



## THE BOOKS OF EVA IBBOTSON

### Introduction

Ghosts and hags, wizards and banshees, mermaids and mistmakers—all are part of the magical worlds that Eva Ibbotson creates in her fantasy books for children. Even her more realistic stories are set in exotic places like the Amazon River in South America, where the natural world creates a mystical sense of wonder. Ibbotson introduces us to an array of fascinating characters and creatures: some from real life, some from folklore and mythology, and some completely original. What readers discover in her books is a love for the natural world in all its forms, plus fast-moving plots that emphasize the importance of showing kindness to others and never being quick to judge those who are different from ourselves. Humor plays an important role in her stories, for they are meant to be entertaining above all. Yet long after the last page is turned, the deeper meanings that emerge from these rollicking adventures linger in the reader's mind.

## About the Books

### Dial-a-Ghost

Miss Pringle and Mrs. Mannering run an agency that matches ghosts who need a home with people who want their dwellings haunted. And they do a very good job of it... until an error by their hapless office boy mixes up two assignments. This mistake is disconcerting to the nuns who requested a family of quiet ghosts for their old country abbey and end up with the Shriekers, a couple who scream constantly and terrorize the livestock. But it's a very fortunate error for Oliver, a small boy whose scheming cousins hoped the Shriekers would frighten him to death so that they could take over his inheritance, a huge manor house. When the gentle Wilkinson family arrives at Helton Hall instead, they immediately befriend the boy, and he is delighted to have such kindly ghost company. They decide to help Oliver escape the clutches of his evil cousins, Fulton and Frieda Snodde-Brittle. But Fulton has more wicked plans of his own. **Dial-a-Ghost** is a fast-moving romp through a plot with more twists and turns than you can count and a cast of characters who are loving and heartless, comfortable and cruel, charming and chilling, whether they are made of flesh or ectoplasm.

### Island of the Aunts

Etta, Coral, and Myrtle tend to the needs of a number of remarkable creatures on the Island, a place forgotten by most people—and they are very happy to keep it that way. But the three sisters are getting on in years and need help caring for their assortment of seals, fish, mermaids, birds, and other sea creatures. So they decide to kidnap some children to be their assistants. Each poses as a hired "aunt" from a London agency, and soon they return to the Island with their stolen charges. Minette and Fabio, confused at first, grow to love the Island and its many unusual creatures. They keep putting off their escape back to their troubled homes. But Lambert, the boy Myrtle kidnapped, is a pampered brat who refuses to believe any of the Island's inhabitants actually exist. When Lambert uses his cell phone to call his father, the whole Island way of life is threatened by Mr. Sprott's scheme to turn the place into an amusement park. He doesn't reckon, however, on the power—and anger—of the most magical creature of all, a larger-than-life spirit of the sea, the kraken.

## **Journey to the River Sea**

Maia feels at home in the boarding school where she lives in London, in 1910. It is the only home she has known since her parents died two years earlier. When distant cousins are discovered 4,000 miles away, Maia must travel to the exotic Amazon River town of Manaus to live with them. She is accompanied on her journey by a governess, the imposing Miss Minton, who has her own secret reasons for accepting a post so far from home. They arrive in South America and soon discover that the Carters, Maia's cousins, are selfish and greedy people who isolate themselves from the wild beauty of the countryside around them. With the help of her clever governess, Maia finds moments of brief escape from their stifling home and makes friends with a strange Indian boy named Finn and a homesick child actor called Clovis. Soon she is swept up in the human intrigues and natural wonders of the world around her. As she helps her new friends to follow their dreams and desires, Maia learns what is most important to her and where her own future will lie.

## **The Secret of Platform 13**

Hidden under Platform 13 in King's Cross Station is a gump, a secret entrance to another world. This doorway opens only for nine days every nine years. During those nine days, beings are free to come and go between our world and a magical Island, where fantastic creatures and humans live together sensibly and peacefully, shrouded from view by the hazy clouds created by lovable animals known as mistmakers. When the infant prince of the Island is kidnapped to our world by the unpleasant Mrs. Trottle, a strange band of rescuers is assembled nine years later to bring him back, and a fast-paced tale of magic, mayhem, and mistaken identity ensues. At first the rescuers are delighted to meet Ben, a sweet boy who could be the prince in spite of his lowly status in the Trottle house. But it soon becomes apparent that the real prince must be Raymond, the Trottables' rather obnoxious, spoiled son. Raymond, however, has no interest in leaving his pampered life for a mystical island. One of the rescuers, a young hag named Ode Gribble, is a tough, no-nonsense type who is determined on success. What she doesn't expect is that, in the end, she'll care much more about being a friend than a hero.

## Which Witch?

Arriman is a very dark wizard, proud of his skills, but feeling bored and weary. Consulting a fortune-teller, he learns that a replacement wizard will arrive to relieve him of his duties, but he grows impatient waiting and decides that he must marry to produce an heir. The problem is finding a wife. The only wife for a wizard must be a witch, of course, but which witch? How to decide? The only way seems to be to hold a contest for the local witches. One glimpse of Arriman convinces Belladonna that she must win. But what chance does a white witch have of doing the dark magic worthy of a wizard's heart? Belladonna finds unlikely but effective allies in a foundling named Terence and his pet earthworm, Rover. Rover seems to be a powerful witch's familiar, an animal capable of inspiring very black magic. Belladonna might win. But then Madame Olympia, a skilled sorceress, arrives from London to compete, and the magical earthworm mysteriously disappears. Belladonna's chances become slim at best until events take a surprising turn that even Madame Olympia could not have predicted.

## About Eva Ibbotson

Eva Ibbotson was born in Vienna, Austria, in the years before World War II. Her mother was a playwright and her father a scientist, but the marriage was unhappy and they soon went their separate ways. Eva's early childhood was spent shuttling back and forth in trains across Europe, from one parent to the other. When Hitler rose to power, Eva's father went to Great Britain, and her mother, after remarriage to a Russian philosopher, soon followed him. Eva switched languages and spent the rest of her childhood in a progressive boarding school, striving to become British. After taking a degree in Physiology at London University, she went on to do research at the University of Cambridge, but she found the experiments she had to perform on living animals very distressing. The results of her experiments were "peculiar," she relates, so when a fellow student, Alan Ibbotson, suggested she could do less harm to science by leaving it and marrying him, she accepted without hesitation. The couple moved to Newcastle, in the north of England, where they raised four children and Eva began writing short stories. When the youngest son started school, she wrote her first full-length novel for children and continued to write for children and adults alternately, much to the delight of her many readers.

## Related Titles

### **The Arkadians**

by Lloyd Alexander

HC: Dutton Children's Books, 0-525-45415-2

PB: Puffin Books, 0-14-038073-6

### **The Cat Who Wished to Be a Man**

by Lloyd Alexander

PB: Puffin Books, 0-14-130704-8

### **Ella Enchanted**

by Gail Carson Levine

HC: HarperCollins Children's Books

PB: HarperTrophy

### **The Ghost Belonged to Me**

by Richard Peck

PB: Puffin Books, 0-14-038671-8

### **Ghosts I Have Been**

by Richard Peck

PB: Puffin Books, 0-14-131096-0

### **Going Through the Gate**

by Janet Anderson

HC: Dutton Children's Books, 0-525-45836-0

PB: Puffin Books, 0-14-130698-X

### **James and the Giant Peach**

by Roald Dahl, illus. by Lane Smith

HC: Knopf Books for Young Readers

PB: Puffin Books, 0-14-037424-8

### **The Shaman's Apprentice: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest**

by Mark J. Plotkin and Lynne Cherry

HC: Gulliver Books

**The National Trust**

The National Trust is an organization dedicated to the preservation of the countryside, coastline, and important buildings and gardens in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This site lists interesting places to visit.

[www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

**National Geographic**

Site of the National Geographic Society. Look up maps of London and the Amazon River. Search the sea around the British Isles for places where the Island might be found.

[www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com)

**Ghost Watch UK**

An English organization that specializes in paranormal investigations. Their site includes stories and anecdotes of people's encounters with ghosts and ghostly phenomena.

[www.ghostwatchuk.org](http://www.ghostwatchuk.org)

## An Interview With Eva Ibbotson

**Magical beings are central to many of your books. Have you always been interested in the supernatural?**

No, curiously I was never particularly interested in the supernatural—quite the contrary. Ghost stories frightened me badly as a child, although I didn't really believe that ghosts existed. I think I began to write about ghosts and witches and magic generally to make children less afraid; to turn these beings into creatures much like us but of course able to do more interesting things. My ghosts and witches are more like underdogs, people on the fringes who need sympathy and help. And the witches in **Which Witch?** are based on my relatives—the nice witches anyway!

**Your main characters all seem to come up against people who are more interested in money and power than in feelings and compassion. Is this a theme you consciously set out to explore in every book?**

I think of my books as entertainments, a kind of present I give the reader, and any serious themes that come up are a by-product. But of course when I am creating "baddies" for the purposes of the plot, I find myself choosing people with the characteristics I dislike most—and there is nothing I despise more than financial greed and a lust for power.

**Humor is an important element in most of your stories. What do you think is the role that humor plays in shaping our lives and our personalities?**

I don't really know how to define humor or how to describe it; it is something you have to show. But I do know that both in my personal life and in my work I would be completely lost without humor...without the ability to turn things upside down, to extract something ridiculous out of the most solemn moment. Incidentally, when I'm writing I find humor—jokes that aren't forced or silly—by far the hardest thing to pull off.

**In *Journey to the River Sea* you have written a more realistic story with a strong theme about the importance of nature to the human spirit. What was your inspiration for this story?**

I wrote *Journey to the River Sea* not long after my husband died. He was a committed naturalist, someone who combined a deep knowledge of animals and plants with a spiritual outlook that had been strengthened by his war service in India and Burma. I think I felt at that time that I needed a rest from my usual fantasy stories—though goodness knows the Amazon landscape is fantastical enough in its own right! I wanted to write a story that was simple and old-fashioned and direct. But I have to say that the reasons one gives for writing anything tend to be made up afterwards. At the time you just find yourself doing it!

## Discussion Questions

1. The world of nature plays an important role in Eva Ibbotson's books. Often her characters' personalities are shown through their relationship to the natural world and the way they interact with creatures in the wild. Compare the different reactions to nature of these characters: Ben and Raymond; Oliver and Fulton; Minette, Fabio, and Lambert; The Aunts (Etta, Coral, and Myrtle) and Mr. Sprott; Maia and Gwendolyn/Beatrice; Mrs. Carter and Miss Minton; Mr. Carter and Bernard Taverner.
2. In each of these stories, children must find resources inside themselves to face difficult challenges and changes in their lives, many times without the help of adults. The author says of Maia at the beginning of **Journey to the River Sea**, "She was afraid...afraid in the way of someone who is alone in the world" (p.2). Which of these characters believes that he or she is alone, and how does that affect the way they face their challenges: Maia, Clovis, Finn, Minette, Fabio, Oliver, Ben, Odge Gribble, Arriman, Terence?
3. Help can often come from unexpected sources in Ibbotson's stories. Look carefully at each of the books to see which characters or creatures are most helpful to the protagonist. Was it obvious to you as the reader that important help would come in this way? How often were you surprised by the power of the helpers? Have you had this experience in your own life, that help came from unexpected sources?
4. Many of the evil characters in the books share certain personality traits. What do these characters have in common: Mrs. Trottle, Mr. Sprott, Fulton and Frieda Snodde-Brittle, Mr. and Mrs. Carter, Madame Olympia? What do these characters tell you about the personality traits that the author dislikes? Do you know people who exhibit these qualities?
5. Showing kindness toward others and especially those who appear to be "different" and "strange" is a quality that is shared by many of the main characters. Discuss the ways in which Maia, Miss Minton, Ben, Belladonna, Oliver, and the Aunts demonstrate this important character trait. What is the author telling us, through these characters, about exhibiting this quality in our own lives? How can we translate this theme from exotic and fantastic settings into our everyday world?

6. At the end of **Journey to the River Sea**, Miss Minton says to Mr. Murray, "Perhaps I'm mad—and the professor, too—but I think children must lead big lives...if it is in them to do so" (p. 283). What does she mean by this statement, and how do you interpret the phrase "big lives"? Which characters in the other books are capable of leading "big lives," and which of them are not? Discuss the personality traits that make it possible for children—and adults—to "lead big lives."
7. Ibbotson says of the Carters, "...they were far too selfish to want anybody, but they needed her [Maia]" (p. 37). What is the difference between wanting and needing somebody or something? Discuss this difference between wanting and needing as you see it in the actions and feelings of Arriman, Belladonna, the Wilkinson family, Oliver, Mrs. Trottle, Ben, Nanny Brown, the Aunts, Minette and Fabio, Maia, Miss Minton, Finn, Clovis, the Carters, and other characters of your own choice. How does it affect your feelings about a character when you make this distinction?
8. When Maia first reads about the Amazon, she encounters these words: "For whether a place is a hell or a heaven rests in yourself, and those who go with courage and an open mind may find themselves in Paradise" (p. 6). Discuss this idea with relation to the setting of each of the books. How does each character's perception of a place affect the way he or she reacts to that place? How does perception of place affect you in your own life?

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