

Exclusive Interview – Melina Marchetta

Q Tell us about your new book, *Froi Of The Exiles*?

A It's a family saga and a love story. Beginning three years after the end of *Finnikin of the Rock*, it's set mostly in the enemy kingdom next door. Froi is one of the more minor characters from *Finnikin*. This is Froi's story as he unravels the dark bonds of kinship along with the mysteries of a half mad Princess.

Q Who do you see reading *Froi Of The Exiles*?

I think a mix of people liked *Finnikin of the Rock* and I suspect fantasy as well as non-fantasy readers will also enjoy Froi.

Q Froi was not exactly loveable or admirable in *Finnikin* – why choose him?

A I don't choose my characters, they choose me! I think he was probably the character who was furthest from salvation. What makes Froi interesting is that he's someone working out the good in him after being brought up by the bad.

Q Could you read *Froi Of The Exiles* without having read *Finnikin of the Rock*?

A It's not necessary but it would help you understand Froi's savagery. After a terrible upbringing, Froi has been reared by some very honourable people for the past three years. This raises a really big argument about nurture versus nature.

Q Such fantastical names and places in *Finnikin of the Rock* and *Froi Of The Exiles* - almost like another language – were they hard to invent?

A Yes, because I can't just invent a name. If it doesn't mean anything to me, if it doesn't resonate, I can't have it in my book. It's like having a music in your head that you follow.

Q *Finnikin* was partly written to explore the experience of political exile, a theme continued in *Froi Of The Exiles* – what drew you to the topic?

A Just look at what's happening in the world right now! One of the interesting things with the Froi novel is that the Lumaterans who have been exiled for the last 10 years, and feel very passionate about the way they were treated, are now treating the Charynite exiles the same way they were treated. So the shoe's on the other foot. What happens when you're very comfortable in your kingdom or country and there are these

people trying to get in for all the right reasons? But they're not allowed in? It's like the Malaysian solution for refugees...

Q The notion of who's good and who's evil becomes a bit blurred?

A I wanted to show that there's no such thing as the good guy and the bad guy. In Froi, both sides have endured awful things. It's the leaders that have brought havoc into people's lives, not an entire race of people. Froi discovers these things and it worries him when he starts caring. Once he sees people up close and personal, they stop being the enemy and become people who have tragic stories like everyone else.

Q So Froi's caught in the middle?

A Yes, it's what happens when you don't belong to one particular culture but you belong to two cultures - how do you balance that?

Q Inspired by the political or the personal?

A Well, by contemporary events and also by being the child of migrants. I've grown up with people who in a good way, have been displaced. My relatives loved going back to Italy to visit but they certainly didn't want to go back there to live. And they're buried here and I think that's very interesting as well. You don't set out to write about all those things but when you're writing, they percolate to the surface.

Q Did you know that *Froi Of The Exiles* was going to turn out to be much bigger and more ambitious than *Finnikin of the Rock*?

A No, in fact I never planned to write a sequel but once I finished *Finnikin*, it seemed a pity to put so much effort into building this world, then step away from it. Froi was in my head and I always think if a character comes with a story I should write it. But I didn't know who he was. I discovered him along the way.

Q Is there a gorgeous romance in *Froi of the Exiles* as there was in *Finnikin of the Rock*?

A Ooh yes, I think Froi's relationship is profound. When you've got someone who hasn't got it in him to be romantic, and a girl who's lost any interest in romance - and sex - and these two characters realise that they are in love with each other it's...well I think it's my most romantic story. It's not your usual love story - it begins in a very unromantic way but I think that heightens it even more when it does happen.

Q A lot of the savagery in Froi is not physical?

A No and not all the characters are savage. They're not physically capable of being savage but the power that they have with words is a thousand times more powerful.

Q Often there is a lot of savagery in fantasy novels?

A There are a lot of battles in some fantasy. And sometimes the criticism with mine is that there aren't enough battles, but I think there's different ways of showing the savagery of men and women. I like people to read what I do best and one thing I do well is character and relationships.

Q Your fantasy is borne along by characters, dialogue and relationships rather than the quest or battle?

A Yes – exactly.

Q The world you've created in this series is intricate – it must have demanded some serious plotting and planning?

A Froi's story came to me about a year before I wrote it. Before I sat in front of the computer I wrote it in my head. I was really patient, I wouldn't begin writing it until I got it all right - the characters, the plot, the relationships, the setting.

Q *Finnikin of the Rock* was highly acclaimed and won awards - does that make the second book hard?

A I can't think about it. I can't think about my audience or expectations. I let that affect me once when *On the Jellicoe Road* came out. It got good reviews but some people were upset I hadn't written another book like *Looking for Alibrandi* and I felt hurt. Then it turned out to be liberating – I remember thinking 'I'm never going to make anyone happy so I'm going to write fantasy.' I remember taking my dog for a walk and thinking, 'just do what you want to do, bring the same hard work and passion you've brought to the other books and things will look after themselves.'

Q You're an 'unrepentant' Enid Blyton fan?

A My whole reading existence began with Enid Blyton. I'm interested in the criticism regarding the literary quality of her writing, but I think, well...a writer was born from it! I mean reading it now you might cringe a bit, but those books seemed magical back then.

Q And a known insomniac?

A Yes, although I am a lot better. It's hereditary, my Mum's an insomniac. There are always a trillion things happening in my head. I fix plot problems in bed and when I go for a walk every day. I don't ever

want to be fixing a plot problem in front of the computer, just want to be writing

Q What's your dog's name?

A Jasper, he just arrived today in the new house – didn't want him around for the move. He's discovering the house with obsessive passion.

Q What kind of dog is Jasper?

A King Charles Cavalier. They're the dumbest dogs in the world but they're the BEST dogs, funny and stupid and very affectionate. Cavaliers don't like other dogs, they only like humans.

Q One of your earliest memories?

A Being at my big sister's kindergarten. They did a play and someone was a bus conductor and he had the pouch and the thing to click the tickets. For years after that I wanted to be a bus conductor based on that man who would have been about 5 years old.

Q Melina Marchetta likes?

A I love New York, avocados and kind people

Q Dislikes?

A Cauliflower, a mean spirit and marking kid's papers.