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Penning stories for children

Clem Jackson talks to Alexa Tewkesbury about writing books for children, creating characters and developments with her 'Pens' series for CWR

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"I think that characters emerge through the illustrations – that's certainly true of Pens."

Alexa Tewkesbury may not be a name many people recognise but lots of people with young children will know her characters, whilst many primary school children will be familiar with her **TOPZ Secret Diaries**. In 2010 she unleashed a gang of lively characters onto the scene at CRE with the launch of the *Pens* series of Bible-reading notes for 3-6 year-olds, published by CWR. I met with Alexa when she was speaking at the Children's Ministry conference and began by asking her how she came to start writing children's books – and

latterly Bible-reading notes.

AT: I've written stories for years. I wrote things and sent them off to publishers and three months later they'd be returned with a 'no thanks'. But in 2002 I was asked if I'd like to have a go at writing the screenplay for an animation of the Christmas story, produced by Steve Legg, which we now know as *It's a Boy*.

Prior to the release of the film it was decided to bring out a book for Christmas 2003 and so I turned the screenplay into a picture book. Through that publication I met people from CWR to further explore opportunities. They were looking at ways to market the characters in the TOPZ Bible reading notes and that set me thinking about writing a diary book for one of the girl characters. I sent CWR a few sample pages and they liked the idea so much they wanted a book for each character. Over five years I have written ten *Secret Diaries* books, covering each of the TOPZ characters. And that's how I came to be writing children's books - I was just very fortunate to meet the right people.

CJ: In terms of characters do you draw your characters visually or just see them in your head?

AT: I don't draw them but I do hear them, how they talk. I tend to hear stories in dialogue so that's an easier way for me to establish characters. I do sort of see the features of the face – not in detail but the sort of expressions, something in the eyes, that sort of thing. I think that characters emerge through the illustrations – that's certainly true of *Pens*.

CJ: Pens is a series of 30-day Bible-reading notes for children aged 3-6. How do you produce Bible-reading notes for children who can't yet read?

AT: Well the brief was 'something short, uncomplicated and which parents, carers, crèche leaders could read with children, for parents to use at perhaps the start or the end of the day'. So they're not so much designed for children to read as for adults to read to very young children.

CJ: Now the characters are fairly well recognisable so tell me about them. Who are they?

AT: There are six main Pens: Gloria Glitter Pen, Waxy Max, Philippa Felt-Pen, Denzil the Pencil, Marco Marker and Charlotte Chalk. Then there is Sharpie the (pencil-sharpener) dog who is mostly seen with Max. In the *Starting School – Special Edition* there is Miss Fountain Pen, Rowena Rollerball and Henry Highlighter too.

All the Pens have different personalities too. Gloria for example always wears a hat and she's quite fussy.

(Gloria interrupts: "Oh I love hats, I'm awfully partial to hats. But I'd like it known that I don't just wear hats, I make them too – lots of them. Sometimes Pens help me but sometimes I want to do them on my own and then I have to get Philippa to tell them to go away and leave me alone, because I know what I am doing and they don't!").

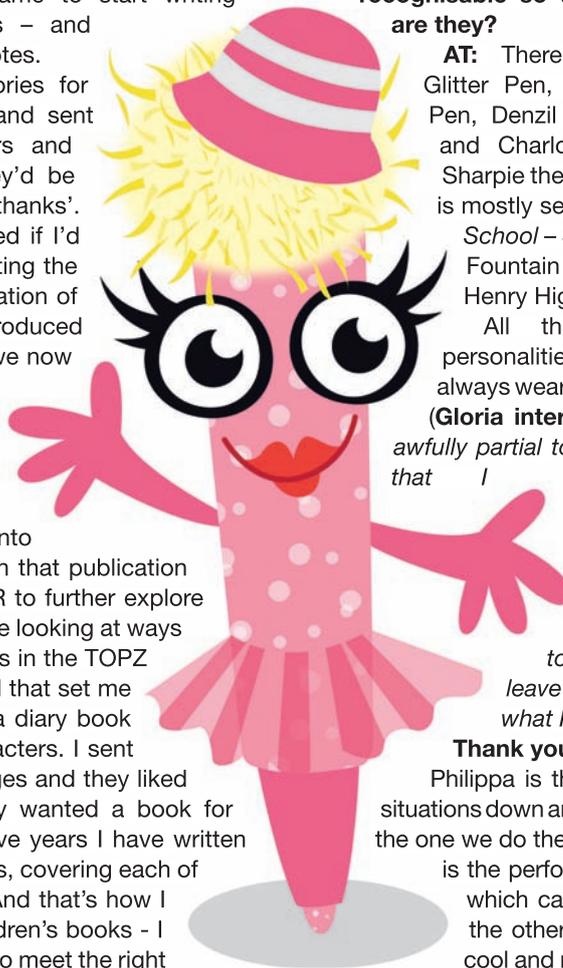
Thank you Gloria!

Philippa is the sensible one; she'll calm situations down and sort out the quarrels. She's the one we do the teaching through. Charlotte is the performer, she's always singing – which can sometimes be irritating to the others. Denzil the Pencil is quite cool and not quite so boyish as Marco and Max, who are cheeky little boys into skateboarding and football and mischief.

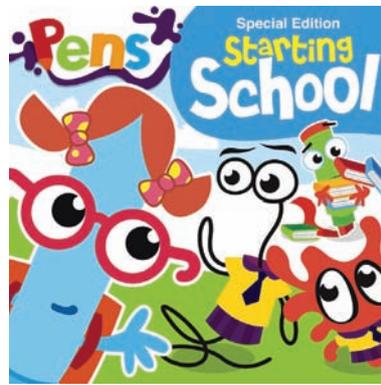
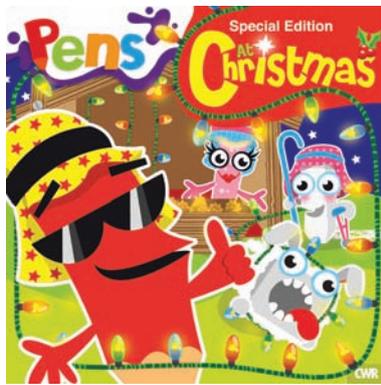
There's also Squiggle and Splodge, who aren't Pens; they're very young and they learn things from the older pens. They're all really tools to get teaching points across.

CJ: You mentioned the Starting School special, one of two specials, along with At Christmas, which are about to be released. Can you tell me a bit more about these?

AT: They're slightly shorter than the other 30-



day books and they're slightly smaller in size. They start off with a longer story; in *Starting School* the story is about Squiggle and Splodge and their first day at school from getting ready taking them right through the day, the people they meet, the things they do. It's designed to take the fear away from little ones experiencing this by showing them that they're not on their own, their friends are there and there are people to help them. Then there's a five-day Bible story, in this one it's 'David & Goliath' to show David facing and overcoming a very scary situation because God was with him, just as in the *Pens* story the characters have their best friend with them too.



With children's stories you need to find a hook, something to bring continuity and with this book I wanted there to be a question at the end of each section, that gives it a sort of rhythm, a shape. And repetition of phrases or questions helps children remember better.

CJ: And in the *At Christmas* book?
AT: This was one where I had to think quite hard about the concept again because the five-day Bible story tells the Christmas story and I couldn't tell that twice. So I decided that with the *Pens* we'd have a Nativity ...

CJ: I can see the fights for who is going to take the role of Mary in that one.
AT: Well yes quite right. But in the play Gloria is Mary and Denzil is Joseph and I decided to use Sharpie as the one who didn't know what was going on. The *Pens* are rehearsing and wondering if they have got everything ready and at the end of each section Sharpie is always asking, "Are we ready for what?" He's always got a question whether it's "Why do you need wings?" or "What's going on?" And just as they are ready to go off to school in the evening to do the play Max throws a woolly rug over Sharpie who of course becomes the sheep that the shepherds bring to the Baby Jesus.

CJ: You've written a number of children's books about Christmas and you always use animals. What is it about Christmas and animals that appeals to you as a writer?

AT: Well I think most young children grow up with cuddly toys around them so that's a safe access point. There's something nice about taking the reality of the Bible and putting it into characters that children relate to. Children talk to their cuddly animals and if in the book you give the animals a voice they accept that and you can use that to tell them a truth at the same time.

CJ: What books are you reading at present?

AT: I'm reading *Skellig* by David Almond at the moment which my daughter introduced me to. I really like Anthony Horowitz's *Alex Ryder* books; I love that quite minimalist style. And I love Roald Dahl, his completely quirky way of thinking which comes into his stories and of course C S Lewis and the *Narnia* series.

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You can find out more about Alexa and her work by visiting www.alexatewkesbury.com.

