

Hope is...

Kiran Millwood Hargrave

If I have one message for my readers, it is to have hope. This is all you need to survive: a story, a school, a life. As adults we talk about hope being too painful, sometimes, to hold. But this is to lose something essential about being alive.

To go on living in any meaningful way, is to have hope. Depression is experienced as a profound feeling of hopelessness, the inability to see an end to the pain. It robs us of perspective, of possibility. Despite the high stakes faced without it, too often people confuse hope with whimsy, with idealism. But it is the strongest of all emotions, the last out of Pandora's Box, slipping from the dark into a darker world, holding out her little light.

Writing children's books means hope is not an added extra: it's an essential ingredient. When asked what characterizes children's literature, this one word is my only solid answer. All the greats offer it: Roald Dahl, Malorie Blackman, Philip Pullman and Jamila Gavin. They understood, understand, that so long as you leave room for it, it is no matter that beloved pets die, kingdoms fall, or friends turn to enemies. It is a promise, a possibility: things can change for the better.

Hope is leaving room for the best to happen, even in the grip of despair. It comes in many forms, in many stories. Hope is the thread in the labyrinth, the silver stitch of a wish. It's a sword in the stone, the solidity of another's hand in yours. With hope, a writer can guide their reader through the most treacherous terrain, into the darkest shadows, and children's books have a responsibility to do this. To help children encounter the worst of the world within the safe confines of a story, and show how to overcome, to survive,

to dream, when all seems lost.

Constantly, consistently, my characters find hope in nature. In the power of the sea to defeat a fire demon, in a swarm of butterflies leading the way home, the unlocking of ice from a cursed land. Hope is wonder, and the ability to find it in the world, in each other.

Most often I find hope in children. Not in some naïve, platitude-riven way, but in all its shining solidity. Children are leading the way against climate change, gun crime, racism, human rights abuses. And this is all wrong. Adults should be doing these things, making these changes, correcting the laws. We should not be relying on children to do it, or merely lifting up their voices, thrusting them centre stage and into spotlights to be belittled and ridiculed. Why must children be our hope? Why can't we be theirs?

Kiran Millwood Hargrave

Kiran Millwood Hargrave is a poet, playwright and author of stories for children, teenagers, and adults. Her books include *The Girl of Ink & Stars*, winner of the Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2017; *The Island at the End of Everything*, shortlisted for the Costa Children's Book Award 2017; and *The Way Past Winter*, which won the Blackwell's Children's Book of the Year Award 2018. Her first YA novel, *The Deathless Girls*, a reimagining of the origin stories of the so-called 'brides of Dracula', was published in September 2019. *The Mercies* was published by Picador in February 2020. Kiran's next book, *The Dance Tree*, will be published in May 2022.

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A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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