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## 5 Questions With... Melina Marchetta (JELlicOE ROAD, FINNIKIN OF THE ROCK)



Australia Day is observed each January 26th; in honor of this, we posed five questions to Sydney native **Melina Marchetta**. Melina is the acclaimed and award-winning author of *JELlicOE ROAD*, which won the Michael L. Printz Award; *SAVING FRANCESCA*, and its companion novel, *THE PIPER'S SON*; and *LOOKING FOR ALIBRANDI*. She lives in Australia, where *FINNIKIN OF THE ROCK*, her first fantasy novel, won an Aurealis Award. You can visit her online at <http://www.melinamarchetta.com.au/>.

**FROI OF THE EXILES** is the anticipated second installment in *The Lumatere Chronicles* (your much-celebrated, epic fantasy series that began with 2010's *FINNIKIN OF THE ROCK*). It's difficult to ask many questions about *FROI* without revealing *FINNIKIN* spoilers, so how about this—what are the **Top 5** things you want readers to know about *FROI*?

It's about redemption and forgiveness.

It's a love song to relationships between fathers and sons and brothers and lovers and husbands and wives and enemies and neighbours and mothers and daughters.



It's dark in places, but still full of hope. It features the most complex characters I've ever written. It was a joy to write.

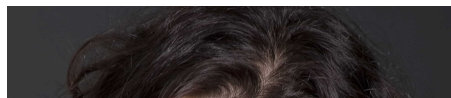
Before *FINNIKIN*, all of your YA novels were firmly rooted in contemporary realism. So many fans of *FINNIKIN* have said, "I don't like fantasy novels, but I love this book!" Yet *FINNIKIN* is by no means "fantasy lite." Why do you think so many non-fantasy readers have connected with the story of Finnikin and Evanjalin?

It's because I kind of cheat and stick to the formula I always use. Big family dynamics. Broken communities. A past that needs to be revealed before a future can be possible. I've said it before, the Finnikin and Froi novels are really the Finch-Mackee and the Spinelli and the Alibrandi families on a medieval road trip. So I think my audience is recognising my formula and they're comforted by it.

Also, I knew I didn't want to reinvent the wheel with both of the fantasy novels. I'm not good at that. I'm not good at inventing a language or trying to imitate Tolkein and the other great fantasy writers. I tend to rely on what I know. Students hear that all the time—"Write what you know"—and I know what it's like to be brought up by migrants. Regardless of how successful we are today, it was upheaval. My father and his entire family came out to Australia in the 1950s with very little but each other. My maternal grandfather was in Australia during WW2 and was placed in an internment camp because he was born in Italy and considered "the

enemy" for the first half of the war. So when I write about men losing their language and their identity in *FINNIKIN*, I'm talking about my family.

Writing fantasy is a tricky genre because of the conventions attached to it. Some readers are sticklers for rules. The map has to be perfect, the novel should end after the major battle, and watch out what you say in your writer's note on the dusk jacket, or what poem you use before the prologue. Sometimes all the criticism



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you see before the protagonist. Sometimes on the cusp of the novel happens before the first line is read. It gets even trickier when you're a YA writer because sexual references make some readers uncomfortable. But the role of the writer is to block that out and write the story they want to write, and not worry so much about everything they may be doing wrong in the eyes of genre purists.

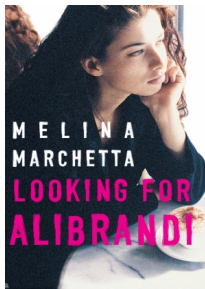


I think some readers see fragments of our world scattered throughout the novel and that's what they're relating to. And what I try to do most, in my work, is give the reader an accessible character. The women are never stunning or fought over by every second man they come across, and the men are never one dimensionally brave. It's because I'm not stunning and was never fought over by every second man I came across, and I don't know one-dimensionally brave men. So I stick with reality when constructing my characters. They may be flawed and very unlikeable at times, but I think they're courageous and beautiful in a way that we all can be in our day-to-day life. So perhaps that's also what my readers are relating to. I try not to analyse why readers react so powerfully to my work. I tried to do that with the success of my first novel and I didn't write for another eleven years.

**At the time of this interview, you're getting ready to head out for several weeks of travels—research for QUINTANA OF CHARYN, which will be the third Lumatere novel. When you were writing FINNIKIN, you took sword fighting and dagger throwing lessons. Are you always such a method writer?**

That makes me seem adventurous. No, I observed sword fighting and dagger throwing more than I actually took part in it. The closest thing to method writing for me is walking in the shoes of the character. I usually have a fair idea of what the setting will look like, so at first there's a lot of surfing the 'net to find the place, and then I travel there. In the first chapter of FINNIKIN, I knew it would be Mont Saint-Michel in France and although my climb was nothing like Finnikin's, the smell and the views and the atmosphere was all there including the room where Finnikin first sees the novice Evanjalin. I have to see it to write it.

I can't write a novel about a medieval world from inner city Sydney. That's the perfect location for LOOKING FOR ALIBRANDI, SAVING FRANCESCA, and THE PIPER'S SON, and also for the Sydney section of ON THE JELlicOE ROAD, because I know those areas well. But the fantasies are inspired by overseas settings. Funnily enough, the very moment I decided that I would write Finnikin was when I was in New York and my first bit of research was visiting the Cloisters. There's a unicorn room there and I thought my story was going to be about unicorns. The only reference to unicorns that survived in the novel was the belief by the young Princess Isaboe that they existed in the forest of Lumatere.



**Let's go back to the beginning: Your first novel, LOOKING FOR ALIBRANDI, is widely considered iconic in your native Australia, and all of your realistic fiction is set there. But your work is equally admired and beloved in the States (JELlicOE ROAD even won the 2009 Printz Award—the YA equivalent of the Newbery). In interviews, you've talked about the differences in how Australian and American audiences receive your work. How does that affect your writing process?**

The difference between the U.S. and Australia is really only Alibrandi. Here in Australia, it has dominated my writing life and there are many people who think it's the only novel I've ever written. That's because it was a film and it was studied on the Senior syllabus. I suppose it touched a nerve. I think it's my weakest work, but it's had the most profound affect on my life and I never take for granted an Alibrandi fan.

SAVING FRANCESCA gave me my first profile in the U.S. really. I've told this story many times before, that Knopf [an imprint of Random House] flew me over to the U.S. and I was reading in-house at Random and someone approached me later and said it was strange to hear Francesca with an Australian accent. I laughed about that in Chicago, at another reading, and someone approached me later and said, "Oh no, Francesca's a Chicago girl." I love telling that story because it proves how universal this very ordinary teenager is. Two days ago I received a letter in the mail via my publishers, which charmed me to death because, really, who gets *par avion* letters in the mail anymore? It was from an 89-year-old woman in New Zealand who loved FRANCESCA. It made my day. All I could imagine was an 89-year-old woman speaking to a 13-year-old girl about my writing.

So audience doesn't affect my writing process most times. I was just saying to a friend today that as ecstatic as I am about the FROI reviews, they also intimidate me and I try not to let them influence the writing of QUINTANA. So when a reviewer states that they love a particular secondary character, I try very hard not to change the course of the story to give that character more. Same when someone doesn't like the novel. The most dangerous thing to do is edit yourself based on reviews when you're in the middle of a trilogy.

**You were a high school English and history teacher for ten years before leaving the profession to write full time. How has being an educator informed your fiction? Or was it the reverse—that writing for teenagers informed the way you taught?**

I wrote ALIBRANDI before I went to university, so the freshness of Josie's voice came from being a few years older than her. FRANCESCA was written 11 years later when I was teaching at a boys high school in the city. I started writing it in October 2001, pretty depressed like the rest of the world. Francesca was very much shaped by that time and the very multi cultural school I was teaching at. There's a scene in the novel where Francesca is stopped in the playground by kids named Shaheen and Javier and they were all real names and personalities. But I never copied their words or tried to use colloquialisms. Such things can date a novel. Instead, I listen to the rhythm—that sing-song way they'd walk and talk. Tom Mackee is based on a bunch of boys who used to shuffle around with their school pants slung low on their hips and their boxer shorts showing. The teacher who had the office next door would laugh because he'd hear me yell, "I didn't go to university for four years to say 'Pull up your pants!'"

They were the best professional years of my life and I loved that world. But it wiped me out emotionally. Teachers don't just teach anymore. They're social workers, they're surrogate parents. I had kids coming out to me about their sexuality, and the toughest boys in the school blubbing in my office because they thought they got their girlfriends pregnant. There's a line in Francesca about her mother who used to be a teacher, where she'd come home from work with some kind of battle fatigue. If the world of Francesca seemed real, it was because part of it came from a real world. The rest was total construct.

*FROI OF THE EXILES* is already out in Australia; it will be released in the U.S. on March 13th.

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