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**INTERVIEW: ANNA BRANFORD**  
**(LILY THE ELF)**



*Anna Branford's Lily the Elf series is full of delightful, imaginative stories that follow Lily, a young elf who lives with her dad "in a tiny elf house, hidden under a bridge in a busy city," as she learns and dreams. Beside them lives her granny (in a granny flat!), and together the three of them form an empathetic, loving family that infuses every page with warmth.*

*Anna generously took the time to answer some questions for us. Here she discusses children's books—both writing them and experiencing them—and the kind of impact they can have both personally and on a much larger scale. She also discusses how her own experiences and her own surroundings have impacted her creative endeavors.*

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

**Anna Branford:** Books were a very important part of my early life. I still have some of my original childhood copies with inscriptions handwritten by my grandmother, who must have been sending them all over the globe! One of the reasons I think books mattered a great deal to me in my childhood was that we moved a great many times, so there was a lot of leaving homes and schools and friends and familiarity behind. Books made portable worlds where things remained constant. Even when the books themselves were left behind, in the new edition at a new school library I was able to find everything just where I'd left it. I still enjoy that feature of books when the world around me seems to be changing too fast.

**KM:** Your own reading tastes are varied, from a love for the Ramona stories to bell hooks. There's a great quote about Ramona — "She represents the kind of girl who has not been subdued by adults or the world in general." I'd love to know if this impacts how and why you write for children.

**AB:** That is a marvelous quote, and I agree with it very much. Ramona was and is a favorite of mine because she lets the reader right into her world and the funny tangles of her thoughts. She is good but not too good, in a way that makes her beautifully relatable and easy to feel very fond of. And because she never allowed herself to be subdued, none of it was ever compromised.

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





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**AB:** One of the challenges is creating stories for children in which there is magic, beauty and hope while being very aware that for many children life is incredibly difficult. In all of my children's writing I would love to be able to lend a few extra details to the kind of inner life that a child might be able to carry with them through whatever is going on in the world around them, and find strength and solace in. That aim is both a challenge and an opportunity, I think.

**KM: I can't resist adding a quote from hooks: "Life-transforming ideas have always come to me through books." What to you is the value of early childhood reading?**

**AB:** Another wonderful quote. My favorite parts of books, whether for children or adults, are the parts that allow people to feel understood in the very feelings, thoughts and experiences they'd imagined were theirs alone. Without intruding or presuming, books offer us company in the strangest corners of our minds. Many a transformative sentence begins "You know that feeling when..." followed by something that sounds obscure but in fact goes right to the heart of the actual experience of being a person. It's as true when you're five as when you're fifty, and just as important, I think.

**KM: You still have your childhood piano. Do you feel your parents' support of artistic expression ultimately impacted your ability to pursue writing as an adult?**

**AB:** My parents are both creative people in different ways from each other, and in different ways from me. My father has a very scientific mind but he also works with his hands, mainly building furniture and other useful things, so the soundtrack of my early life was one of hammering, sawing and drilling. My mother's creativity has more of a visual focus and she often added the whirl of a hand-turned Singer sewing machine to the cacophony. One Christmas that we spent in a country with nothing festive for sale, she created everything for us – decorations and gifts – from paper, one of her own nighties, and any other bits and pieces that were available to her. It was perfect. So it was very normal in our home for quite a few things to exist in the evening that hadn't been there that morning. I think my own creative endeavors were just a part of that same flow.

**KM: Lily and her family live close to nature, as you did as a child and continue to as an adult. Are there any autobiographical qualities found in the *Lily the Elf* stories?**

**AB:** Certainly there are. Lily's world is full of tangled mossy roots and rainwater and birdsong and all the other things I love best. But I think the most autobiographical component of the Lily stories is just that Lily is a quiet sort of elf, inclined to spend quite a bit of time lost in her own thoughts and doing her own thing, which is very much as I am. In fact, I would struggle a bit to write a story about an outgoing, confident, noisy creature, because I can't quite imagine what that would be like.

**KM: I was drawn to one of your blog posts — the magic and curiosity of experiencing the familiar as majestic, which Lily is forced to embrace any time she encounters something like a human's ring (which she uses as a wading pool) or an owl, so much larger than herself. That shift in perspective--was that the original spark for this series, or was it something else?**

**AB:** Thank you for reading my blog! Even though I have just the fondness for beautiful, natural places you've



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noted, and escape into them as often as I can, I actually live in quite an ordinary modern city. So one of the sparks for the *Lily the Elf* series is the search for the magical, beautiful places hiding in urban spaces. Children, I think, are often very good at finding them, and turning a small suburban park into a great wilderness, or a balcony garden into a place of mystery and magic. It's something I love doing too, and can be a wonderful way of experiencing the familiar as majestic.

***Take a look at all of the books in the Lily the Elf series: [The Midnight Owl](#), [The Precious Ring](#), [The Wishing Seed](#), and [The Elf Flute](#)!***