth won't say words that have more than one... bit to them."

"Bit?"

"Yes."

"You mean syllable? You can only say one-syllable words?"

"Yes. *Yes*."

His father's voice was full of frustration, and it occurred to Stuart that it was probably as hard for him to use only short words as it would be for Stuart to use only enormously long ones.

"Don't worry," he yelled, reassuringly, "it's just part of the dream. It shouldn't be a problem—you just have to say *left* or *right* or whatever. Where do I go now?"

He was still standing on the stepping-stones in the room full of water, with three doors ahead of him.

His father peered over the balcony. "Go through the door!" he shouted, and then paused to think. "The door that is not on the left or the right."

Stuart walked forward and opened the middle door.

A huge, shiny green leaf barred his way. He pushed it aside and found himself in an enormous greenhouse full of tropical plants, with creepers dangling from wires above him and huge, perfumed flowers blooming on every side. When he looked down, he could see a muddle of narrow brick paths snaking through the vegetation, crisscrossing each other in a complicated network.

"Which way do I go?" he shouted up to his father.

"To a door near a thing."

"A thing? What sort of thing?"

"A thing from which clear stuff that you can drink comes out of."

"Water, you mean? So I've got to find a tap? Or a hose?"

"No. You can find things like this in parks. A round shape. *Splish*, splash. Coins are thrown in."

"A *fountain*?"

"Yes."

Stuart moved cautiously through the vegetation. Butterflies flittered between the flowers; a lizard appeared, paused briefly on a bunch of nearly ripe bananas, and then zipped away again. Somewhere to his left he could hear the tinkle of water. He ducked under a hairy stem, parted a wall of leaves, and found himself beside a stone fountain, with a jet of water shooting upward out the mouth of a stone dolphin.

On the wall nearby, almost covered with purple flowers, he could just see the outline of a door.

"Through here?"

"Yes. But take care."

"Why?"

"In the next room, there is a... a large beast."

"Another horse?"

"No. It's huge and gray with a trunk."

"You're not *serious*?"

Stuart opened the door just a crack and saw a square concrete room, the floor covered with straw. Lying across most of it was an elephant. It appeared to be asleep, though its stomach was rumbling gently, and occasionally it moved its trunk around, sending blasts of warm, grassy breath across the room.

Hardly daring to breathe, Stuart eased his way in and tiptoed forward, straw cracking underfoot. He felt even smaller than usual and incredibly vulnerable. The elephant would only have to roll over and he'd be flattened like a lump of pastry under a rolling pin.

Two metal doors lay ahead, one of them to the left and one to the right.

"You need to go through the door on the right!" shouted his father.

"I can't," called Stuart, as loudly as he dared. There's an elephant lying in front of it."

Its vast bottom was actually wedged right up against the correct door.

"The door on the left is a dead end," said his father. "But if you back to the plant room you could fetch fruit, which might tempt the beast to move."

"Bananas!"

It didn't take Stuart long to locate the bunch where the lizard had been, and he twisted off a handful and found his way back to the next room.

He held one of the bananas near the end of the trunk, and the elephant groped forward sleepily, opening one eye.

"Bananas!" said Stuart, moving it further away. "Come and get your lovely bananas!"

The elephant hauled itself slowly to its feet, and Stuart threw the bananas into the far corner, then dodged around the side of the lumbering animal.

The door was now clear, and he made a lunge for it.

He stepped into a long room with a cool, green marble floor, and walls hung with large paintings. It took him a moment or two to realize that the only door was the one he just walked through.

"This is a dead end," he shouted up to his father.

"No. It's not—there are... one more than ten ways out."

"Eleven? Eleven doors? Where?"

"They're by the square things ... I mean, not *by* ... and not square ... Oh dear, this is so hard to say."

"You are doing fine, Dad," shouted Stuart, encouragingly. "Have another try."

"The things with *paint* on," called his father.

"You mean the paintings?"

"Yes. The doors are not in *front* of them."

"Behind, then? You mean the doors are behind the paintings? Or do you mean the doors *are* the paintings?"

He walked up to the nearest one, a sappy portrait of a girl holding a box of chocolates, and yanked at the right-hand side of the frame. It swung straight open, just like a door, to reveal a hole in the wall big enough to step through. And on the other side of it was a candy store, a really fantastic one, every shelf laden with jars, every counter stuffed with fudge and bubble gum and toffee and marshmallow and licorice and chews and lollipops and sour balls...

"Is this the way?" shouted Stuart hopefully.

"No."

"Oh." Disappointed, Stuart let the painting swing shut again. "Which one should I go through, then?"

"The one that shows a... a..."

"I might as well try all of them," said Stuart.

"No, don't do—"

"It'll be just as quick."

He tugged at the frame of the next painting in line, a seascape with a giant squid sticking its head above some improbably huge waves, and the picture smacked open as if on a spring. A torrent of freezing water gushed through the hole, and Stuart, soaked and gasping from the cold, struggled to close it again. A jellyfish flobbed through the gap, followed by a long, orange, sucker-covered tentacle.

"OUT!" shouted Stuart, using all his strength to slam the picture against the intruder. The tentacle withdrew, the door closed, and a sheet of water, green with seaweed, glided along the floor of the gallery, leaving a thin coating of sand behind it.

"Okay," said Stuart, teeth chattering with shock, "maybe not such a great idea."

"Are you all right?" called his father.

"Yes, just about."

He had the sudden memory of assuring his mother that he and his dad would be absolutely *fine* while she was away, and then he looked at the next painting—an arctic landscape with a snarling polar bear—and decided to leave well enough alone.

"The one you want," called his father, slowly and carefully, "shows a room at the top of a house. A room in the roof with things in it of all types, shapes, and sorts."

"An attic," said Stuart.

He looked quickly around the gallery and soon spotted the painting he needed. It showed a dimly lit room piled high with bags and boxes; an old rocking horse stood in the corner. He pulled at the frame, and the painting swung open to reveal a similar room but one so stuffed with objects that it was actually difficult to see where he could climb in.

He squeezed into a narrow space between a large trunk, a dollhouse, and a stack of hatboxes, and he had a look around, coughing slightly at the dust he'd raised.

"I can't see a thing," he shouted. "There's too much junk in here. Where's the next door?"

"To your right," called his father. "To the back of the red rug. Halfway up the wall."

When Stuart eventually spotted it, he saw that it was more of a hatch than a door—the sort of hatch that in a house would lead to a water tank—but it looked easily wide enough for him to get into. He pulled at the handle.

"It's locked!" he shouted up at his father.

"Oh."

"There's writing on it," called Stuart, pushing aside a cobweb obscuring the top of the door, and then groaning. "It says, THE KEY IS HIDDEN IN THIS ROOM." He looked around despairingly.

There was a cardboard box right next to him, and he lifted the flaps at the top and glanced at the jumbled contents—some old lightbulbs, odd tools, nails, tangled string, a loose pack of cards, a clock, a bag of curtain fittings: it would take him twenty minutes to go through this alone, and the room had forty or fifty other boxes, suitcases, trash bags, and pieces of furniture. There were a million places to hide a key.

DR. DANA: Thank you so much. So Stuart's father is forced to use only monosyllabic words in the maze adventure. But typically he uses words that I don't know how to pronounce, much less define. Did you have to develop his character with a dictionary and a thesaurus by your side?

LISSA EVANS: Do you want to know the truth?

DR. DANA: Yes.

LISSA EVANS: No! [LAUGHTER] No. That is my vocabulary, I'm afraid. There were very, very few words I had to look up. For some reason, when I was younger, I had a brain like a sponge, and I remembered everything I read. And peculiar words, particularly nouns, stuck in my head. And they've remained there ever since. I'm sure they've kept more important things from my memory. But, no. They're still there.

DR. DANA: This book is very funny. I especially like the arguments between Stuart, April, and April's sisters. You were a stand-up comedian and a comedy producer in radio and television. I'm curious to know if you find comedy difficult to write.

LISSA EVANS: You have to be very precise about comedy. It has to be right. It always offends me when people seem to think that writing tragedy or drama is more difficult than writing comedy, because it's not. And it's really hard to write comedy. If you write a page of description, and it's so-so, not particularly interesting but has one good sentence in it, the reader will forgive you. They'll like that one good sentence, and the rest won't matter. But if you write a joke with a careful build up and the joke doesn't make the listener laugh, then you've wasted your time and they won't like you for it.

And for me, it's not difficult, but it takes time. And it has to be very, very precise. And I think I learned through working with very, very good comedy writers in television and radio-- I didn't write for television and radio myself, but I did produce and direct. And there were two writers in particular who wrote up a situation comedy in Britain called Father Ted, who were absolutely brilliant writers. And they, in a way, taught me how to frame jokes.

And so I love doing it. And I think it's the best thing you can possibly write. [LAUGH] But people are a bit snobbish about it, and I think anybody snobbish about it should try and write a funny line themselves and see how difficult it is.

DR. DANA: So it sounds like you did a lot of collaborative writing. Was it different to sit down and write a book all by yourself?

LISSA EVANS: I was a script editor before. So what I would do-- I would take a piece of writing and see how it could be improved-- so slash things out or move things around. And that gave me the ability to do that to my own work. In fact, sitting down with my own work is very, very satisfying, because when you try to improve somebody else's work, they don't always want the improvements [LAUGH]. And so you have to be very tactful about it. But with my own work, I could improve away to my heart's content, and write and rewrite until I feel I've got it exactly right.

DR. DANA: Do you have any more children's books in the works?

LISSA EVANS: I am currently writing one. It's not the third Stuart. There's a third Stuart at the back of my mind.

DR. DANA: Oooooo...

LISSA EVANS: Because when I finished Horten's Incredible Illusions, I felt I tied it all up rather neatly, and there was no room for a third. And then just one day it occurred to me that, actually, there was a little bit of room for one-- something that is mentioned in the first book can actually lead to another story. So that's bubbling away in the back of my mind, and meanwhile, I'm writing a different children's book for a similar age group-- I hope a very funny one. It's really hard work [CHUCKLES] and it's called "Wed Wabbit." And that's what I'm writing at the moment.

DR. DANA: Stuart has a Facebook page, and he answers questions. What sort of questions do people write in and ask Stuart?

LISSA EVANS: They ALL ask when there's going to be a third. [LAUGHTER]

LISSA EVANS: That's the question. And I have to say, oh, I'm just thinking about it at the moment. I'd love to be a book a year author, but I seem to write rather more slowly than that. Somewhere on the website is an interview. I wrote-- Stuart's interviewing me, and I wrote the triplets interviewing Stuart. And somewhere on the Facebook page are those interviews.

DR. DANA: That's great. Lissa Evans, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles today.

LISSA EVANS: My pleasure. It's an honor. And I hope one day I can come and visit your wonderful library.

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