



Author Spotlight: Aleesah Darlison



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Author: **Aleesah Darlison**

When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

From about the age of sixteen, I told people that I wanted to be an author. Unfortunately, everyone told me I'd never make it and that it was too hard to get published. It wasn't until many years later when I was in my early thirties that I came back to writing as a career option and stopped viewing it as just a dream or a hobby.

Where do you write? Do you like to be by yourself in the quiet, or do you like to write in a noisy space?

Most of the time I write at my desk, straight onto my computer. I type much faster and more neatly than I can write, which helps when the ideas are flowing. If I can't get to my computer, I'll write in my notebook and transfer later. If I can read my handwriting, that is...

What do you use to write – pencil and paper or computer?

Computer usually. If I'm working on a picture book I often start off in a notebook or print my manuscript out so I can edit it on the go – you know while cooking dinner, waiting at the traffic lights, hanging out at my children's sport. Picture books are shorter, so easier to transport, whereas with longer novels I usually feel better and more efficient working on a computer.

When do you write?

Whenever there's an idea in my head. Whenever I have a spare moment.

When do you get your ideas?

All the time. Sometimes in dreams. Sometimes while driving. Sometimes while walking. Ideas are everywhere. The key is finding the good ones that can sustain an entire book.

Do you think of the story in your head before you write it?

Sometimes the story elements will be there, sometimes if I start writing down the ideas, plot and characters, they form more quickly on paper. For some stories, you might have some of the elements come together quickly and then as the weeks pass the other pieces of the jigsaw slowly come to you. I find that whole process quite amazing. I might be actively seeking the missing jigsaw piece or I might not. It might just appear like magic. But it usually does turn up.

What gave you the idea for Stripes in the Forest?

I have always, always loved thylacines and felt very sorry about what happened to them. I write a lot of stories, particularly picture books, that feature Australian native animals.

My original manuscript for Stripes in the Forest is dated 3 April 2012, so I wrote it some time ago. As the 80th anniversary of the extinction of the thylacine was drawing near, I thought it was now or never to see if I could get it published. **Big Sky Publishing** were amazing to work with. They really got behind the project and everything came together very quickly.

What do you like best about Stripes in the Forest?

In terms of the text, the most striking and emotive thing is that the last, wild thylacine looks out and addresses the reader directly. She talks to us and tells her personal story. She's a mother trying to protect her babies and I think many human parents and their 'babies' will connect with that.

In terms of the illustrations, I think Shane McGrath has done the most amazing job to bring to life these animals of which our main records are black and white photographs. Shane has created so many layers to the story that it enables new things to be discovered every time someone reads the book. There's a lot there.

My year six teacher in primary school read Frank Dalby Davidson's *Man Shy* to the class. It's about wild cattle in the Snowy Mountain region (if I remember correctly) who were hunted out of the mountains and had watering holes fenced off so they eventually died. The story focuses on one animal, a female, as she becomes the last one of her kind standing, with a baby at foot. In a way, I was trying to capture the essence of that story, the hunted, the proud, courageous, stoic sole survivor, and of course, the great Aussie animal hero.

Do you like the illustrations?

I LOVE the illustrations. What a beautiful gift they are to me as the author (who can't draw!) to have my story brought to life so beautifully for others to enjoy.

How did you feel when you wrote this story?

What a great question! The main things I felt would be protective, sad and probably a sense of trying to gain justice for the thylacine. I wanted the female thylacine to be strong, protecting her babies like I would protect my own. At the same time, I felt very protective of this beautiful, strong character that I'd created. The other feeling was one of sadness. Sadness at the loss of these animals and the stupidity of people at the time allowing it to happen. The benefit of hindsight is a wonderful thing, I suppose.



***I am the last of my kind. This I know.
Once, we roamed the land. We owned the land.
We called it Home.
But strange creatures came to take it from us...
My story matters. I am the last living female
Tasmanian Tiger.***

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How do you hope readers will feel?

I've seen how children and adults are responding to the text already. I see that those same people are falling in love with the thylacine – my thylacine and the thylacine species – as they read the story and learn more about these amazing animals from talking to me.

I want children to care for, love, appreciate and actually *know* these animals. I want them to be remembered and celebrated. From what I've seen, that's certainly being done. There are some stronger or more mature elements of the story and there are some sad moments, but, being a picture book, I was very aware that I had to offer hope for child readers at the end of the story. Without giving too much away, there are various elements in the text and the pictures that offer this hope and provide a twist on what you might *think* is the thylacine's story.

When I read the story at schools, the audience is captivated. You can hear a pin drop. Children are so invested in the thylacine's story. I think I could be creating, or at least encouraging, a few new eco-warriors out there, which is wonderful to see. We need more people to care about our wildlife because animals can't stand up for themselves.

How would you like teachers to present *Stripes in the Forest* to children?

I'd like teachers to offer the book to students so they can draw their own conclusions. Lots of teachers are as fascinated by thylacines as I am. They recognise them as an Australian icon and they're keen to share my story and the history of the thylacine with their students. Any forums about the thylacine always produce strong emotions and rich discussion. We've created comprehensive Teacher's Notes for the book that can assist teachers in studying the book and the thylacine in the classroom. Here's the [link](#) to download the notes:

Are there any messages you would like them to discuss?

Probably two key ones. Learn about the animals that have come before. They're incredible and unique and shouldn't be forgotten. Secondly, take the lessons from the past and apply them to the animals we still have in our world today. Australia has the highest rate of mammal extinction in the world. Thirty animal species have become extinct in the time since Europeans settled here. That's thirty too many. But if we learn to love, appreciate, understand and care for animals and their environment (it's not just our environment, it's theirs too) then we will continue to be gifted with animals' presence.

Do you have any advice for children as writers?

Read lots of books and write every day. Enter writing competitions if you can and share your work with others – for me, sharing my stories is one of the greatest joys of writing.

What is your favourite picture book?

Oh, gee. That's a hard one. I love so many picture books. One that really drew me in when I started reading copious amounts of books to my children was *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry and the Big Hungry Bear*. It's funny and cheeky and has a similar idea as *Stripes in the Forest*, I suppose, although it's executed very differently, where the main character looks out at the reader to engage them.

Who is your favourite author? What do you like about his or her work?

Another hard one. I love them all! Just one that springs to mind is Morris Gleitzman, especially the *Once* series. His books are sometimes sad, always thought-provoking. It's nice to see someone getting kids to think, but still using humour within his serious stories.

Find out more about Aleesha from her websites:

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