



Sophie, tell us a little bit about what inspired

The House with Chicken Legs?

My grandmother told me fairy tales about Baba Yaga and her house with chicken legs when I was young. Some of the stories were terrifying, but they fascinated me too. Baba Yaga is much more than your average fairy-tale witch. She can be cruel, but also kind and compassionate. I wanted to explore this side of Baba Yaga, while giving her a role that explained people's fear of her, and her links with death.

The house in *The House with Chicken Legs* ended up being similar to my grandmother's home: filled

with memories of the dead, but also a celebration of life; brimming with delicious foods, beautiful music, and wondrous stories.

Marinka was initially inspired by my children, who also dream of climbing over fences and carving their own destiny. But as soon as I started writing Marinka, she became incredibly real to me. It felt like her world and her story already existed, and I had simply discovered a window into it.

What are your favourite myths or folk stories?

Slavic fairy tales have a special place in my heart, because of my grandmother. My favourites include *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, who completes seemingly impossible tasks set by Baba Yaga to earn a skull with burning eyes that frees her from her evil step mother; *The Snow Maiden*, who sought out love and happiness even though it made her melt; and *Sadko*, who played music until The Tsar of the Sea danced up a storm. I also love folk stories from all over the world; African tales about *Anansi*, a wise and cunning spider-man



who spun a web to the sky to ask for the Sky God's stories; African-American tales of *Brer Rabbit*, who uses intelligence to prevail over larger animals; and the Middle Eastern stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*, told by Scheherazade to save her life, which include tales of epic journeys, djinn, sorcerers, talking animals and magical objects.

If you had a house with chicken legs for a day, where would you go, or what would you do and why?

I have always wanted to see the places that inspired my grandmother's stories. So, I would sit on the house's roof as it ran over the fells near my current home and the Welsh hills of my childhood, splashed through the English Channel, and galloped all the way across Europe to the enchanted forests, lakes and seas of my grandmother's first home.

But I wouldn't stop there! There is so much of the world I would love to see; northern lights and narwhals, baobabs and bears, snow monkeys soaking in hot springs and migrating monarch butterflies.

The house and I would samba in the streets of Rio, fire dance in Fiji, dip into the Dead Sea, and amble under avenues of cherry blossoms in Korea. I'm not sure I could do all that in one day, but it would be fun to try, and it would certainly inspire some new stories!

What research did you do when you were writing the book?

I read flocks of Slavic fairy tales, including all the Baba Yaga stories I could find. I also researched ancient Slavic beliefs, and many of the ideas I came across – death as a journey, the glassy mountains, the black ocean, and Baba Yaga's links to an ancient Goddess of Death – became incorporated into *The House with Chicken Legs*.

I experimented with Russian recipes, made my first *borsch* and ate my first horseradish. I listened to traditional Russian music, discovered many curious and wonderful Russian proverbs, and visited beautiful places – Venice, Africa, Russia, and the Arctic – from my armchair through the magic of books and film.



The story deals with both dark and light themes – what messages would you like readers to take away from the book?

That life is full of joy and sorrow, loneliness and companionship, pride and regret. To live means experiencing it all. Some things might feel heart-breaking, but they can never truly break your heart. There is always hope for a brighter future, and you might find it in the most unexpected of places – in an encounter with a young friend or an old Yaga, in a house that you thought was your enemy, in the beak of a bird, or in the ripples on a puddle's surface. Even death can inspire us to embrace life.

I hope my readers try to appreciate every moment – whether light or dark – and keep striving for happiness. We can shape and mould our futures, and the possibilities are as endless as the stars!

Can you give us a sneak peek of what's coming next from you, Sophie?

My next book is also inspired by Slavic folklore, especially by a tale called *The Lime Tree* or *Why Bears' Paws are Like Hands*; and, like *The House with Chicken Legs*, it has themes of identity and belonging. The book is set in the Siberian Snow Forest – the largest forest on Earth – and in addition to the human characters there is a courageous weasel, a slightly grumpy wolf, a fearful elk, and a bear or two.

There are several short stories within the main story, inspired by folklore characters such as Zmey Gorynych, Koschei the Deathless and Father Frost. A minor character from *The House with Chicken Legs* appears with a larger role. I wonder if readers can guess who it might be?

