



## Books That Made a Difference to Elise Chidley

Author Elise Chidley can devour books by just gazing at them. But even literary geniuses have to make dinner. . .

I STARTED READING BECAUSE, honestly, there was nothing much else to do. I am South African but I spent the first half of my life in Swaziland, so we were even more cut off from the technological world. I didn't know what a television was until my pre-teens. At that time, not only was there no TV, there was no Internet, computer games or anything, really. So for entertainment we had to read or play; and I didn't much like playing.

The thing about reading, which I try to teach my kids and anyone else I can corner, is that it makes you want to write. You simply can't write if you don't read enough – it creates a blueprint. And that is why, absurd as it sounds, I always knew, even as a 9-year-old, that I would grow up to be a writer.

I used to read a book every three days. Now, however, with three kids (aged 5, 7 and 9), I've had to slow down – a lot! I read one book a month, if I'm lucky. What I would give for two hours and a good book. Sheer bliss! For now, I'll make do with those few treasured moments of solitary reading.

*Elise lives in Connecticut, in the US, with her family. She has been short-listed for the Nadine Gordimer Award and the Ian St. James Award. Her book tour of South Africa, to promote her debut novel The Wrong Sort of Wife (Orion), a romantic comedy about "marriage, mistakes and mending them," begins mid-April.*

# Elise Chidley's Bookshelf

## Just So Stories

By Rudyard Kipling

My mother read us these tales about how animals got their humps, trunks or spots. I loved the language and the way Kipling addressed the reader as "O Best Beloved." My favourite was *The Cat that Walked Alone*. This story, about the stubborn and independent spirit of cats, inspired me to write my first published piece, a poem called "Wild Dog," which appeared in a wildlife magazine when I was 9. I also loved *The Elephant's Child*, who lost his little boot of a nose forever. I read one of these stories to my daughter's school class and the children concentrated all the way through. I think it's important to challenge young readers with difficult but stirring language.

## Just William

By Richmal Crompton

As a child, I loved the 11-year-old William Brown for his rebellious approach to life and ludicrous attempts at sarcasm. The scruffy William is the protagonist of these comic short stories of rural middle-class life in Edwardian England. In *Just William*, the first in the series, he, as leader of The Outlaws, airs his conspiracy theories and plots against the constraints imposed on boys by grown-ups. The Outlaws clash frequently with their enemies, the Hubert Laneites, led by Hubert Lane (who else?), a clean and tidy boy who ingratiate himself with authority figures.

## How I Live Now

By Meg Rosoff

Daisy, a disgruntled, anorexic teenager from Manhattan, New York, arrives in rural England to stay with her aunt and cousins. The story takes a turn when a sort of World War III breaks out, and Daisy's aunt disappears on a secret mission, never to return. The children are then unsupervised and fall into an earthy, idyllic rhythm of life. The cousins are an eccentric, otherworldly bunch and Daisy falls in love with one

of them. But their happy existence is curtailed when they're taken under the protection of local resistance fighters, who separate the boys and girls and send them to different locations. Daisy, who starts out as spoilt and selfish, becomes motivated by a fierce determination to keep herself and her cousin, Piper, alive until they can find the boys. The descriptions of the English countryside are so evocative that you can smell the roses, mud and blood. It's a wonderful book.

never be headlong in love with Jenny, even though he comes to recognise her true worth.

## I Capture the Castle

By Dodie Smith

This novel, first published in 1948, tells the tale of the glamorous but penniless Mortmains, who live on the brink of ruin in an English castle. The story is related by the teenaged Cassandra, intent on honing her writing skills in the form of witty journal entries. Her



## A Civil Contract

By Georgette Heyer

Haughty but impoverished Viscount Linley enters into an arranged marriage with shy, plain Jenny Chawleigh, the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Jenny is made to feel her social inferiority by Linley and his relatives, but she loves him nonetheless and does her best to make him love her. Meanwhile, Linley yearns for the beautiful Julia, whom he would have married if circumstances hadn't forced his hand. Most Heyer novels end happily, but this one has a bittersweet conclusion, leaving you knowing that Linley will

father – a brilliant writer whose first book was a literary breakthrough rivaling James Joyce's *Ulysses* – has been stricken with writer's block for years. Her older sister, Rose, is a heroine waiting for a romantic novel to star in; anything by Jane Austen will do. The story heats up with the arrival of the Cotton brothers, wealthy Americans who inherited a nearby estate. Rose believes she has first dibs on the eldest (and wealthiest) of the brothers. But Cassandra falls in love with her sister's choice. What I really admire about this novel is the way the humour offsets Cassandra's coming-of-age angst. **O**