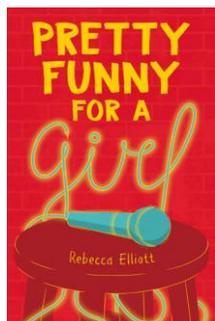


AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Rebecca Elliott on *Pretty Funny for a Girl*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Haylah Swinton is an ace best friend, a loving daughter, and an incredibly patient sister to a four-year-old nutcase of a brother. Best of all, she's pretty confident she's mastered making light of every situation—from her mom's new boyfriend to unsolicited remarks on her plus-sized figure. Haylah's learning to embrace all of her curvy parts, and, besides, she has a secret: one day, she'll be a stand-up comedian star.

So when impossibly cool and “thirstalicious” Leo reveals he's also into comedy, Haylah jumps at the chance to ghostwrite his sets. But is Leo as interested in returning the favor? Even though her friends warn her of Leo's intentions, Haylah's not ready to listen—and she might just be digging herself deeper toward heartbreak. If Haylah's ever going to step into the spotlight, first she'll need to find the confidence to put herself out there and strut like the boss she really is.

Q: What inspired you to write this book?

A: I always wanted to write for teenagers because I feel like I still am one—I haven't really grown up! Also because I think those years are just the most crazy and fascinating times—exciting, unpredictable, with such high emotional stakes, when every day can be life-changing.

And I chose to write about a character like Haylah because I don't think we see my favorite kinds of girls represented enough in YA fiction—the ones who are more interested in being loud and proud and ambitious and weird and making you laugh 'til you pee your pants rather than trying to live up to the ridiculous social media ideal of how you “should” look and act if you're a girl.

Ultimately, I wanted to write a laugh-out-loud tale about the importance of self-love over the opinions of others and the joy of wobbling your funny bits in the face of life.

Q: After earning a degree in philosophy, how did you get into writing for young adults?

A: After my degree, whilst being stuck in a very dull office job, I started illustrating children's picture books and eventually writing them as well, and as I got more and more into the writing, my aim became to write a novel for teenagers. It took me a long time and a couple of failed attempts before I really found my voice and discovered lurking in my head my perfect character: Haylah.

Q: You've written over thirty books. What about writing this novel was most different than your previous books?

A: I've written a lot of picture books and early readers, but unlike writing for the under-10s, I love the freedom that writing a full-length novel gives you: the need to be super concise isn't there anymore, and you can really be yourself and take a thought for a walk, which I loved. On the other hand, unlike a shorter book, there comes a point with a novel when you can't go back and re-read what you've already written every time you write another chapter, and it all becomes a bit unwieldy, like trying to run with a wobbly jelly in your hands that just keeps getting bigger. But you have to trust that as long as you don't drop it, it will hold together and keep its shape and that it will all be worthwhile in the end because who doesn't enjoy a massive plate of jelly? (Ok so it's *possible* I might have taken the jelly analogy a bit too far—what were we talking about again?)

This was also my first time writing for teenagers, which is clearly a very different voice to my previous books. Though really it wasn't much of a stretch as I pretty much still have the brain of a teenager. Although it was a long (LONG) time ago, that period of my life still feels so vivid to me, and I have the greatest of respect for teenagers, which is why I like writing about them so much. In just a few years you go from snotty kid to a fully formed person. It's insane!

You're suddenly making your own decisions, forming your own opinions, molding your own future, choosing what kind of person you want to be, falling in love for the first time, and all the while battling cruel expectations from the world and the media, not to mention the raging hormone battle within. I tell you, teenagers are total heroes.

Q: If you weren't writing, what would you be doing?

A: Wishing I was writing! I have just the best job in the world: I get to make up stories and work in my pajamas—what more could you want! (Although I would like to think that in some alternate universe I'm a drummer in a famous rock band.)

Q: What was the most challenging part of writing Haylah's story? Why?

A: Without a doubt writing the stand-up scenes. Writing stand-up is SO hard at the best of times, but also so much of stand-up comedy is in the delivery. I have to trust that the reader will deliver the jokes as they read it in the right way to make them funny!

Q: Does Haylah remind you of yourself in any way?

A: Haylah's character is quite like me, though not her story. The big girl who made people laugh—or at least tried to. And I had an obsession with comedy though I never would have had Haylah's courage to get up on stage and tell jokes.

Q: Haylah is nicknamed "Pig." Did you have any nicknames growing up? If not, what nickname would you choose?

A: No, disappointingly, I didn't, though my sister has always called me "Boobs" for some reason. If I could choose? Oh, I don't know, something understated like "Foxy McAmazing" would do just fine.

Q: You're also a book illustrator. If you got the chance, what scene from the book would you most like to illustrate?

A: Oh, that would definitely have to be Haylah's dream about dancing the salsa with Ron Weasley.

Q: Do you prefer stand-up, movies, or written comedies?

A: I love stand-up, especially watching it live—it's just the purest form of comedy. Just one person on their own on stage with nothing but a microphone and the hope that what's in their head will make the room laugh. Definitely one of the bravest jobs in the world!

Q: Who is your favorite female comedian? Why?

A: Well I have to say my best friend, stand-up comedian Kirsty Hudson really (otherwise she'd kill me), but alongside her it's very difficult to narrow it down to one! I like comedians who, alongside being funny, are startlingly honest, occasionally shocking, and say things that instantly resonate with me. There are so many female comedians I love, but at the moment, the top of my stand-up list would be Hannah Gadsby. Her style and thought process are utterly unique (and hilarious).

Q: Can you tell us more about your comedy podcast "Don't Laugh But"?

A: "Don't Laugh But" is a random and only occasionally relevant chat between me and my best friend Kirsty Hudson (a stand-up comedian). We pick a subject each week, ranging from cheese to death and anything in between, and giggle our way through. People seem to enjoy it, but even if they didn't, we'd do it anyway as it keeps us entertained!

Q: Why did you choose to have Haylah deal with both body image and her confidence as a comedian at the same time? What do you want young readers who are dealing with similar struggles to take away from this?

A: I very much didn't want the body image thing to be the central theme of the book. Yes, Haylah feels that she's big, but for the most part, she's quite happy with that, and what she thinks about way more than the way she looks is her ambition to do something amazing—become a stand-up comedian. I only wish that the way we look, particularly for teenagers, could take a back

seat to the way more important stuff like our passions and ambitions.

Whilst, as with most of us, Haylah will always struggle a little with her body confidence, I think she'd also say that one of the coolest realizations as a feminist is that there is no right or wrong way for a girl to look, to dress, to act. So be you big, small, loud, shy, high-heeled and preened, DM-wearing and pierced, and anything and everything in between, it's ALL GOOD, and it's all beautiful. So I hope one of the central themes of the book is screw the haters, screw the ridiculous expectations of society and social media. The only opinion of you that matters is your own opinion. So be whoever the hell you want to be and be proud—shoulders back, chest out, and go show the world who you really are.

Using stand-up comedy, which is a big fear for a lot of people, seemed like a good way to explore my main character's bravery, not in a dystopian hero-saving-the-world kind of way but in more of a relatable "you might not like it, but this is me, and dammit I'm gonna stand up and wobble my funny bits in the face of the world" kind of way.

And even if it's not a career readers are interested in, I just think there's so much in stand-up that teens can identify with—the vulnerability and the desire to be noticed but not to be judged. Plus it's a good excuse to make a lot of jokes and hopefully make readers laugh. Because as Haylah says, "When you find the funny in this serious world that is so often full of pain and cruelty, it's like discovering a diamond in a cave of crap. It's precious."

Q: *Haylah wants to be a famous comedian. What advice do you have for young readers pursuing their ambitions?*

A: Whether you have aspirations in comedy or writing, apart from really studying lots of other authors' or comedians' work, I would say the main thing is have fun with it and keep at it because it's your favorite thing to do—not because of some desperation to get famous! That way you will only get better and better, and the inevitable rejections (part of every writer's and comedian's life) won't deter you.

Q: *What's next for you?*

A: I've just finished the second installment of Haylah's story and am now starting to work on a possible third one, which is exciting!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Elliott is an author and illustrator. She earned a degree in philosophy and once did a brief stint in a dull office. Now, she enjoys eating angel delight, loudly venting on a drum kit, and spending time in her sunny garden. She lives in England with her family, some chickens, and a cat named Bernard.