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**INTERVIEW: MEREDITH COSTAIN  
(ELLA DIARIES)**



*The Ella Diaries series, written by Meredith Costain and illustrated by Danielle McDonald, chronicles the life of a quirky, spirited young girl as she faces the trials of elementary school and beyond. Diary entry by diary entry, Ella's charming and unmistakable voice knits each story into a vivacious series that refuses to be put down.*

*Meredith Costain generously agreed to devote some of her time to answering our questions. She discusses how her own childhood and relationship to the arts, including literature and music, laid the foundation for her career as an author. She also reflects on her own connection to Ella, the impact of the diary format, the challenges she faces as a children's writer, and much more.*

**Kane Miller:** As a child, what role did books play in your home? Was reading enjoyed as entertainment?

**Meredith Costain:** I was lucky enough to grow up in a house full of books. Stories were a part of everyday life. I could read before I went to school and spent many happy hours with my nose stuck in a book, especially on long car trips. I had a little light built into my bedhead and used to snuggle down under the blankets every night to read.

My family also read and recited lots of poetry — particularly the verse of A. A. Milne and C. J. Dennis, and Hilaire Belloc's hilarious *Cautionary Tales for Children*. So my head was always full of rhythm and rhyme — like an internal clock. My cousins and I (The Thrilling Three!) produced our own newspaper and wrote and performed highly dramatic plays for our pets.

**KM:** You've been writing and performing music since childhood, and you've since traveled the world and continue to play blues piano. Tell us about how that support of the arts and culture as a child ultimately impacted your ability to become a writer as an adult.

**MC:** My brother and sister and I were all encouraged to learn piano, and I had ballet lessons in a dusty old scout hall (the inspiration for *Ballet Backflip*). We had an ancient collection of classical music records and I used to dust the lounge room while leaping about to the music from the ballet *Les Sylphides*. I went to a tiny rural school and rode my bike a couple of miles there and back. Maybe it was the rhythm of the bike wheels going



around . . . and around . . . and around . . . but as I rode my head filled up with stories and poems of my own. Once home I'd grab an old exercise book and pencil and race up to our haystack where it was quiet and secret



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and private and scribble them down. (Now that I'm 'older,' if I get stuck with a storyline I find the rhythm of going for a walk or a bike ride will help the words to come. Especially if it's in rhyme!)

My mum encouraged me to send my poems off to writing competitions. I won a few in my teenage years, but the highlight was a poem I wrote when I was nine. It was published in the children's section of the 'big smoke' metropolitan newspaper and they actually paid me for it! I sat in my bedroom and made a solemn vow that I would be 'an author' when I grew up. I even picked out a pen name for myself!

**KM: Are there any autobiographical qualities found in the Ella Diaries? We've all had a Peach Parker in our lives (and have possibly been a Peach Parker at some point, too!). And I'm guessing your own love of poetry as a child inspired in part Ella's love for it as well?**

**MC:** Oh definitely! Ella is interested in lots of things I was as a child: music, singing, dancing, writing poetry and songs. But she's much more confident and quirky than I ever was – and much better at dealing with problems (particularly Peach). I think that's one of the great things about being a writer: you can finally do the things and solve the problems you mightn't have had the ability or confidence to do in your own life. You get the chance to live vicariously through your character! :)



By including Ella's 'heartfelt' poems and ditties, I was hoping to encourage readers to write their own poetry and discover the joy of language, rhythm and rhyme. I've tried to include lots of different styles and forms: haiku, list poems, concrete (shape) poems as well as simple doggerel (and 'caterel'!). I found that writing poetry was a great way to express my own 'inner-most feelings' when I was in 'desperate despair' or having friend problems.

I've also tried to sneak some poetic devices into the text: Ella can be 'fizzing' with excitement or about to 'erupt' with anger. These descriptions are always accompanied by doodles (glasses of fizzy lemonade or erupting volcanoes) to illustrate their point. And there is a *lot* of alliteration. :)

**KM: Did you always imagine these stories being told in a diary format? What opportunities does this format offer you as a writer, and Ella as a character?**



**MC:** The diary format allows you to be reflective about events — it's a great way to express your character's feelings and emotions. This helps to make your character more relatable, as it (hopefully!) allows readers to identify with their problems and issues.

The illustrations are a natural extension of this, expanding Ella's thoughts on a particular worry or moment of joy. I'm not an illustrator myself, so I was



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extremely lucky to have been paired with the wonderful Danielle McDonald, who was able to add an extra layer to the text.

A drawback of the diary format is that there isn't much opportunity for dialogue. To get around this I introduced mini scripts — complete with stage directions and reading notes — to report important conversations. I also created lots of tables, lists, footnotes, and graphs for various situations, to break up the standard 'recount' entries. These allowed me to be playful with language and ideas and were a lot of fun to write.

**KM: What are the challenges and opportunities you face as a writer for children?**

**MC:** When I was a child 'entertainment' was limited to a chunky B&W TV set with 4 channels, building billy carts or rolling around the paddocks inside a rusty tin water tank, or reading. But today, books have to compete with so many other forms of entertainment: hand-held screens, computer and video games, podcasts, streamed music and social media. So their content and appeal needs to be really compelling to stand out in such a noisy marketplace.

I do a lot of writing workshops and author talks in schools and libraries, which allows me to talk to children in different parts of the country about what their current interests are, and what they love to read and write and dream about or wish for. What I've discovered is that although 'external' things like technology and landscape change from year to year or place to place, feelings and emotions and hopes and dreams — all the things that drive stories — remain exactly the same. And that has been a wonderful opportunity for me.



**KM: What practical steps would you suggest to children who recognize in themselves the desire to write books?**

**MC:**

- First and foremost, you need to read. Every day! Try reading a variety of formats and genres: fiction and non-fiction, mysteries, thrillers, humour, fantasy, poetry, graphic novels. It's a great way to absorb the different ways word can fit together.
- Have a go at writing in different styles and genres as well. Find a quiet, private place where you can do some 'secret scribbling' — not for school assignments but just for yourself.
- Find a writing buddy to share your writing and plot ideas with. They can be a great help if you get stuck, coming up with an angle you may not have thought of yourself.
- Become a good self-editor. Read your writing out loud. Does it sing? Do you need to vary your sentence beginnings? Have you used the same word three times in the same paragraph?
- Turn off your smartphone and unplug your headphones. You need to create space in your mind to allow your imagination to flourish and ideas and characters to creep in.



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**KM:** Finally, what to you is the value of early childhood reading?

**MC:** Books can help to spark a child’s curiosity and imagination, develop empathy for others and improve their vocabulary skills. (For years, I mispronounced words like ‘mised’ and names like ‘Imogen’ that I’d encountered in books because they never came up in day-to-day conversation!) And there are all kinds of studies that show how reading can help to improve academic success.

But for me, their main value is that they allow children to disappear into their own little world and live there for a time, just like Jo and her sisters ‘travelling to’ and experiencing four different continents as they sewed Aunt March’s bed sheets in *Little Women*.

Books can also be a great comfort in the way they help readers to realise they’re not alone. There are other people out there going through exactly the same situations and experiencing the same dramas as them, whether it be starting a new school or falling out with a friend. That is their magic.



Take a look at all the books in the *Ella Diaries* series:

[\*Double Dare You\*](#), [\*Ballet Backflip\*](#), [\*I Heart Pets\*](#), [\*Dreams Come True\*](#), [\*Pony School Showdown\*](#), [\*Worst Camp Ever\*](#), [\*Friendship SOS\*](#), [\*Friends Not Forever\*](#)

Follow the adventures of Ella’s little sister Olivia in the *Olivia’s Secret Scribbles*:

[\*My New Best Friend\*](#), [\*My \(Almost\) Perfect Puppy\*](#), [\*Amazing Acrobats\*](#)