

# An Interview with Elisabetta Gnone

## Author of Fairy Oak

The following conversation with Elisabetta took place at her home, early in November 2010, just after the release of "Farewell to Fairy Oak" the seventh book in the series..

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### **Elisabetta, is this yet another book about fairies and witches?**

Another book about a people, perhaps. Many such books have been written, but this is about the people of a fairy tale.

### **A people of fairies, witches, wizards...**

Fairies, witches, wizards and common people. A "multi-ethnic" population that accepts its diversities serenely. Nobody even notices them. In *Fairy Oak*, peace and harmony have reigned for so long that by now it's hard to say who's magical and who's not. It's a small community, a weird assortment of individuals, with all the rituals, traditions, habits and the familiarity of a small peaceful village, lacking for nothing and looking out over the sea, in a beautiful natural setting.

### **Where is Fairy Oak?**

*Fairy Oak* is an imaginary place facing a savage sea, sheltered by highlands that are covered with snow in winter, and surrounded by enchanted forests, green meadows, lively streams and transparent lakes.

It's an ideal spot, where time and space are unbounded and nature is alive and present. The days are filled with the rhythms, the colours and the weather of this place: the furious wind from the west, the storms, the blinding sun, the long tides, the full blossoming of the headlands, the change of the seasons... I have located the story in a setting rich in dramatic landscapes, rivers, lakes, sea, and mountains, to describe nature to the readers, and let them experience it with the help of a strong and present weather. The weather helps a lot in creating the atmosphere of a place and time.

### **You talked about forests: why did you call the trilogy Fairy Oak?**

Because the village is built around an enchanted oak tree that talks. It's a very ancient oak, never particularly or deliberately wise. It knows a lot because it has been around and has seen and listened a lot. "Oak" likes to chat with people and is delighted

to be the heart of *Fairy Oak*. It loves children, protects them and often covers up their pranks.

### **The children of Fairy Oak: can you tell us something about them?**

They're very many, of all ages, some are magical, others are not and together they form a great gang. For me it's fantastic to "see" them playing together, free and safe in that dream location, discovering new things every day and acting all together to solve the problem of one ...

### **At a certain point the children of Fairy Oak are in danger, a dangerous enemy arrives ...**

He suddenly arrives, yes, on the night of June 21. Or rather, to be truthful, he returns. He's an old enemy, the personification of evil, though he's not a person, and doesn't have a precise appearance. He attacks in the form of a storm or a devastating atmospheric event that not even the spells of the magicals can withstand. Or else he is helped by his allies: magicals of Darkness, kidnapped and forced to obey him, or simply traitors, lured over to his side, fascinated by his plan.

### **You said magicals of Darkness, perhaps you should explain...**

Two kinds of magicals live in *Fairy Oak*, the Magicals of the Light and those of the Dark. The first have the power to create, in the broadest sense of the word. They make what isn't there appear, but can't make it disappear. They can make wood bloom and create a melody by mixing white and black stones as if they were the keys of a piano, they can cure but not injure, they can improve things but can't make them worse. The Magicals of the Dark have opposite powers: they make things disappear, deteriorate and rot; they can harm and even kill. They can see in the dark and are even more mysterious and shadowy than the first, though they're not evil.

### **Hard to believe...**

No it isn't. Think of nature: in spring and summer, in our hemisphere, nature creates: leaves,

flowers, fruit, baby animals... And in autumn and winter you could say it that in its own way, it destroys. The alternation of these two “powers” allows life to renew itself, and the better they’re balanced, the more beautiful and stronger living creatures are.

The powers of the magicals in *Fairy Oak* do the same thing, opposite and inseparable; they act in turn, when they’re needed. And if that place is so beautiful, pleasant and harmonious, it’s because of the perfect balance there has always been between the population of Light and that of Darkness.

### **But then the enemy arrives ...**

Yes, unfortunately. As always, beautiful things have a hard time remaining beautiful and there’s always somebody that wants to ruin everything.

And that’s what the Terrible 21st does. *Fairy Oak’s* inhabitants have called him that because he has always launched his first attack on the Summer Solstice, when every one is out celebrating and no one worries about defending themselves.

### **That’s right, and then we come to them, the living symbol of this balance ...**

Vanilla and Lavender Periwinkle, the twin sisters with opposite powers. They were born on the same day but with twelve hours difference between them. They’re physically identical but completely different in character, from the very first moment on. And this is why: Vanilla is a Witch of Light and Lavender is a witch of Darkness! It’s the first time ever that two siblings have different powers. They are two faces of the same medal, and the enemy will do anything to separate them.

### **Where did you get your inspiration for the twins’ characters?**

I used to be a little girl, and I haven’t grown up much. I spend time with children, I have 4 nieces and nephews, and I have to thank Milne, the creator of Winnie the Pooh.

### **What does Winnie the Pooh have to do with it?**

I studied him extensively, when I set out to create the Disney magazine for children.

Christopher Robin’s mother used to give him stuffed animals to play with, and since the Milnes lived quite isolated out in the country, those stuffed animals were the only friends Christopher had: a teddy bear, a tiger, a rabbit, a piglet and a kangaroo with her joey. For each of them Christopher invented a character and a role within their group of friends.

Soft, comfortable Winnie became his best friend, loyal and trustworthy, Piglet was the shy and frail friend, Tigger lively and irrepressible, Rabbit impertinent and presumptuous, Kanga became the mummy and Roo the baby of the group. Milne used to watch his son play, and one evening he started “describing” what he saw...

### **And Vanilla and Lavender?**

The success of Winnie the Pooh is largely due to the fact that every child can identify with one of the characters of the stories, and with all of them together. When I thought up the *W.I.T.C.H.* series I created five girls with five different characters, five different ways of coping with adolescence, so that any girl would have a model with which to identify herself. And I did the same thing with Vanilla and Lavender, summing up all the characteristics typical of an open, sunny, joyful, reasonable character in the first, and all the characteristics of a more dark, rebellious, worried and impulsive character in the second. And, after all, aren’t we all a little bit of one and a little bit of the other?

The readers have understood, and today play at being Vanilla or at being Lavender.

### **Why are two twins with opposing powers born in Fairy Oak?**

This is what the main characters must also discover.

Vanilla and Lavender have a very precise mission to accomplish: they have to save their world, once and for all. That’s why they were born, but they are unaware of this and have to discover it. They have to learn the meaning of their powers, and get to know themselves inside out to overcome the enemy. They are very young and many things will go wrong, but somebody will help them.

Aunt Tomelilla for one. She is the wisest and most honourable witch of all times: she knows the tormented story of their powers and their people and understands how important it is to be familiar with the past in order to stand up to the future. This is why she presents the girls with the first volume of an antique book that will reveal itself to be very precious. The second volume, though, has been lost, and the twin sisters will have to find it to know the whole story.

Thus the twins receive their first help from the past and from remembering.

A second valuable help will come from their friends, from the boys and girls of *Fairy Oak* that, at the most difficult moment, form a beautiful and compact group to surround the twins. All together, the children will be stronger and more efficient than the adults, who are by now tired, divided and resigned.

### **And then there's trust!**

Exactly. The trust the twins have in one another even when they have thousands of reasons to doubt each other's love. The trust that Lilac Tomelilla places in her nieces and in the children. The trust that the children swear to one another. Trust has a very important role in this story. All these things taken together, combined with the twins' destiny, their differences and their deep feelings, will save the eternal alternating rhythm that feeds life, because, finally, that's what it's all about. Vanilla and Lavender, at the end of the long meandering path to their powers, will come to understand their mission. When everything seems to be lost and eternal darkness is spreading over the valley, they will cast the *Ultimate Spell* that will erase evil from all souls and from the roads of the village and bring back harmony and serenity.

### **And Grisam and Vanilla fall in love!**

It's important that I bring up, for a moment, the love described in this story. Grisam, the handsome young wizard of Darkness, courageous and tenacious, is in love with Lavender, and their love is the love of children, sweet, romantic and pure. But though it is a love between youngsters, it is sincere. Grisam loves Lavender deeply and he is attracted by everything about her, even by her terrible character. He can't fall in love with Vanilla and Vanilla understands this. And in the third book she will have her own personal chance to fall in love, and to be loved in return. This is one of the dramatic turns of events: the prisoner in the prison cell of the village is not an ally of the enemy as everybody believes, but a young inventor who comes from far away, a non-magical of mind-blowing genius with the eyes of a fawn.

### **Vanilla, Lavender, Shirley Poppy... The names in this trilogy are pretty original. Where do they come from?**

All the magicals have names of flowers like Vanilla, Lavender, Shirley Poppy and Cherry Spleenwort, that seem almost like real names and surnames. I like flowers and using the names of plants

to form the names of the characters has been a lot of fun.

### **And the ones that are impossible to pronounce, like those of the fairies?**

I got the idea of giving the fairies in my story names that would mean something and at the same time be difficult to pronounce, justifying this choice with the explanation that if you call fairies by their full name you force them to obey, and therefore fairies choose long and intricate names. The funny thing is that in the book only adults are allowed to call fairies by their real names, because giving orders is a responsibility. In reality, adults can't pronounce the names, while children can!

### **Girls, boys, who reads your books?**

Fairy Oak is read mainly by girls, but we've discovered that about 20% of the readers are boys. It's true that they have had to get over the feminine aspects of the graphics, and the schools that have selected the book to be read with the students have helped us in this regard. Once they get into it, boys also become enthusiastic about the twins' mission, their values, and their battles and about the enemy. They have seen and responded to the adventurous aspect of the trilogy, ignoring the more romantic, bucolic and sweet aspects which appeal to the girls and women.

### **Could we define Fairy Oak as a "romantic fantasy"?**

I always say that it's a fairy tale. *Fairy Oak* lacks some elements typical of fantasy: the gloomy and grotesque atmosphere, the journey, the ferocious battles. In my book, what remains, what prevails, are the small things, the atmosphere of the roads and the houses, the calls of the seagulls, the noise of the wind and the waves hitting the rocks, the children's voices, the sounds of glasses in the pubs, the fabric of the clothes, the smell of warm bread and freshly washed laundry, the pebbles smoothed by the sea, the toads in the streams... I imagine that the children in my story will remember these things when they grow up. I would love it if my readers did the same.

### **You say that Fairy Oak isn't a gloomy book; does this mean that the reader laughs from time to time?**

Very often! I sometimes burst out laughing while writing it. And when my husband laughed while reading, I would give myself a pat on the back. That's

another aspect of my book that distinguishes it from fantasy, which takes itself very seriously: in *Fairy Oak* nobody takes himself too seriously. Not even the fairy-nanny Telli, who isn't exactly a Jiminy Cricket.

**But then why did you add *Terrible 21st* to the book?**

Evil comes, gets clobbered and leaves. I needed a story with a happy ending, a story in which it would be clear who is bad and who is good, and in which, in the end, goodness overcomes evil honestly.

**A happy ending, the good ones always win, nobody dies and not even a drop of blood... it's far-fetched and has no relation to reality. Isn't it a bit too good, this story?**

It's a fairy tale!

I believe that literature helps individual growth, and that there is a form of literature for every age. I love adventure and fantasy stories like *Shrek* and the *Simpsons*, although I don't think they're meant for 8-year-olds. In those stories there's a desire for feelings, values, ideals. But how can you laugh about heroism if you don't know what a hero is? How can you joke about honesty, loyalty, sincerity and courage if you're not acquainted with them? How can you laugh about evil overcoming good if you haven't seen good overcoming evil? At 8 years you have a right to your fairy tale, in which the hero overcomes evil because he's valiant, courageous, strong, determined, loyal and modest. You have the right to dream about being that hero. Isn't that what we adults do too? Don't we still dream about marvellous and exceptional things or about overcoming human limits? Our days, talk shows and newspapers are full of clashes. Why can't we just learn to avoid them, to reject them...?

**In your story you include an unpleasant, nasty little girl, who never mends her ways: isn't that anti-educational?**

The moral of my fairy tale lies in the story, not in the individual characters, each of whom has a specific role that is functional to the story.

That's why it's important that they never change, especially the main characters. *Cherry Spleenwort* doesn't carry any messages, but participates with all the others in giving meaning to the story.

**And all the others are many! How many characters are there? Have you counted them?**

There are about thirty main characters, plus all the others... about forty or fifty counting those mentioned only once.

**And many of them are pictured in the illustrations of your books. Can you tell us about them?**

It was a lot of work. In the beginning I selected thousands and thousands of photographs. I needed them to orient myself in the descriptions of the locations and faces, and the illustrators needed them to draw their pictures. I wanted real faces, real locations. And a book that would have a fragrance.

*Fairy Oak* was conceived on my kitchen table, and in the artists' bedrooms. The backgrounds for the first book were jackets and clothes taken from our wardrobes. I did the layout and the graphics, people sewed the photos on, just like in the old days. In the third book they scanned all kinds of objects they had around the house, pieces of cloth, ribbons... And all that gives a good, homemade, warm, genuine feeling. Readers always mention this, maybe it's one of the reasons for the book's success.

**The books have several black and white illustrations scattered throughout the pages, while the full-colour ones are grouped in two central sections. Why did you choose to do it this way?**

I wanted illustrations that would not so much explain the text, as add content. In my books I describe a place and a community, and I liked the idea of the pictures illustrating the locations and people as if someone had taken pictures on various occasions, and then gathered them together.

In *The Twins' Secret*, the two central inserts are the photo album put together by their mother *Dahlia*. We can find "snapshots" of the main characters and their houses, and pictures of the valley as if they had been painted by a friend. In *The Dark Enchantment*, the inserts represent the magic books of *Vanilla* and *Lavender*. They both show the same lessons (real lessons in botany, zoology, geography...), but as the twins differ a lot from one another, their notebooks offer very different points of view. In *The Power of the Light*, finally, we recreated the scrapbook of fairy *Telli*, and the pictures show highlights of her adventures in the *Periwinkle* house and in *Greenvale*.