Festival of Ideas What Does Diana Wynne Jones Mean to Readers Today?
With Colin Burrow, Michael Burrow, Neil Gaiman and Katherine Rundell
Chaired by Johnny Burrow
Sunday 26 September 2021

Johnny Burrow – Hello and welcome to the Bristol Ideas online event celebrating the life and work of the great Diana Wynne Jones. Lovely to have you all with us, hundreds of you here from literally all around the globe as far as we can tell. We've just been scrolling through the list of messages already. I'm seeing Minnesota, I'm seeing Texas, Italy, Malaysia, Japan, Leeds, Cambridge, anywhere you can think of. Some glamorous, some less glamorous, all highly valued.

Lots to talk about, of course, about Diana Wynne Jones this evening, but not the only glorious event we've got coming up on the Bristol Festival of Ideas. The programme is a mixture of online, like this one, and live events running right through the autumn. It continues to feature writers and thinkers from all over the world. You can sign up to the e-newsletter via the website, or you can follow Bristol Ideas on Twitter so you can stay up to date on the latest events. This event will be available to watch again via Crowdcast as soon as we're finished, so if you're watching it now and you're somehow not completely saturated in an hour or so's time you can always watch back. Or if you missed it or [have] friends and family who couldn't make it, they can watch it back as well. The event has been co-organised with St Georges Bristol and Diana Wynne Jones' family, friends and fans, including her friend and literary executor Laura Cecil, academic

Katherine Butler and research writers Henrietta Wilson and Lydia Wilson.

You can, of course, ask questions. I was talking about the chat where you're from everywhere. Since I started speaking, we've now got people from Milton Keynes and Maine and New Zealand. So you can chat in there. There'll be moderators to talk to you but you can also ask a question on the Ask A Question section, and our panel will be dealing with those at the end. Talking of which, I should probably introduce them.

I am Johnny Burrow. I am in that first category, I suppose, of Diana Wynne Jones' family. I am one of her five grandchildren and I absolutely loved her. One of my very earliest memories, full stop to be honest, is my dad, who is also here and will be introduced shortly, explaining to my twin brother Gabriel and I that our grandmother was going to be called Granarch as a portmanteau of 'grandmother' and 'anarchist', once he'd finished explaining roughly what that was for a kid. On the grounds that she was a grandmother, just like our other grandmother and just like everybody else's grandmother, but she probably wasn't going to quite do it the way that everybody else's grandmother did it, and she probably wasn't going to do it the way that everybody thought that she was meant to do it either. Both of those predictions were correct. She was all the better for it. And as with all things in her life really, she didn't do it the way she was meant to do it but it was glorious anyway. I am, by the way, coming off the back of a truly terrible cold, not Covid, but if I start sounding a bit like a Bond villain, I can only apologise. I don't have anything drastically interesting to say

about Diana Wynne Jones' work to be honest, apart from the fact that I grew up with her books and I loved them almost as much as I loved her, but luckily, we've got a panel of people who really do.

Colin Burrow is Diana Wynne Jones' youngest son. He's my dad as well, he's the proud dedicatee of her *Eight Days of Luke* and *The Skiver's Guide*, which is written 'for Colin, with whose help this book would never have been written'. I think, fair to say, since then he's got fairly more lively. He does a bit more work now, he's a senior literary critic, he writes for the *LRB*, he's a senior research fellow at All Souls College Oxford. Also spends a lot of time in his shed woodworking and losing to both of his sons at Mario Kart, so there you go.

We've also got Micky Burrow with us, who is Diana's middle son, now her literary executor, of course, and joint dedicatee with her eldest son Richard of *The Ogre Downstairs*. He now lives in her house of many steps, which we all still very much love, and works in the software industry.

Neil Gaiman, we were talking about very diverse locations, it is 7 in the morning roughly for you, Neil, joining us all the way from New Zealand, which is very, very kind of you. Of course, needs no introduction, the author of books for children and adults, award-winning across the board, titles including *Norse Mythology*, *American Gods*, *The Graveyard Book* and, of course, the *Sandman* graphic novels. He's been making some telly recently, rather a lot of it, and I've been seeing clips on Netflix, images, stills and video of an upcoming Netflix series of *Sandman*, so lots of exciting things

in the pipeline there. He was a close friend of Diana Wynne Jones, a protege, a confidante, co-conspirator, all the rest of it. Fascinated to hear what he has to say.

And last but absolutely certainly not least is Katherine Rundell, who is the author of half a dozen award-winning children's books, among them *Rooftoppers*, *The Explorer* and *The Good Thieves*, and a very short book for adults, *Why You Should Read Children's Books Even Though You Are So Old and Wise*. Which a friend of mine actually gave to me a couple of years ago and I was sold. I was reading them anyway, it has to be said, so possibly preaching to the choir, but it was glorious. So very lovely to be speaking to you. Katherine, of course, is also a fellow of All Souls College Oxford, where she works on the poetry of John Donne, a love which began in part when she came across one of his poems transformed into a spell in the pages of *Howl's Moving Castle*. Glorious to have you all with us. All of the speakers are going to be speaking individually then having a group discussion at the end, responding to your questions. First up, I think we've going to hear from Neil Gaiman and Micky Burrow about, of course, their shared love of Diana and their own bizarre meeting, as far as I can tell.

Michael (Micky) Burrow – That's right. I first met Neil in the 1988 World Fantasy Con in some dismal hotel not far from Heathrow. We were sharing a room, which Diana had booked. I'm not sure on what basis she booked it. She probably told Neil that she'd already booked it for me and she told me that she'd already booked it for Neil. But it was typical of her that she was very generous in helping anybody to go anywhere really. Diana was always encouraging

younger authors and I think Neil at that point was quite a young author. He was exactly the same age as me, and was just embarking on your career, I think, at that point, weren't you, Neil? In about 1988. You'd probably written your first couple of books by then, hadn't you? What are your memories of that time?

Neil Gaiman – That was about three weeks before the first issue of *Sandman* was due to come out. I was definitely doing things on a budget and Diana definitely told me that yes, she had a room for Micky, why didn't I use that instead of trekking backwards and forwards to Sussex every night? And I accepted with incredible joy, I was absolutely broke at that time, and I remember missing the banquet because I couldn't afford the banquet that month. However, what I heard about the chicken and the avocadoes at that banquet actually made me kind of pleased that I'd hung out in the bar instead.

Micky – I don't remember anything about the banquet at all. Probably it's been blanked off from my memory! I'm not sure whether that Fantasy Con has contributed at all to *Deep Secret*, which is based around a fantasy con. Probably not, I think it was a later one. What do you think?

Neil – I'm not sure. I know that *Deep Secret*, she told me at one point the various ingredients of *Deep Secret*. It was a different hotel because she said the geometry of it just didn't work, and also for some reason you'd start out on one floor and then you'd be on another. Which made getting from place to place very difficult. But she stole one thing in *Deep Secret* from me. Which was one of our first, not our first meeting. We spent a lot of time together at the Milford

Science Fiction Writers' Workshop in a little town called Milford somewhere near Southampton or Bournemouth or somewhere. I was, I didn't respond well, I was not a morning person. The first day I was great at getting up at whatever time it was that we had to get up. We had to be up for breakfast which was served at 8, and if you were not at that 8am breakfast there was no food until 1, in this weird little seaside hotel that was just about to close down and just had us in. And it was fine on the Monday, Tuesday I was there but sleepy, Wednesday I was there but bleary, Thursday, basically, according to Diana, anyway, from whom I heard the story, I turned up at the table essentially asleep and just people put food in front of me and I ate, and when I finished the rather sad breakfast, Mary Gentle who was also sitting next to me and hadn't wanted her breakfast, just put her breakfast plate to see what I'd do, and I continued eating. And then apparently, I looked up and said very sadly, 'I've already eaten this breakfast once and I didn't like it the first time' and Diana stole that and created Nick in *Deep Secrets* and gave him my breakfast.

Micky – I remember that scene very well. That's one of my favourite books, *Deep Secrets*.

Johnny – And to be fair on that, if there was one thing that Diana absolutely loved, it was someone who ate far too much and repeatedly and would simply not stop. I mean, if you kept eating. The story I was told was my godfather, the first time he went to their house in Bristol, they had a relatively small roast duck for too many people and he, having never met them before, when he finished, stood up and just picked the carcass up and started gnawing it. And most people's

mums would go: 'What are you doing? Who do you think you are? How are you behaving this way?' Apparently, she absolutely loved it and never let him forget it, so I'm sure eating too many breakfasts can only go one way with her, Neil.

Neil – It was definitely a popular move to have made. But that was the first time Micky and I met. I'd known Diana at that point for about three years, because we met at the, actually at another convention, at the British Fantasy Convention that she was a guest of honour of. In 85 or 86. She later told me, much, much later, that I was the first adult human being who was neither a teacher nor a librarian nor in publishing to tell her that he read and liked her books. And that was merely coincidence because I was in the bar, I'd got to the convention slightly early, I was in the bar, she turned up early, went into the bar, I walked over to her and went 'Oh my god, you're Diana Wynne Jones, I love what you do' and started talking about her books. And years later, she said, 'You know, until that convention, the only people who'd actually told me they actually liked my books were people who did it professionally. You were the first adult fan.' And whether it was true or not, I never cared. It was such a lovely thing to hear.

Johnny – That is a lovely thing, and of course then throughout the rest of her life she had many people eventually telling her that they loved her books, and you, of course, have that now as well. Glorious to talk to you both, glorious to hear that first meeting story. We're going to be hearing a lot more from Neil later in the show. Our first speaker on their own is Colin Burrow, Diana's youngest son,

fellow at All Souls Oxford, as stated, writer at the *LRB* and all the rest of it. Take us away.

Colin – Thanks very much, Johnny. Very good to see you and hear you, albeit gruffly. I wanted to start just by talking a little bit about that wonderful photograph of Mum that's been used as the cover image for the publicity for this event, where she's sitting in her favourite writing chair and she's got Caspian, her most beloved dog, sitting at her feet. He is, of course, the original of Dogsbody and was truly the prince of her heart. And she wrote most of her books sitting in that chair, curled up in a world of her own, and she'd have a pen in one hand, she'd have coffee in another hand, and then she'd have a cigarette in another hand, she was a bit magical, and that image of her sitting there writing, writing – she wrote long hand with a pen – with the words just flowing out, was such a vision of just pure human happiness for me to see her there. And it's truly wonderful that such a self-absorbed and self-contained writing posture should have produced so many books that have made so many people happy all around the world. I just think it's a really wonderful thing. But I think that image of her in the chair also says something about the way her imagination worked really. Because she loved to create autonomous worlds, completely self-contained universes which had their own rules and which stuck to their rules on their own terms, and she was, like a lot of fantasy writers but I think in a way that goes beyond a lot of fantasy writers, a world builder and a world constructor. And that's a real part of her power, just getting lost in her own world.

But the other thing about her, which is particularly apparent to somebody who was in her family, was that she was a great re-imaginer and re-describer of the world around her. And so, if you shared experiences with her, as Neil has described, you'd sometimes see them coming back in a transfigured way in fiction. And her fiction, as well as being a matter of world making, was also a kind of enchanted and refracting glass where you'd see things in the world amplified and distorted and with a sort of rainbow of colour around them. And she could do that with people. So, my dad was the worst possible patient. If he had a cold as bad as Johnny's, he would have been sneezing in a way that would shatter most people's speakers on their laptops, he would have been waving handkerchiefs around, he would have been groaning about death imminently. And all of that, of course, becomes the magical cold of Wizard Howl in *Howl's Moving Castle* where green magical slime flows forth from this histrionic male. It's Dad, completely!

And there are other very striking examples of where she'd sort of see through to the heart of a scene and transform it into fiction. So, in *The Homeward Bounders*, the character Helen, who is one of the priestess, goddess from the east that Mum very much liked to imagine, she has a fringe that comes down like this, so you can see only the tip of her very sharp nose, and she's very spikey and she likes insects. Well, she is a friend of mine, who was a great lover of war games who had fair hair and was a man, but nonetheless he is Helen. He didn't have the ability to turn his right hand into an elephant's trunk or a sword with which to slay demons, but he was someone who, if anyone could, he would have done.

So, she did transform people. And she also transformed places. So, we went on a lot of family holidays to the Lake District which is famously wet and misty and vertiginous, and Mum was very afraid of heights and we'd go on walks where she would be terrified. She'd see the landscape falling away from beneath her and we'd also often get lost, and we'd often almost have to carry her past these crags and hillsides because she was so in the grip of fear. And all of that becomes the space between universes in the Chrestomanci books, those great voids where you have to watch your footing and you don't quite know where you're going and you're terrified. It's just an extraordinary act of transformation. So, she wrote a kind of fantasy which was in its strange way very true to life, or at least life as she saw it. She didn't always see reality in the same way as everyone else, she didn't always see the same reality as me.

She certainly believed, and it wasn't just a joke, that she had a travel jinx and that meant that whenever she went on the M25, which for those of you who aren't in the UK is the orbital road that goes around London and which is always horrendously congested. But whenever Mum went on the M25 and it was horrendously congested, it was because of her travel jinx. Maybe on Wednesday it was also pretty congested there.

And she also sometimes transformed people into fiction in ways that suggested that she didn't see those people in the same ways as me. And that was particularly true of her mother, with whom she had what we could politely call a very complicated relationship. I think she not only thought her mother was a bad mother but she also genuinely thought

that her mother had stolen something really profound from her like her childhood, and it was a very painful relationship. Obviously, Mum's mum was my granny and I quite liked my granny, and so seeing her represented as she is, transparently really, as Gamma Pinhoe in *The Pinhoe Egg* as a wicked witch who created a plague of fleas and whooping cough and causes a war between clans of witches, and at the same time casts a spell on everybody so that nobody knows it's her fault, that was quite hard and transformative. But the genuine pain that she did feel about her own childhood was really fundamental to all of her fiction. And what I think was heroic about her, really, was that she was absolutely determined to turn all that hurt into creativity and humour. And she did that to a remarkable degree. And Dad always used to say that she was a classic instance of the wound and the bow, as Henry Wilson called it, and that is alluding to Philip Teates, who is the greatest Greek archer who's also got a terrible wound on his foot and is suffering agonising pain from it the whole time. And that combination of suffering and power, I think, really was how her imagination worked.

And the particular pain about her own childhood, I think contributed three at least really big features of her fiction, which are consistent features of her fiction. The first was an obvious one, which her difficult relationship with her mother meant that she really brought the fairy tale cliche of the wicked witch to life. Chillingly there are these cold, manipulative older women who are really trying to destroy the younger generation again and again in her fiction. The Witch of the Waste in *Howl's Moving Castle* who steals Sophie's beauty and health from her and makes her

somebody who nobody notices, and that is actually an extraordinary powerful component in her fiction, although it's quite an unsettling one.

The other thing I think it gives her is a real passion for slightly vague, vain but extremely powerful men, so Wizard Howl is one of the characters who readers of her work fall in love with. And Mum created him because she needed those sorts of men. And then another vain, vague, powerful man is of course Chrestomanci with his dressing-gowns, I'll put my Chrestomanci dressing-gown on. I've only got one, I haven't got one for each day of the week. I hope you're all wearing your Chrestomanci dressing-gowns at home. But she really needed that glamour of masculinity, I think, to offset her uneasy attitudes to her own mother and her own past. But the third really key thing that came as it were from the wound was her preoccupation in her fiction with fairness, in a profound way. So, her books again and again are about people who have enormous powers but don't realise it, who are having them stolen from them surreptitiously by somebody in the background. And to get that power back what they've got to do is firstly notice that they're being manipulated, and secondly do something to get that power back. And that's so often the narrative energy of the story. It's there in *Charmed Life* where Gwendoline is stealing Cat's nine lives and using his power and in the later fiction it takes on a slightly different form. It almost becomes a kind of environmentalism where there might be a wicked sorcerer in another universe next door to you who is stealing all the magic from your world, who is stopping the birds singing, who is taking away everything that makes your world alive,

and I think it's that concern with fairness and not being manipulated by somebody else which really makes her novels powerful, and I think makes them particularly powerful, actually, for this generation who are in many ways having things taken away from them. They're having material things taken away from them in the form of wealth, but they're also having immaterial things taken away from them, opportunities, opportunities to be imaginative and free, and I think all the wonderful things in her writing are about freedom and about Granarchy. She loves animals that won't obey the rules, she loves people who won't obey the rules, and she really, really admires and loves people who win back themselves from others. And that's the core of her writing, and I think it's really why I'm so proud to be one of her sons. I think she was absolutely terrific and really matters now for that concern with fairness. Thank you.

Johnny – She was an extraordinary person. Very nicely spoken, Colin. Lovely to be with you. I was keeping an eye on the chat while listening. They love your dressing-gown. There is huge respect for the dressing-gown. And there is also some poor soul in Australia, Jim, who says it is 4am, definitely in the dressing-gown though still no Chrestomanci powers. We've got another hour or so. We hopefully will have the power by the end, if not hold on to the dressing-gown. Colin will be back at the end for the Q&A with the whole panel. Lovely to hear from you. Up next, it is the glorious Katherine Rundell.

Katherine Rundell – Hello, thank you so much. I am a children's writer and I think it isn't too much to say that Diana Wynne Jones changed my life entirely, but not necessarily in

the children's writer way but because I fell so in love with that poem with the 'go and catch a falling star' in *Howl's Moving Castle*, and I fell in love with the way she treated it, not as something that should be reverenced but that as something that had a kind of spark and a kind of aliveness. It was part of what I adored so much about her. As a kid, I first read *Charmed Life* at about eight, I loved the way that she sees things from the adult world and called them into her books in a way that other writers just weren't doing, in that she had things that were very firmly relegated to 'other', like John Donne poetry.

Also her kind of irony and her kind of sarcasm, her willingness to have these sort of strange opaque moments, like at the end of *Charmed Life*, that thing where the magic happens and it happens in a great swirl and a great strange mist. I loved that she didn't spell it out entirely and that she demanded that you fill in the blanks and that you rise to it. And I loved so wildly her belief in the intellect of the people who she was writing for. I think before her, historically, broadly speaking, there are exceptions, but mostly, I think people as good as Diana Wynne Jones thought they were too good for children, and I think one of the things she did was show that is in no way the case.

And so I love I fell in love with John Donne, partly because of her, and then I wrote about him in my finals when I was an undergraduate at Oxford University, and then I sat an exam called the All Souls Fellowship Exam and I wrote mostly about John Donne during that exam and if you pass that exam, two people pass it every year and they get to go to All Souls College. And when I got there, I was given a literary

supervisor who I thought was a great Shakespeare scholar and a lecturer on Spencer, and he asked me what I wanted to do, and I said ,‘I'd like to write about John Donne, maybe do a PhD, but really, I want to be a children's writer like Philip Pullman or Diana Wynne Jones’, and he said, 'Diana Wynne Jones is my mother'. So, I had gone an entire circle and ended up back in front of Diana Wynne Jones' son.

And I think when I write for children, I try to remember some of the things that she taught me, some of the extraordinary lessons which she just laid out for us. The first book I read of hers was *Charmed Life* but I went on to read all of them, over and over and over again, in a way that I think so many of her readers do. I think there is something in them that you become hungry for and that you return to. And I think it is they have this thing that Jane Austen has and that Shakespeare has that they endlessly renew themselves, there is always something new to find in them because they are such rich stories. But most of all I loved her for her refusal to talk down to children, because the vast majority of literature has not understood that children can have enormous lives and rich imaginations. I loved her for her unswerving refusal to explain things, her unapologetic quality. It felt to me like liberation and it's something that I now have become a proselytiser for, the idea that you can put words into books that children won't necessarily know but they will either collect them, they will either find out what they mean, or they will just jump over them and come back for them later. Her vocabulary and the way that she writes, she had no truck at all with the idea that you should ‘see Spot run’. She believed in unleashing herself into these books. In reading

them as a child, it felt like being saluted by someone that believed in you.

I also loved her absolute resistance to cliche, in a way that I think almost no other writer has been so brilliant either in subverting it or just mocking it. I imagine this is one of the few places where people will have read her *Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, which I absolutely loved, and I copied a tiny little bit of it here because I love it so much. For those who haven't come across it, it's a litany of definitions that you find yourself in in the world of fantasy. So, for instance, 'Stew, what you are served to eat every single time. Clothing, here the colder the climate, the fewer the garments worn. Missing heirs, at any given time, half the countries in fantasyland will have mislaid their crown prince or princess. Scurvy, despite a diet consisting entirely of stew, see above, and whey bread, supplemented only by the occasional fish, see above, you will not suffer from this or any other deficiency disorder. Common cold, this is one of the many viral nuisances that will not be present. You can get as wet, cold and tired as you like and you will still not catch cold, but see "plague".' And I love that she doesn't do that. She has wizards with terrible colds. And I return to her consistently because she has a vision of the world that has no need to exclude the minor details. Instead, she has them make everything so much richer.

There is also the element that Colin mentioned, which is that she is the creator of some of the sexiest characters for young women who are reading these books, and indeed young men, that you will ever encounter in children's fiction. Her willingness to just unleash these male characters in the psyche of eight-year-old girls has shaped so many of my

friends forever. Of course, everyone wants to marry Howl. But also the idea of Chrestomanci with his dressing-gown and with his calm authority and with his elegantly short temper. He was for me the ideal man in a way that is not helpful as you work through the world, but in a way which has lasted me forever.

And I also loved, and I don't know if this is the same, I certainly know it's the same for all the girls I know, *Fire and Hemlock* is one of the strangest and most remarkable children's books that I have ever read. It's a strange beast. For those who don't know it, it's based on the story of Tam Lin, and in it a girl who is 12 ends up at the end in love with the man who has been her friend and companion throughout. It might well be that that is not a book that would fly now, but at the time it felt to me like an extraordinary way of thinking about the way that you mature and the way that you obsess. It felt to me like a book that in its opacity left enormous amounts of space for choosing how to read it, and of course most 13-year-old girls I know chose to read it by falling wildly in love with the elegant, distracted, slightly vain character of Thomas Lyn.

So, I go to schools a lot, and one of the things that I get asked is what is your favourite children's book that you didn't write? And I have always, always said *Charmed Life*, and one of the things that gives me great joy is that I've been doing this now for 12 years and the number of children who have heard of *Charmed Life* has burgeoned in those 12 years. The number of them who have read it and are in love with it has been absolutely exploding, I think in part because of the reissue of all the books. But I started right back at the

beginning, 12 years ago, when people hadn't come across it in quite such numbers. I would offer a prize, I would say, ‘OK I have a bet for you, I think there is no chance that you will not adore *Charmed Life*, and so if you read *Charmed Life* and you don't love it, you can write to me and I will send you chocolate in the post.’ And I got this glorious cascade of letters from children saying ‘Dear Katherine Rundell, I read *Charmed Life* and I regret to tell you that I absolutely loved it and it's my new favourite book’, and they all come in exactly the same mechanism. They all attempt to pull a sort of enchanting eight-year-old trick. And then in the end, I got one letter from one boy who said, 'I read it, I don't believe in magic, it didn't really happen, I didn't like it', and so to him I grudgingly sent a bag of Maltesers and a secret wish that he would understand the concept of the imagination. But he was the only one, and otherwise I have just been the receiver of a staggering number of letters from children falling love over and over again with Diana Wynne Jones' work and with her wit and with her irony and with her willingness to believe that we will follow her where she takes us, and with that extraordinary gift of writing sentences that make you want to scream with jealousy. And I think that there is nobody like her in the last 100 years. I think she is utterly, utterly unique, and my favourite children's writer ever.

Johnny – Katherine, that was wonderful, thank you. Did you ever get a chance to meet her?

Katherine – I never did, no.

Johnny - She would have loved you. Honestly, she would have absolutely loved you. My only other question is did the

kids who liked the book get the Maltesers as well, or did you really stick to your promise?

Katherine – I would write back to them saying I was so glad, and now you need to read *The Magicians of Caprona*, and *The Lives of Christopher Chant* and *Eight Days of Luke*, and I would send them lists. To a few of them I even sent books.

Johnny – A greater gift than Maltesers, I think, fair enough. Katherine will of course be back, as of course will Colin Burrow for the Q&A at the end. Before that, we go to the wonderful Neil Gaiman, who's got up early for us, he's ready for a chat and I cannot wait to hear what he's got to say. I think he's going to be with us very shortly. A very busy man with *Sandman* adaptations coming up on Netflix relatively shortly as well. The chat is hugely busy. I hope they got the off-brand Maltesers, says Fi, and so do I. I completely agree with that. There are various people as well, one saying that Richard, Diana's oldest son, was actually their English teacher in year 7, and the link was made when they reviewed *Howl's Moving Castle* as their favourite book. I can't quite find the name, so I apologise to whoever this was, saying they're absolutely mortified looking back as an adult. The only thing I could say, straight forwardly, don't be. He would have loved it, and she would have loved it even more. I remember very clearly, I was so proud to be her grandson, always. I'm very boring about it. You want to talk about being retrospectively embarrassed about things, that's about number one for me. And eventually when my twin brother and I were probably about eight or nine years old, she came to my school, as Katherine used to, and gave a talk, and she told the story about being so focussed on her writing that she put a roast

chicken by the door for my granddad to put on his feet, and put his walking boots in the oven. And I just dined out on that, pardon the pun, for the rest of my school career. So, nothing to be embarrassed about for anyone. One person she absolutely loved, always loved hearing from and I'm going to love hearing from now, is Neil Gaiman who is with us.

Neil – I vanished mysteriously for a few seconds. But I'm back. I discovered Diana at about the age of 17, and it was a paperback copy of *Charmed Life* in Puffin edition, I think, and I thought of myself as being too old for children's books, so why I had actually wandered into the children's section of the bookshop and why I picked up that book I still don't know. But I took it home, I read it and at the end, I was angry. And I was angry that I was not eight. It was that feeling that you'd just read something huge and important and you were too old for it to have changed your life. In the way that CS Lewis had changed my life, that Tolkien had changed my life, that PL Travers had changed my life. There were people that I'd read and was never the same person after.

Hearing Kate talk about reading *Charmed Life*, I was just so filled with joy and envy because I thought that was actually what I wanted. There was anger but there was delight in going 'OK. I think there's somebody here who is the real thing'. One thing that you cannot fake in children's fiction is, well you can fake it but you can't fake it for very long, is a kind of rock bottom sincerity. Does the person mean it? Is the person writing this, have they seen the sights that they are describing to you? And you felt that Diana had.

As a very young journalist, I then got very lucky because I was reviewing books for the *British Fantasy Society Journal*, which meant that I got everything sent to me to read. And Diana's books were exciting and I also found that I felt incredibly lucky because I was getting them as she was writing them. There was a period of incredible fecundity during the 80s where she was producing essentially masterpiece after masterpiece on a level that you look back now and go 'Hang on, she wrote *that* followed by *that* followed by *that*? And then *Howl's Moving Castle*?' I remember reading *Archer's Goon*, getting to the end of *Archer's Goon* and just going straight back to the beginning again. Partly because I had not understood the final chapter, and how it had all worked, and partly because the experience of reading *Archer's Goon*, as far as I was concerned it was the best thing in the world. I was 24 years old and all I ever wanted to do was read *Archer's Goon*.

Years later, when I met Diana, I talked to her, I remember, about her final chapters, because I said I had never hit a final chapter of yours that I have not had to then start thumbing back through the book and figuring out the clues and putting it all into order. And she said, 'That's because you read like an adult, Neil. You don't read like a child any longer.' I said, 'What's the difference?' She said, 'Children read every word and take everything in, adults assign importance to some sentences or things, and they will dismiss things, and they don't carry it forward.' And I wasn't convinced, and I wasn't convinced until 20 years ago I started reading the complete works of Diana Wynne Jones to my daughter Maddie, and over the course of two or three years I got to read all of

Diana's books. And even books that I had thought were difficult were not difficult. Everything, if you're reading it aloud, you're actually registering every nuance, every tiny little thing from the side character, what is that scarecrow doing in *Howl's Moving Castle*? Or whatever. And you pick up on things that were obscure.

I was always fascinated by Diana's ability to mythologise her life, and to mythologise the people around her. I was rather, I was, for example absolutely unconvinced by her travel jinx. She would talk about her travel jinx and I thought it was utterly fictional, until the one time I had to travel with her. She was a guest of honour at a convention in Minneapolis and I was going out to Minneapolis to attend the convention and also to see my wife's family, and I remember we got onto the plane at Gatwick, we all rendezvoused, it was lovely to see her. We got on the plane, we sat on the tarmac for a bit, they explained that the door of the plane had fallen off and this didn't normally happen, and they got us all off the plane. And we waited several hours for another plane to happen, and it has never happened before or since to me, that the door of a plane had randomly fallen off a large passenger jet. And Diana took it in her stride, she said, 'Of course, this is my travel jinx, it happens.' And from that point on, I said, ‘OK, well it may not exist but I will absolutely believe in your travel jinx from now on because I have experienced your travel jinx.’

I got to plot with her, plot books with her that we never wrote but we would sit around and plot, and just that experience taught me incredible things. Phoning her, back in those days when you would phone somebody that you

wanted to talk to. Diana did not answer the phone, that I remember, but when the phone would be answered, and then a voice would say, 'Diana, it's Neil for you', and then she would come on. If she did answer the phone she would answer it incredibly nervously, as if I was about to give her bad news. When she did answer it, we would talk sometimes for hours. Very often, about, and mostly, I think, about craft, and what fascinates me about Diana is she gave the impression of just being a natural, somebody who came out of the woodwork with all these ideas, with all these wonderful stories. She wrote them down, she sent them off and there [it] is, and it was a disguise. It was the same kind of disguise that, I don't know if you've ever seen a slack rope walker. They're sort of less flashy than tightrope walkers, and then you try it yourself and you realise that, no, if you get on to this rope, you fall off. And the amount of balance, the amount of training, the amount of craft, the understanding of what they're doing, is utterly there, utterly remarkable. And she made it look easy, and I still think that's why she didn't win the huge awards. Because I look back and go, 'Why didn't you? You were writing books that were undeniably classics. You should at have least won the Carnegie Medal. Not once but several times over. You should have been lauded during your lifetime in a way that you never were, except you never seemed to mind because you always knew exactly how good you were. And you knew how much better you were than the others so you were fine on this.' But for those of us who loved and appreciated what she did, it was, or for me at least, it was a source of frustration. Nobody could have been more pleased for me than she was when I won the Carnegie for *The Graveyard Book*, and by the same token, I thought,

‘You've written things better than this and you should have got this.’

She was the finest and wisest and most brutal of mentors, because if I wrote something she liked, she'd tell me. And if I wrote something she didn't think worked, she'd tell me. And it made the praise valuable, but she would cushion the cosh in a, if not a velvet bag, at least a hempen bag before she hit you with it. But you knew, and she would make it very clear. But what she would always come in with was 'And you can do better than this, and you will do better next time.' My final memories of Diana are going and seeing her every time I came to the UK, always because she was getting sick and going down. She had moved her bedroom downstairs and the last thing, the last real interaction we had, I got to show her my episode of *Dr Who*, 'The Doctor's Wife', about four months before it actually aired. I had a video of it back when we had videos, or possibly a DVD, or maybe it was even on my phone, and she wanted to see it, and we sat and watched it together, and she said, 'You did a good one, there.' And I was happy.

Johnny – Good. As well you should have been. Lovely to hear, Neil, thank you. I remember as well, you wrote, I think very shortly after she died, an essay entitled something like 'To my friend Diana Wynne Jones' and I remember reading it, I must have been a 13-year-old boy, and just crying. I mean it was absolutely lovely and very thoughtful and very heartfelt, so thank you for that. And thank you for that talk just then. And we, of course, have an even broader panel now because we've got all of them together, with the exception of Micky, I think, but we have Colin and Katherine back on my screen, as

if by magic. And we also have, there's been a full-blown conversation going on on the right of my screen which has been fascinating, but also in the middle of my screen there have been questions flying up for the panel. And I think we're going to start with a simple one, firstly because it's nice and broad but secondly because I really, really want to know the answer. Which is simply from Carolina to the panellists, 'Which is your favourite of Diana Wynne Jones' books and why?'

Neil – For me, probably *Archer's Goon*, because she did things in there that I'd never seen anybody do before. The amount of faith in her audience, the faith in her readership to follow this, the willingness to cross over genre boundaries as if they didn't exist, demonstrating that they didn't exist, which she then cheerfully proceeded to do for the rest of her career. You look at *Hexwood* and it's a fantasy novel about science-fiction, or a science-fiction novel about fantasy, in which both are true. But I have also a tiny small soft spot for *The Lives of Christopher Chant*, which is an odd one, which is because at some point we were talking and I said, 'You know, I always felt that you nicked a lot of bits from Chrestomanci from PG Woodehouse's Smith. Chrestomanci and Smith seem to me very much of a type. If Smith had actually got a job and run magic, he would have been Chrestomanci.' And she said, 'Well yes, Neil, that's actually very perceptive. But in *The Lives of Christopher Chant* it was you.' And I said, 'What?' And she said, 'Oh yes, it was how I thought you probably were as a child.' I said, 'Oh, OK.' Which left me traumatised but incredibly fond of that book.

Johnny – That's actually my favourite as well, for the record. The image of stepping stones in the world between the dreams and the worlds and the nethermost that was somehow scary and welcoming, I just loved as a kid. Katherine, which is your favourite?

Katherine – Mine is *Fire and Hemlock*, now as an adult. I think that is the case. I think the one that I was given, *Charmed Life*, by a bookseller who said, 'This is the best book about magic that is also funny that has ever been written and will ever be written'. And I was eight, so I don't think I really had much of a hinterland with which to compare it, and now I go around saying exactly the same with exactly the same slightly obsessive Ancient Mariner quality. But *Fire and Hemlock* seems to me staggeringly and devastatingly perceptive about the reality of being a teenage girl. It goes deep and strange and I love it for its strangeness. And I also think how dauntingly brilliant it is to have been able to take the rhyme of *Tam Lin* and made it into a sort of odd vertiginous half romance, half murder mystery and her, as I said before, her utter willingness not to spell it out, to leave it for you. And so people still fight about that book because it has puzzles that aren't answered in the text. I find that a remarkable thing to have the courage to have done and I love her for it.

Neil – I remember Diana telling me, I once said to her that my only dissatisfaction with *Fire and Hemlock* is I wanted to spend longer in the quotidian reality before we realise that the quotidian reality was not reality, and she said, 'Oh yes, that was how I wrote it but my publisher felt that it was a

little boring so we cut a lot of it.' And I always think, ‘No! There’s more!’

Katherine – Is there an archive? Does anyone...?

Johnny – There probably is somewhere. And she also made a career in other points out of defying publishers. I remember at one dinner years ago, her telling tiny me and my brother with absolute glee that she had sent a manuscript of, I can't even remember which, off to her publisher and a specific page had been highlighted as ‘This is convoluted and too much and I don't like it’And going back to Neil's point earlier that she knew exactly how good she was and she didn't particularly care, she said, 'So what do you think I did boys?' She said, 'I cut all the words out, I cut out various different sentences, and I stuck them back together with Sellotape in a way that made it very obviously look like they'd been changed and sent it back' and they said, 'It's wonderful, really well done', which is about as her as you can get. Dad, which is your favourite?

Colin – *Fire and Hemlock*. I think it is her masterpiece really. I just think the way it evokes forgetting part of your life and losing where you're going is extraordinary. And I think the way it weaves in the story of Tam Lyn to Bristol is just an astonishing achievement. I also think it's a book where she looked hard and directly at her own sadness, which is why she can convey so much about what it is to be a teenage girl. And I think it's incredibly brave to have done that, actually, and the result is a wonderful book. And, actually, looking at the chat, as it's unfolding there's been a lot of love for *Fire and Hemlock* and I really think that it is the one. *Charmed Life*

is a great favourite of mine, and *The Lives of Christopher Chant* as well, but I just think that *Fire and Hemlock* is really where she gets lift off.

Johnny – I'm going to have to re-read that one, I think. The questions keep flying in. Jessica asks, to Neil and to Katherine, 'How did Diana influence you as writers, and what are you grateful that she gave you?'

Neil – For me, confidence. And a sort of confidence that was wonderful because she believed in me as a writer and took me seriously at a time that I wasn't really a writer. I was but nobody knew. I published a handful of short stories, I was a journalist, I had an enormous career in front of me, but the fact that Diana, who was as far as I was concerned as good as it got, thought that I had the chops and treated me as an equal was like having Dumbo's magic feather. I knew I could fly and that was huge and important for me.

Katherine – I think for me reading her growing up from such a formative age, a sense that she believed in me, as a child, she believes in her child readers. And so you feel that you are stepping in to the world of somebody who believes that you will rise to the story she is telling you, is an act of such profound generosity and I always think that there are not enough people who believe in their readers with quite such vibrant. And just in practical terms, when I was 22, I wrote a novel called *Rooftoppers* about a girl called Sophie, which is a very slight reference to Sophie in *Howl's Moving Castle*, and she, a tiny baby, drowns and she is rescued by an academic, and the academic is Colin Burrow. So, to an extent there is, very loosely Colin Burrow and a couple of other academics

who I admired wildly. And that sort of vision of the way that you might approach literature, which is Colin's, I imagine is also Diana's.

Johnny – That's lovely, and sadly he's a terrible swimmer, just for the record. But I'm sure in the fiction he's masterful, but in real life he's actually rather disappointing. Lots more questions flying in. One that I'm particularly interested by from Yaz, asking everyone, 'Is there a particular character or characters or scene in any of Diana's books, even if it's not your favourite, that reminds you of her?'

Neil – There's no moment in there for me where a particular scene or anything like that that is more Diana than anything else, because I think we were incredibly lucky to have this wonderful fiction that always evokes Diana. A few years ago, my friend Peter Nicholls, who was also Diana's friend, who was a critic, had severe Parkinson's, had disappeared off into sort of dementia, and he would go out every morning onto his porch, light these little cigars, and just sit and read things. He took enormous pleasure in reading, but had no memory of what he was reading, so he would just sit and read randomly. And I remember staying with them before the end, and going out and sitting with Peter, and I just picked up *House of Many Ways* and he had *Charmed Life*, and we sat there reading Diana together. Peter, he didn't say anything, but he was reading, and I was sitting there next to him, and Diana was there. And there was always that feeling of evoking presence.

Colin – It's a very interesting question and it does make me think about her in quite a radical way because I think the

answer is, my answer is, I don't think there is a character in her books that remind me of her and yet all her books remind me of her. I think that was part of her, actually. She was really good at looking at people and seeing what they were and seeing through them in a slightly scary way sometimes. But I think she sort of almost didn't believe that she was there. So, *The Time of the Ghost*, the narrator is somebody who possibly isn't there and I think she thought about herself in that way. The closest you get to a self-portrait is really Sophie in *Howl*, where she had bad arthritis when she was not very old really and that did mean she was limited in what she could do, and that account of suddenly becoming old and bent over was about herself really and about being ill. But generally, she was the point of view, she was the person who saw rather than the person who was in the fiction.

Johnny – Another question that has caught my eye is from Fi, and this is the sort of more complex inverse of which is your favourite. 'To the panellists, like many, I was introduced to Diana Wynne Jones' works through *Howl's Moving Castle*, but what is the one Diana Wynne Jones' book you think deserves more recognition?'

Neil – I remember being very frustrated by the BBC version of *Archie's Goon*. Because it kind of had the plot of *Archer's Goon* and it had none of the magic. But overall, for me, it's been a source of joy over the last 30 years just watching Diana's star ascend. The books get more and more readers. The readers, the children discover her. The idea, in the 80s, when she was writing a lot of these works of genius, when she was writing *Fire and Hemlock* and *Archer's Goon* and

Howl's Moving Castle and the rest of them, the books that were winning awards, what were fashionable were sad stories about kids in tower blocks whose elder brothers had a heroin problem and who were having big problems at school which they may or may not actually resolve by the end. And they were very gritty, slice of lifey, good-for-you stories. Rather like the Victorian morality ones. And just the joy of story and the things that evoke magic were profoundly unfashionable. And if JK Rowling gave us anything it was actually telling publishers, 'No, kids like stories and kids like magic.' And that actually has had a glorious knock-on effect to Diana because the more people who read them, the more people who tell people about them, the more people who pass them on. I think it's huge.

Katherine – I think, I've met no one who has read *The Magicians of Caprona*, which is, I'm sure I have now met people on this panel and indeed in the chat, but I loved it for its sweetness and its anarchy. And I don't think it's her greatest but I want it to be read and read and read. But I'm just going to keep saying *Fire and Hemlock*. I also think *Fire and Hemlock*, because it's not part of a series, gets forgotten, and people should be talking about it as one of the finest books about a young woman ever written. It should not be put in a specific shelf in a specific place. It is staggering literature.

Colin – I'd like to pick up on Kate's point about series because publishers love them and they can say, 'This is another World of Chrestomanci book', 'This is another Dalemark book' and that does help the marketing. And that does mean that the ones that aren't part of series tend to be undervalued.

Magicians of Caprona has got great cats apart from anything else, there's Siena for you sort of transformed into a world of magic, it's really extraordinary. But I think *Power of Three*, it's quite an early one, and one where she's thinking about landscape and human influence on landscape, and I don't think people particularly talk about it and I think it's slightly dropped out of view, and it's another really great book.

Johnny – I think it is. I agree with *The Magicians of Caprona* suggestion. I think we had that on audiobook and you read it to me, and I read it. So, Katherine, that's three in one person for a start. But I honestly loved it, I need to read it as a pseudo grown-up. Another question from Claire is a very interesting one. 'The appeal of Diana Wynne Jones' books partially involves how flawed characters grow in organic ways without a single deeper meaning or lesson that dominates the narrative through a unified thematic resolution. I'm not asking for anything as formal as a philosophy of life, which would entirely destroy the charm, but did her approach to daily life reflect a similar openness to disorganised and undogmatic forms of personal growth? PS, Hi Colin from Claire Landis.'

Colin – Well, thanks, Claire, it's great you're here. She's a graduate student of mine who I haven't seen for ages because she's in America.

Johnny – Are you not doing your job again?

Colin – I'm not doing my job again! Flawed characters, yeah. It is what she does, and I think she's very, very artful at not drawing attention to the flaws in an overt way, and very

artful about not moralising about them. And earlier on in the chat I think people were talking about *Howl* and how they didn't initially realise that he was quite literally heartless until re-reading it. And I think that is part of her skill, that she could create these people who don't know what's wrong with themselves. And you don't necessarily quite know what's quite wrong with them, too. And see them growing. I don't know if there's a philosophy of life there. I think there's a psychology, I think she's very interested in people who don't quite know who they are, and that can be a good thing or a bad thing. And I think her view of real people is a bit like that as well, that she often felt people didn't acknowledge what they were for good or for bad. So, it's a big part of her writing, and I think it is more a psychology and a writerly practice than it is a straightforward moral philosophy that you could state in precepts about human behaviour. But I think probably Neil and Kate will have more insights on that question probably than I will.

Neil – Let me toss it to Kate first because I want to think about it.

Katherine – I think insofar as it's about how she lived, of course I very sadly never knew her, but I think the way in which her characters do have these flaws in them that are different from the flaws of classic children's literature, both in the baddies and the goodies. For instance, the baddies in *Charmed Life* being quite shoddy and seedy rather than just straightforwardly fairy tale wicked. I think that is one of the things which suggests that when you enter a Diana Wynne

Jones book, you enter a world and a world with texture and opacity rather than just moral lessons, and I know that when you write for children, the temptation to tell them something morally important becomes very strong and I think the way in which she resisted that was both beautiful and offered a sort of model for the people who came after her. That you didn't have to essentially say, 'Sit down, be quiet, and extremely well behaved.'

Neil – I think that the joy for me of her characters is they were people and it feels as if you would know them if you met them. Very, very few of them feel like characters. They're all broken. And they're all broken in interesting ways, and some of them will mend themselves and some of them will not. And they all have, your protagonist always needs to understand who they are and the biggest question of most of the books is going to be 'Who are you?'. And trying to think of a protagonist... there are very few protagonists who know who they are at the beginning, and sometimes that's very literal. They believe they have one set of parents and they don't. They believe themselves to have one identity, and they're wrong. They believe themselves to be a specific kind of thing, and they're wrong. And I sometimes wonder if that's because Diana used to talk about the fact that her mother defined her and her sisters. They were given roles that they were expected to conform to, and she always felt that she'd broken out and done the wrong one. And I don't know to what extent that feeling of figuring out who you are, defining who you are, and finding out who you really are and where you come from, moves through everything. But it is there in every... it's not in every story and all of the major ones.

Looking at something like *Enchanted Glass* where you really don't figure out who everybody was until literally the final page, is quite astonishing.

Johnny – So much of her work ends up feeling like that, I think. Unfortunately, this is the stage in proceedings where I have to start being my boring radio presenter self and start looking at the clock. We have got a couple of minutes, which is not long enough to do a whole question in loads of depth from all of you, so what I suggest is there's a great one here from Taya. 'Can we talk about the humour in her work, from slapstick to satire (huge, I know). Humour in her work, humour in her life.' I mean, I remember learning to swear straightforwardly from hearing her swear playing cards, prodigiously, often directed towards my mother, with love, because Mum is probably watching. But she was funny, she was a funny person, she was an extremely funny writer. One line, one moment from each of you, just as a final takeaway, either in print or out of it, when she just made you laugh.

Katherine – I love the moment in one of the Chrestomanci books, I think it's probably *Charmed Life*, where Chrestomanci sweeps out of the room in a very long one-person procession. It's just so great. She's just so brilliant.

Neil – I'm reminded, one of the lovely things about the fantasy book that Kate was talking about earlier, *The Tough Guide*, was that a lot of that I had heard as rants, incredibly amusing and wonderful rants. And her rant about stew was so much better because her rant about stew points out how long and complex it is to make stew. The fact that stew is something that has to be attended or it has to be stirred.

Everybody has had the experience of turning back on stew to answer a phone call, and then you come back and there's a layer of blackness on the bottom that permeates the entire rest of it. The capacity for stew to go wrong. And she did this entire speech about, in conversation, about people in fantasy making stew with ease. And then she said, 'Nobody ever makes an omelette.' She said, 'You could make an omelette so easily. There are birds' nests everywhere, why don't people in fantasy make omelettes?' And I don't think I've made an omelette since without thinking of Diana and the stew and the omelette.

Colin – There's a lot of love in the chat for her food, which is wonderful. Going right back to the *Eight Days of Luke* and the monochrome meals that get served up. I've just been re-reading *The Pinhoe Egg* and actually the gryphon Klartch learning to walk and learning to be a gryphon is just so, it has her humour because it's so warm about a creature that doesn't know yet what it is. It's about to become this great, vast, terrifying creature and yet it's still just a puppy, just falls over its own feet. That is for me the core of her humour. The humour or warmth about things that don't quite understand themselves yet.

Johnny – And equally, that idea of a thing that doesn't quite yet know what it is being central to the rest of it as well, not just the humour but the whole thing. Guys, it has been such a pleasure to speak to all of you this evening. Katherine Randell, Neil Gaiman, Colin Burrow, did such a great job. A real moving, funny, interesting, heart-warming conversation which I have absolutely loved. Thank you to everyone who has kept possibly the most populated chat section I've ever

seen. If I got texted on radio shows at this kind of pace, I would never have to think ever again. Thank you of course to Bristol Ideas, all of the organisers, so many wonderful people have been behind this. Laura Cecil, Katherine Butler, Henrietta Wilson, Lydia Wilson, all kinds of people behind the scenes as well, just doing sensational things, all of your questions, Zoë Steadman-Milne running things, so many people behind it. So many people have enjoyed it, I hope. Remember it is all being recorded, if you missed the beginning, if you missed the end, if you want to watch it again, if you want to watch it again but edit Colin out, so many options, it's all going to be available for you. And, of course, the Bristol Festival of Ideas. Many, many more things coming up throughout the autumn online and in person, so subscribe on all the relevant social media, keep an eye out, keep reading, keep thinking, keep laughing, and keep enjoying the work of Diana Wynne Jones. Thanks.