

BOOKS

# 'Children like being slightly scared...'

Children's picture book phenomenon Lauren Child has graduated into a stylish writer for young readers. Tamzin Lewis meets her



Lauren Child's latest character is American schoolgirl Ruby Redfort, a smart, sassy secret agent. Ruby shares attributes with the young Lauren, such as a love of detective fiction, films, TV and sport. But the 13-year-old code-breaking prodigy also has the confidence and assertiveness which Lauren says she longed for as a teenager.

So what has inspired Lauren, who previously dreamed up Charlie and Lola, Clarice Bean and Hubert Horatio Bartie Bobton-Trent, to create the new spoof detective series?

"The beginnings of Ruby came from watching cop shows like Starsky & Hutch, Colombo and Hart to Hart," Lauren says. "I used to love American TV shows, sitcoms and the early Walt Disney films. Children were often portrayed in those films as leading a very free but cosy life."

"I first saw ET when I was about 16 and I believed in the children's school and home life but they also had freedom, rode their bikes, and went out on the streets on their own."

She adds: "With Ruby Redfort, I wanted to hark back to a time when you don't have to explain about being safe."

For Lauren that meant setting

her girl detective in a 1970s world before mobile phones and the internet. Living with her not-so-smart but very wealthy, socialite parents, Ruby has a gift for code-cracking which draws her into a world of "busting bad guys".

Lauren, 47, says: "I wanted to have a book which echoed the feeling from when I was growing up in the 70s and 80s. Readers won't be able to gauge what year it is, but it has the feel of that time."

"It is useful setting it in the past because I think mobile phones ruin thrillers. A Perfect Murder was the remake of Alfred Hitchcock's Dial M for Murder and for me it doesn't work. If you have a situation where there are only

## FACTFILE

Likes? Stately homes, interiors and furniture

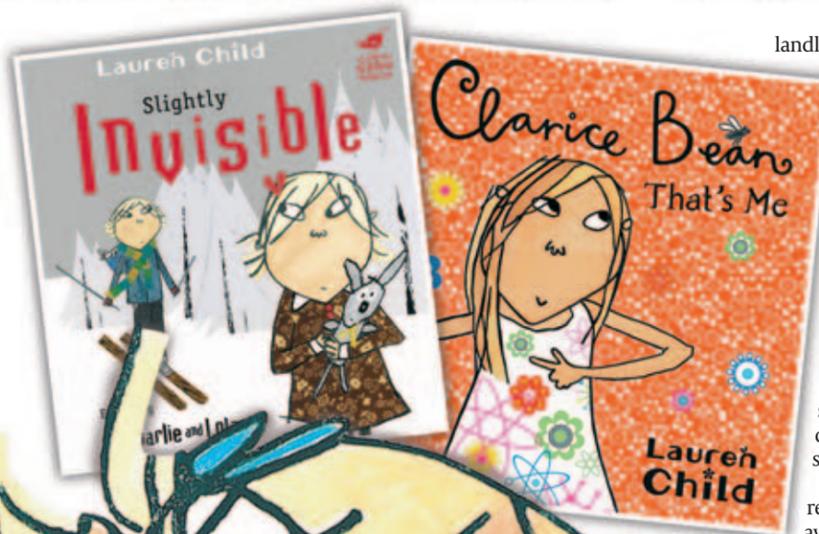
Favourite children's book? *The 18th Emergency* by Betsy Byars

Biggest inspirations? The illustrators Quentin Blake and Ronald Searle

Number of books sold? Three million and counting

Biggest award? MBE for services to literature in 2010

Lauren Child and her creation Lola, the little sister who asks 'why?' in the Charlie and Lola series.



landlines or telephone boxes it is very different."

Lauren describes the Ruby Redfort stories, *Look Into My Eyes* and *Take Your Last Breath*, as adventure books but she also hopes they are funny and a bit ridiculous.

"They are a pastiche of crime thrillers," she says. "Crime fiction sells like hot cakes and generally we love the danger."

"Children like being slightly scared which is why they love Halloween and fairy tales. There is something wonderful about being cosy and safe and reading about something dangerous."

"If I am stressed I often want to read a crime novel as it takes you away from your problems and I think children are just the same."

Lauren Child studied at London's City and Guilds Art School before taking on many jobs including painting spots in Damien Hirst's factory. After years of having ideas rejected by publishers, *Clarice Bean, That's Me* was finally accepted by Orchard Books in 1999.

A year later *Charlie and Lola's I Will Not Ever Never Eat A Tomato* was published which, along with *Clarice Bean*, rocketed Lauren to picture-book stardom.

The character of Ruby Redfort was initially *Clarice Bean's* reading matter of choice, before becoming a heroine in her own right.

Ruby's series set in the fictional town of Twinford, is aimed at readers aged about nine to 13.

So how does Lauren define her transition from "authorstrator" to novelist?

"Illustrating is a very different

mindset," she says. "I find illustrating very physical as I'm moving around a lot. When I do a lot of collage I'm exhausted by the end of the day."

"You are responding to the text, working out what looks good on the page and how it will look with the text."

"It is a bit like doing a tricky puzzle where you are trying to get everything you need in."

"You also have to surprise. There might be something you desperately want to illustrate but it just doesn't work as it is too similar to the previous page. Or what you would love to illustrate is too ambiguous or abstract for that piece of text."

Lauren explains that the way she views Ruby is more cinematic than illustrative, with lots of short scenes, dialogue and action.

"I do see in pictures," she says. "If I

It is useful setting Ruby Redfort in the past because I think mobile phones ruin thrillers: landlines are different.

can't see where a character lives I find it very hard to write. But usually I find it easier to tell the story in words rather than pictures as illustrating is mentally exhausting. Pictures have to come out of your head and you have to make it work on paper."

Making it work on paper also applies to Lauren's innovative use of

typography which has helped inspire a new generation of children's authors to be equally experimental with type. And her love of typography, which she partly ascribes to her art teacher father, and also her interest in cartoon strips, finds a place in Ruby Redfort.

Lauren says: "It's amazing that there are hundreds of different fonts each of which

have been designed. I think children are more than ever interested in typography because of computers. I often get letters where a child has messed about with type."

"I used to do that laboriously with a felt-tip pen and by cutting out newsprint which was very time-consuming. Now you can do so much more."

*Look Into My Eyes* and *Take Your Last Breath* by Lauren Child are published by HarperCollins, [www.rubyredfort.com](http://www.rubyredfort.com) Lauren's World Book Day Ruby Redfort title *Hang In There, Bozo* is out now priced £1. It is Ruby's survival guide for tricky situations. World Book Day is on March 7, [www.worldbookday.com](http://www.worldbookday.com)

