

Dear First Readers,

First of all, thank you for welcoming my novel, *The Song That Sings Us*. I've been incredibly touched and encouraged by the enthusiastic anticipation news of its publication has received. Many of you will already be familiar with my work, with picture books, poetry, fiction and non-fiction. But this story is a little different and although it's by no means my first book (probably somewhere in the 70s I think) it feels like a first for me. This is partly because it's fiction of length I haven't written in 20 years and also because of the way I wrote it, sharing it week by week with friends, Jackie Morris, Cathy Fisher, Molly Howells.



Almost all of my previous books are in some way about nature and human relationships with the natural world. Almost all draw on my background as a field zoologist: I began my career following humpback whales in boats, and spending hours looking at bat poop down a microscope. In some ways, *The Song That Sings Us* is entirely consistent with that history, with deep roots in zoological science and in what I know about the human connection with all living things. But, this time, I wanted to write about in really different way, in a way that would be more emotionally engaging, in a way that would take my readers on really exciting journey.

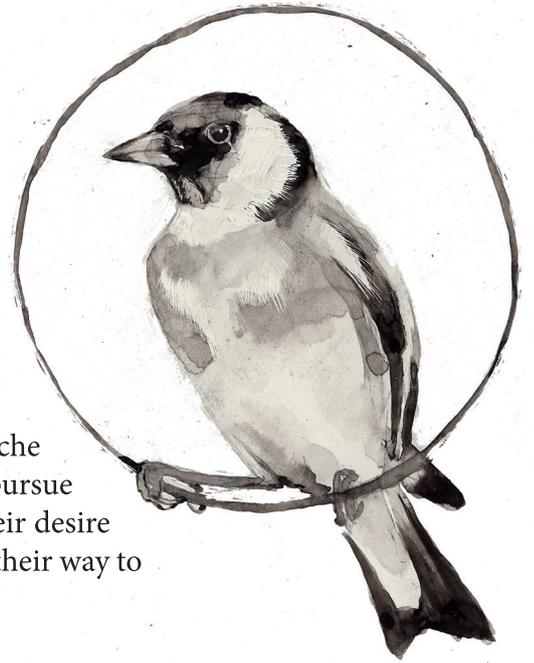
So, I invented another world. A world where some humans have always had the gift of eavesdropping on animal thoughts. They don't always understand what they hear, they don't always behave well when they do. Yet from that gift of listening, a society is born where respect for nature is woven into the warp and weft of human culture. (I was very aware of the many precedents in children's literature of 'talking animals' which I hope I have mostly avoided.)

In my imaginary world, as in our world, things are changing. There are those who want to dominate nature, to use it, to own it and sell it, and they definitely don't want to listen to anything any animal has to say. These people are known as the Automators and they have seized power, outlawed the gift of listening, and are busy destroying the natural world for their gain. They are opposed by a tiny but determined rebel movement called Green Thorn, whose mysterious leader, the Ghost, has been missing for a decade.



Green Thorn are not the only opposition. As the Automators' power rises, so does the number of children born with the power of listening in on animal minds. Something else is happening too: some animals have a new ability, the ability to enter a human mind and speak directly to it.

My story centres on three siblings: Harlon, a girl, the eldest and her brother Ash and sister Xeno; twins who possess the forbidden power of listening. The story begins just before dawn, high in the mountains when, Automator forces come to take Ash and Xeno. While their mother gives them covering fire, the children escape by snowboarding down a terrifying, steep slope, pursued by robot falcons. An avalanche strikes, and the children are separated. They are forced to pursue different paths, uncertain of where to go, only guided by their desire to find each other and their promise to their mother to find their way to an island lost in the depths of the ocean.



There are other guiding forces at work in the story. Animal characters who possess the new power of speaking to a human mind, who guide and befriend the children. A wolverine called the Gula becomes Ash's special companion; an elephant called Enkalamba heals Harlon and guides her on Green Thorn mission through the forest, and a tiger sea captain called Skrimisli, has a paw on the wheel of the action. There is friendship, there is laughter, there's a lot of heart-stopping danger and plot twists, and hidden identity is big feature. There are chases, there are fights, there are escapes, Arctic wastes and steamy jungles. Oh, and there are a couple of very nasty baddies; I love writing a poisonous, scheming villain and a thuggish sidekick.

The ending is potentially an apocalyptic tragedy, as is the ending facing us in the real world. What can save my characters? Well, you'll have to read *The Song That Sings Us* to find out. But I'll give a clue. It is the same things that could save us: the realisation that we are all of us, from microbe, to mushroom, from hammerhead shark to human, wolverine, elephant, whale and songbird, one family of life, one kin.

My soul is in this story, I hope you hear its message.

- Nicola Davies

