

Children's Author Talks About the End of the World

MG Harris, bestselling author of *The Joshua Files*, mixes Mayan mythology with conspiracy theories in her high tech stories for boys. But does she really believe the world will end in 2012? Steve Barley finds out at the 2009 Guardian Hay Festival.

Born in Mexico City but raised by her mother in Manchester, Maria Guadalupe Harris – or MG as she prefers to be called – has led an upbringing as cosmopolitan as the 13 year old hero in her books. Exploring remote jungle ruins in her childhood gave her an early fascination for the ancient – but hugely advanced – Mayan civilisation and the unresolved questions it left behind. Like, *Why did the Mayans abandon their cities between 800 to 900AD?* and *What catastrophic event had they foreseen that made them end their calendar on December 21st, 2012?*

Making good use of her academic background and career in bio-technology, MG has created a high-tech, high octane read that has been described as 'Alex Rider meets Stargate'. Steve Barley attended her presentation at the Guardian Hay Festival where she expounded passionately about writing to her young fans in the audience, and created older fans of the parents with her broad smile and ready quips. Catching up with her afterwards Steve discovers a writer with very little ego but grand writing designs. Here he finds out more about her background, her books and her new found fame.



MG Harris' book signing at the 2009 Guardian Hay Festival

Q: *In your books the lead character, Josh, is torn between uncovering his father's Mexican roots and retaining a life of normality with his mother in England. To what extent is that based on your own upbringing and experiences?*

MG: I think in a metaphorical way, yes. But I didn't put it in on purpose. I only realised afterwards Josh's life was a metaphor for me becoming aware of my Mexican family, and my Latin American heritage and what that really meant.

Q: *How difficult was it writing *The Joshua Files* from the perspective of a teenage boy?*

MG: It requires a lot of concentration to be honest. I can't just write something and think that's fine because I always have to ask, 'Would a 13 year old boy think like that?' But when I was 13 I pretty much only hung around with boys as there were only boys in the street. Though I wouldn't say I present Josh as one of the boys I knew because (laughs) he's much nicer than them really. They were quite horrible but also good friends. In fact my best friend was a boy.

Q. The Joshua Files cleverly blends ancient cultures with cutting edge science. Was the science element born from your academic background and career in bio-technology?

MG: Yes it was. If I want to think of a way that you can have some kind of molecular control I know how that could happen. Science was one of the first things that came to mind when I started writing.

Q. Is the 2012 date at the heart of your books, which is when a catastrophe is supposed to befall mankind, based on a real Mayan prediction or something you created yourself?

MG: It's based on a real end date in the Mayan calendar but as to what that related to we don't know, nobody knows.

Q. I understand from your Blog you're working on an idea for a smart, yet non-precocious child detective. Is that likely to be your next major writing project after The Joshua Files?

MG: I don't know, because I've already written something else about a boy who is a telepath. Being a telepath, everyone wants him to be a spy and he's been trained to be a spy but he doesn't want to be. The publishers might print that next year.

Q. So you tend to have several different stories going at the same time?

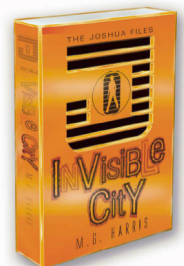
MG: Well I don't want to write the same thing forever. I'm very impressed with Anthony Horowitz and Robert Muchamore, I've been to both their talks, and to be able to write eight or ten books about one character... could I write that many books about Josh? Maybe. But I'd have to write something else as well. Especially the way Josh is written in first person. It's quite intense emotionally. And as he gets older, I have to say, I feel less confident writing him because then he becomes a young man and you know... young men do close down what they'll display of their emotions so it becomes more of a guessing game for me. Josh will run to five books though and I'm currently working on book four.

Q. You've had amazing success over the last few years since you took up writing seriously. Has it surprised you, and is an author's life as glamorous as you expected?

MG: I think it is quite glamorous but I have to say that it's not dissimilar to being a reasonably successful scientist. If you get a modicum of success you'll be on the conference circuit flying around the world to give talks and perhaps go skiing in your spare time or attend black tie dinners. What's different as an author is that people are interested in you in a way that I'm not used to. In science they are interested in your work but they don't become interested in you that much. To have questions asked about me. That's really new.

Q. Your literary agent is Peter Cox, of Redhammer and Litopia.com fame. To what extent has he helped you in your success?

MG: Hugely. He was very demanding about the first book, Invisible City. He really made me push things on the plot. We sat down and I said, 'What do you like about this?' and the first thing he said was, 'What you've written can't be published as it is.' And he told me all the things that were wrong with it and then I said 'But what do you like about it.' And he said, 'The central concept.' He liked the whole Mayan end of the world and archaeology thing. He said, 'It's got a feel of a young Indiana Jones.' I thought, well okay, I'll keep the central concept of a lost city and lost codex and the 2012 thing but make the boy more emotional.



Q. So you had to make him flawed in some way?

MG: Not so much flawed as sympathetic. Back then, Josh was more able and, as Peter pointed out, didn't have much wrong with him. I mean how can children sympathise with someone who's clever, brilliant, *and* brave. Josh had to become someone they could empathise with.

Q. What do your family think of your writing and new found literary success?

MG: They're very happy because my husband was made redundant from his supposedly stable job the week I got my offer so it was very helpful. He does marketing consultancy now.

Q. Were you working yourself at that time?

MG: No. I used to run an IT company with a friend until I broke my leg badly in a skiing accident in 2005. That's when I said I'm gonna take a couple of years off and become a writer.

Q. From your website, you sound like someone that throws themselves passionately into following whatever inspires you - be that Mayan history, writing or Manchester United - but do you ever suffer from writers' block?

MG: I think if you've got something emotional going on in your life, then it's very difficult to write, but no. I don't. I tend to work to a structure plan though. It makes it much easier to write the book if you start work every day and go, 'What am I writing today?' and your plan says, Josh goes here, he meets this person and he finds out this and there's a chase. Then all you've got to do is make that happen.

Q. Finally, the children's book market has undergone something of a renaissance in the last decade in terms of the quality and diversity of writing on offer. What advice would you give to any budding authors out there wishing to follow in your footsteps and pen the next 'must have' story for kids?

MG: I would say, don't look at what's already out there first. Go into your own childhood and think about what moved you when you were a child, and what excited you, and what scared you. I think if you can't connect with that as a children's author then I don't think you've got any business doing it really. The kind of things I found exciting as a kid still excite me now. So when I'm thinking of a new story, like the child detective, I'll cross him with a medieval theme because when I was young I loved medieval knights. What could be cooler – medieval knights and detectives – now there's a story! So start by connecting with something that moved you as a child, but then look into whether anybody is already doing that. If a million people are, then there's probably not much point writing it unless you're doing it in a really different way.



M.G. HARRIS

Many thanks to MG for taking time out in her busy schedule. The second Joshua Files book, *Ice Shock*, is now available in most bookstores.

And no, MG does **not** believe the world will end in December, 2012. Although, perhaps her publishers are hedging their bets as they are recommending she release the fifth and final Joshua Files book in the spring of that year!

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