

KNOW THE AUTHOR:

Anna Ciddor



INTERVIEWED BY TALÍ LAVI

If you were a teacher you would want a younger Anna Ciddor in your class. A diligent and intelligent twelve-year-old with an eye to achievement, she would be creative, have a lust for history and for getting things right. If you were the child sitting next to this Anna, you might not like her quite as much but, actually, you can't help but do so anyway because she's so very nice.

Anna Ciddor, writer and illustrator of—amongst a very long list—the highly successful *Viking Magic* children's fantasy series and now the superb *The Family With Two Front Doors* (Allen & Unwin, 2016), is no longer twelve years-old but, alongside many other accomplished writers for children, she believes there is an age she is able to tap into most naturally for her work. And speaking to her, on an autumnal Melbourne morning, one can easily conjure up this impassioned girl, intrigued by the past. Her childhood home was an idyllic creative starting point:

My parents didn't believe in television so we didn't have a television in the house. I was the eldest of two younger sisters and I was the creative director, and we put on plays, ballet, musical shows, radio shows, puppet shows. Making up stories and writing books.

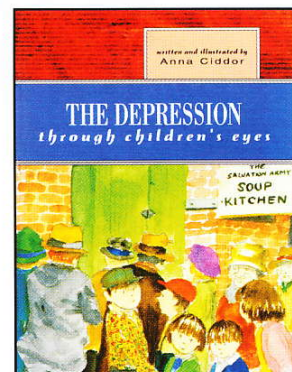
It was in the bedroom, however, that the craft of storytelling really developed. Sharing a room with her two younger

sisters, it was Anna who would make up the stories, *nothing very sophisticated, they were always stories about fairies and I was the Queen Fairy*. Her sisters were a willing audience until they went to sleep. Young Anna, however, never a very good sleeper, would then just lie in bed, for hours—well, it felt to me like hours—just making up stories in my head. It's an easy mistake to make, to deduce that she would have dreamed, even back then, of being a writer, but she is quick to disabuse people of this notion.

I never planned to be a writer when I grew up. I was always planning to be a teacher. And I was a teacher at first. It never crossed my mind that I would use those talents as a career.

Knowing what she wanted to do, she set out and did it. Determination and a conscious shaping of her career are evident. Although *fascinated by the past*, she was disenchanted by the way history was taught at school and so, being as adept at maths as she was at humanities, she endeavoured to help those who struggled with maths. *I thought I could help people to love maths too*. But it was her love of history that took her on a different path after having children. *It was reading to my own kids and thinking, I could write one of these*. Anna's first book was *Take Me Back* (Lamont, 1988), a nonfiction picture book inspired by the Bicentennial of Australian white settlement. Her experience with this book is telling of her drive.

This was when I was just starting out wanting to be an author and an illustrator. I thought, 'Well, I'll write a book that goes back in time and shows what life was like in Australia'. So I wrote and illustrated that. I went around to a few publishers. Eventually someone accepted it which was amazing and incredible but then other people, who'd been slow in coming back to me, said 'We like that idea'. So that was what got me into the Australian history area ... When I researched that one, I discovered how little there was for children that took them back in time and showed them what life used to be like. That was what I got hooked on for the next twenty years or so.



During that period, Anna wrote fifty non-fiction books for the educational and trade market, all tapping into an area that was, at that time, undeveloped. It emerged from a desire to enliven history, one that can be traced back to a sufferance of the way it had been taught at school. If you

look at some of these books, **The Depression: Through Children's Eyes** (Macmillan, 1995) or others, you will note the strong focus on character and the juxtaposition of two narratives, highlighting possible variations of experience at any one time. This is something that extends to her fiction as well. In **Viking Magic**, Thora and Oddo's stories shape and shift each other's and the counterpointing perspectives of Nomi and Yakov in **The Family With Two Front Doors** give richer tonal elements to the work:

I love doing it where it's almost first person, so you see it from their eyes but it's the narrator telling you what they've seen. So you've got the opportunity of describing how they look ... because you are the omniscient person. I love challenges, I love little boundaries, I guess it's the maths side of me. Having an historical framework, or having to do a character only in this way and they're only allowed to see so much.

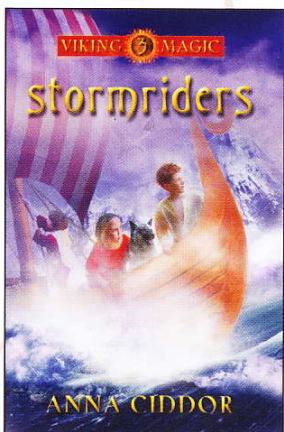
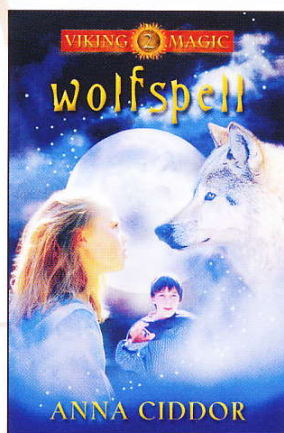
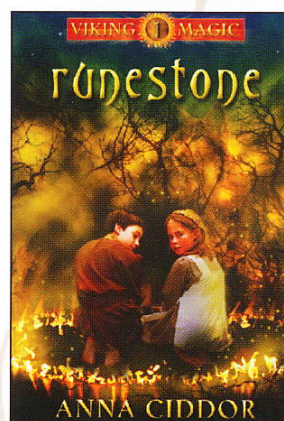
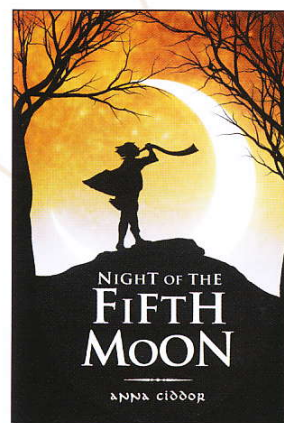
This intimacy of voice allows a feeling of closeness to her main characters, a rich sharing of their experience.

The biggest challenge, it seems, was the one she set herself having decided to cross into the territory of fiction. After voicing her desire to do so, she had been told by her publisher, *Non-fiction writers can't write fiction*. She thus set out to disprove this claim. How she set about doing so and what the results were, discloses much about this author/illustrator.

*I went to a local bookshop, 'Books in Print', [in Malvern] for advice. It would have been around 2000 that I went to them and said 'I'm thinking of writing a historical fiction book. What do you think? What's popular?' They said, 'Fantasy is popular at the moment' because it was early **Harry Potter** days. 'You've got to write fantasy'. So I did my homework, I found out what buyers were wanting ... I didn't know what I wanted to write, I just knew I wanted to have a go at historical fiction. I really had no specific plan when I went into them. And I had just done a little reader for somebody on Vikings and ... discovered their beliefs in magic. So I thought, OK, I'm not actually a big fantasy fan myself but I could use the historical fiction and use that they believed in magic. So I'm still arguing am I, am I not, a fantasy writer even though I was labelled that.*

The experiment had unforeseen consequences; a wildly successful adventure trilogy that fed into a widespread appetite for fantasy and was subsequently translated into Spanish and Portuguese. **Runestone** (Allen & Unwin, 2002), later followed by **Wolfspell** (2003) and **Stormriders** (2004), deftly set up this intricate historical context. Within the series, the central characters come to realise that their selves are worthy and valued for what they are. But it starts off from a highly climactic opening where Gyda the Midwife slyly swaps two babies at birth. The terrible stakes are alluded to, for Thora has been born into Bolverk's house, a distempered farmer with no use for girls. Gyda changes her for Oddo's place in his magic-making family and thus saves her. These two seams run deeply through the books. There is the dangerous, oftentimes difficult reality of life and the children's challenges of feeling forever displaced in their own families—Oddo is not of farming stock and Thora cannot make any spell work whereas her siblings can shapeshift or disappear at will. Tempering this darker tone, is the pure enjoyment of an adventure story and the world of magic. Consequently, because they seem so accomplished, it is slightly staggering to hear Anna confess that *they really were an apprenticeship, those first few books*.

In **Night of the Fifth Moon** (Allen & Unwin, 2007) her gripping tale set at the time of pagan Ireland, Ket competes with five other youths to become an apprentice to the powerful druids and finds, through this thrilling trial, that power corrupts. Druid Faelán intimates to the fosterlings, *Writing is a skill that is sacred and secret to the druids, to help us remember our great store of knowledge, and later claims, Words ... are power*. This is true for most of the worlds Anna has written about. In **Viking Magic**, this power is held by very few; the male runestone workers who are able to decode this form of language, of which Thora's father and male siblings form part of this community. In **Stormriders**, when Thora and Oddo travel to Iceland, the Irish Celtic priest who has found himself the sole remaining member of his community there, holds this same power of literacy. However, in her latest novel, **The Family With Two Front Doors**, the power of words has been transfigured, for here it is the author herself who holds the power of creation, in this labour of love wherein she resuscitates her long-lost family.



To attempt to describe **The Family With Two Front Doors** is already to divulge its unique quality. It reads like a well-loved classical Victorian novel (for me, it evoked childhood pleasures of reading E. Nesbit or Noel Streatfield, one of the writer's childhood favourites) and yet its characters are based on Anna's own family, orthodox Jews living in Lublin, Poland in the 1920s. This sensibility is informed by it emerging from a real person telling me about a real child. *I all the time had in mind the Little House books, where Laura Ingalls Wilder is talking about her long ago childhood. That was the feeling and the atmosphere that I wanted to get.*

That person was Anna's own Nana Nomi, whose central narrative drives the story and who Anna interviewed over an extended time, twenty-five years before endeavouring to write the book. Her husband had prompted her to interview Nomi about her past for she was a Holocaust survivor and in Anna's family this meant that *the past was never mentioned ... it was taboo talking about the past. So, even before this book was imagined and at a time when she was deep into writing non-fiction, the first hurdle Anna needed to overcome, was Nomi's own reticence.*

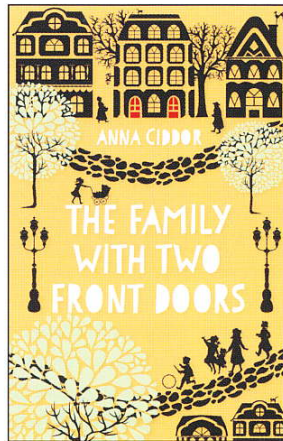
I said, 'Tell me about before the war.' She said, 'I don't want to talk about it.' I said, 'Tell me about before, tell me about when you were a child. Different worlds, a happy world' ... Everything was tinged for her by what came next.

Through these interviews, Anna gleaned precious details of the Rabinovitch family's life where they did live in a house with two front doors because of the sprawling nature of the family, having to house ten family members (when the book begins, one of the nine children is already married) and a small synagogue led by their father, a Rabbi. These details were crucial to the desire at the heart of the book, articulated so beautifully by its writer,

I wanted to give them a life that they didn't go on to have. I wanted to catch that moment when they were happy and not let that be shadowed by what came next.

This moment is indeed captured. For within the grace of the form and language that the novel employs, there is a sense of rambunctiousness and excitement. The story's arc is driven by the arrival of the news that fifteen-year-old Adina is about

to be engaged and leads up to the marriage celebration. This is based on fact and, no doubt, challenges readers' modern notions of what is an appropriate marriageable age. But alongside the nervousness of family members, and worries as to the suitability of the groom or whether Adina will be accepted, are lovingly performed weekly religious rituals of which food acts as centrepiece. Samovars bubble, challahs are braided—sometimes under Herculean conditions—and honey cakes become a test of true culinary worth.



It is a testament to Anna's skill that it is this sense of vibrant life that is evoked through the novel and in her enlivening illustrations, rather than the family's terrible fate. As is alluded to in the 'Author's Note', only Nomi, Esther and Miriam survived the Holocaust. Implicit in this statement is that Yakov, eight years-old in the story and who embodies an infectious spirit of fun and inquisitiveness and acts as the parallel narrative to Nomi's, is killed during that time. And so, although this note raises the book to another plane—that of being important alongside entertaining—it was something that the author vacillated between including. A friend told her that it was crucial to the story's significance being fully revealed. Now Anna agrees. But the process of whittling away the tragedy and uncovering the family's joy of existence, took years of writing and rewriting.

She had worked on the manuscript for four years before Allen & Unwin—the publisher she has worked with several times and whose team she praises highly—was entrusted with it. During this period, intense research and reading around the time evoked was engaged in, simultaneous to the imagining of characters.

Even after this stage of submission, there was a visit to Poland where a number of uncanny coincidences (among them, a guessed address was confirmed as only a few doors away from the real one) led to a realisation that a truth was strangely emerging in spite of gaps in knowledge. *I was really, somehow, getting into how it really happened even though I was imagining it. It was real. It was weird.*

For those as enamoured with the Rabinovitches as this reader was (and it seems there are a number of these as the first print run was sold out at the time of the interview), there is a chance we will hear more from them as Anna has a four-book series planned. At the moment, though, she is taken away from the business of writing by that challenge most typical of a modern author: marketing her creation through talks and workshops.

She had given herself the time frame of at least three months owing to the first month being critical and that after that time bookshops may send stock back. Word of mouth and independent bookshops have helped this gem sell and Anna notes the significance of a bookseller's role, from her local Books in Print to the pleasure of having her book feature as one of Reading's [a stalwart of Melbourne's independent literary scene] *Books of the Month* in March. Anna's satisfaction on hearing praise for the story she claims was written *for me* instead of writing for a presumed market, is palpable. For this work that has taken years to create, is not only a valuable historical portrait but is also a beautiful literary work.

Anna Ciddor's website:

www.annaciddor.com

Novels in print:

Viking Magic series:

Runestone (2002) Allen & Unwin, 192pp. 978 1 86508 689 7 Pb

Wolfspell (2003) Allen & Unwin, 192pp. 978 1 74114 013 2 Pb

Stormriders (2004) Allen & Unwin, 192pp. 978 1 74114 360 7 Pb

Stand Alone Novels:

Night of the Fifth Moon (2007) Allen & Unwin, 252pp. 978 1 74114 814 5 Pb

The Family with Two Front Doors (2016) Allen & Unwin, 208pp. 978 1 92526 664 1 Pb