



School: School of Creative Industries

Researcher: Lucy Christopher

Project Title: Facing the Darkness: Developing empathy and maturity in young readers through emotional realism

UOA: 27 - English Language and Literature

Research Statement

Christopher's research explores the importance of dealing with difficult truths and emotions, asking what happens when we confront the darkness, rather than pushing it away or denying its existence. This research question is evident in Christopher's writing for older readers, including *The Killing Woods* (2014) and *Three Strikes (The Darkness)* (2018), as well as in *Shadow* (2019) - a picture book for young readers.

Shadow explores loneliness, sadness and anxiety within a mother-child relationship. In the writing of this book, Christopher drew on studies that look at what happens when stories for the very young are shared between parents and children, and how discussions and activities following on from reading can deepen understanding and empathy both within their relationship and in the child relationships beyond the home.

Christopher is known for treating her young readers with respect, showing confidence in their ability to handle difficult subjects and complex emotions. Her work for young adults asserts the importance of having open discussions about a range of complex subjects, including teenage sex and mental health issues, rather than labelling these issues as being unsuitable for young adult readers.

A leading publisher of books for children and young adults stated that her work has:

helped change the way publishers looked at this market, encouraging a more mature level of content with a high level of personal identification with themes and characters. Her unique blend of emotional realism also led the way for writers to challenge emerging feelings and conflicts in young people's own feelings and thoughts.

Christopher's research involves exploration of language and structure. In *Storm-wake*, based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Christopher merges aspects of Shakespearean theatrical form with conventions of a modern young adult novel. The

novel explores Shakespeare's line, *We are such stuff as dreams are made on*, testing its thematic resonance in how we create narrative. *Storm-wake* lays bare the merging of the conscious and unconscious forces that are in play in creating narrative, investigating how fiction moves between real and fantastical themes, as well as between highly conscious form and moments of suspension of disbelief.

Christopher also uses language and structure in order to draw readers into the story, allowing them to relate to the central characters. The use of two, first person, narrators in *The Killing Woods* allows Christopher to present alternate viewpoints, asking the reader to empathise with more than one person, while simultaneously allowing the reader to note the gaps and inconsistencies between the two narratives. This technique makes readers active in their engagement with the story, asking them to make their own judgements about the truth of the events described by the novel's protagonists. In *Shadow*, Christopher uses metaphor, simple language, and a close and personal narrative voice in order to encourage empathy between readers and characters, with the aim of creating wider tolerance and understanding for issues of mental health.