

# Magpies

Talking About Books for Children

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GIRL HERO

## SECRET SAFARI

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[ Children's Books Adapted for the Stage ]

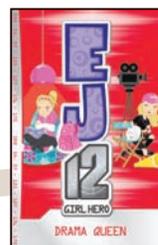
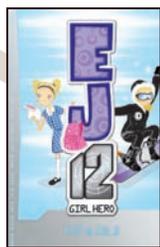
[ The Magic of Beald Dahl Country ]

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In This Issue

# Cover Book Review

by Russ Merrin



Emma Jacks is just an average ten-year-old girl, passionate about her sports, loyal to her friends (Elle, Hannah and Isi), tired of enduring the spite of nasty peers (Nema and Laila) and secretly dreading the daily crises that plague her school life. But there is another side to Emma Jacks. With her logical mind, love of puzzles and advanced mathematics skills, she is also EJ12, the brilliant code-breaker in the under-twelve division of SHINE, a secret spy agency that protects the world from evil-doers. As EJ12, Emma battles evil villains and makes the world a safer place. In fact, Special Agent EJ12 is the Shining Star Spy of the Year of the SHINE Agency!

Whenever an encoded message from the malevolent, rival spy network SHADOW is intercepted, EJ12 is called in to decipher it. This decoding usually leads to a meeting with the chief of SHINE, the wise, kindly A1, who, as an older mentor, is sensible, steady and always supportive of her young protégé. The end toilet cubicle at her school acts as a portal to SHINE headquarters. To access HQ, Emma sits on the toilet seat lid, inserts her phone into the socket near the toilet roll holder, then keys her pin code into the Mission Tube Access Pad. As the wall opens up, EJ slips off the seat onto a beanbag which she rides down a giant tunnel slide to the code room at her SHINE base.

Briefing usually leads into a mission which only Emma herself can undertake, after being kitted out with any high-tech equipment she may need. SHINE agents can also work with back-up, often one of Emma's close friends. They form the BEST (Brains, Expertise, Support, Tips) agent assistance system, providing essential information on a range of subjects often recently tackled as individual student research for class assignments. In a nice 'in' touch these are known as the 'BESTies'.

In the latest title, **Secret Safari**, while Emma tries to gauge the extent of nasty Nema and

Laila's mischief in excluding her from netball practice, she gets an unexpected text from her mother who has won a trip for their whole family to Africa. Emma suspects, rightly, that SHINE has secretly orchestrated her mother's competition 'win'. A mission alert message informs EJ12 that SHINE's number one enemy, A1's evil sister, Adriana X, has broken out of SHINE detention and is once again up to her wicked schemes—this time in Africa. While Emma's Mum serves as a vet with the SHINE Wildlife Refuge, EJ12 herself has to investigate the full extent of Adriana's machinations.

The **EJ12 Girl Hero** series of paperback novels is extremely popular with lower to middle primary level girls from Grade Two through to Grade Four/Five providing, as they do, quick easy-to-read adventure stories presented in large well-led type broken with black and white illustrations. The stories are delivered in short sentences using an easy vocabulary thereby making them accessible to a range of reading abilities. In each book EJ is presented with two challenges: one is a 'save the world' type of problem, the other is of a moral nature involving friendship and social niceties. For example, in the first book, **Hot and Cold**, Nema, EJs ex-friend is playing off the girls in her class as she taunts them as to which one of them will be invited to her super birthday treat. If EJ is invited should she accept or should she turn down the invitation and support her friend who Nema has humiliated by publicly informing her she is not one of the chosen?

The thin paperback novels are attractively presented within classy, glossy coloured covers which feature a cartoon depiction of the two versions of EJ, with the slightly cautious, anxious Emma on one side, and the confident, plucky EJ12 on the other. EJ displays all the admirable traits of a true hero—courage, kindness, tenacity, confidence,

compassion and intelligence. These topical, fast-paced novels serve as a vehicle for the ultimate wish fulfilment of little girls together with a healthy dose of morality. Despite Emma having a father and brother, males do not feature largely in these adventures, and, while adult intervention is minimal, EJ12 more than holds her own with the enemies she encounters. She confidently undertakes her extraordinary adventures with equal measures of aplomb and equanimity.

EJ's codes and word play are easy for the reader to decipher, and appear as illustrated examples of what an encoded message might look like, lending authenticity to these escapist tales.

And just who exactly is the author of these highly popular adventures? In the series' early books, the author's name—Susannah McFarlane—is cleverly spelled out using numerical codes, Morse Code, mirror writing and even anagrams, all versions of the imaginative word play which our clever young heroine so effectively masters.

Although the adventures occur roughly in sequence, each book in the series serves as a stand-alone reader. The EJ character herself develops and grows only a little with each episode. By the 12th book, **Secret Safari**, Emma is still basically the same character: the slightly self-doubting, friendly ten-year-old girl with the semi-secret identity as the SHINE Special Agent. This is one of the many strengths of this endearing series.

#### EJ12 Girl Hero series:

**Hot and Cold** (2010) 978 1 92168 400 5  
**Jump Start** (2010) 978 1 92168 401 2  
**In the Dark** (2010) 978 1 92168 402 9  
**Rocky Road** (2010) 978 1 92168 403 6  
**Choc Shock** (2010) 978 1 92168 405 0  
**On the Ball** (2010) 978 1 92168 404 3  
**Making Waves** (2010) 978 1 92168 416 6  
**Drama Queen** (2011) 978 1 92168 422 7  
**Out of This World** (2011) 978 1 92168 423 4  
**Pyramid Puzzle** (2011) 978 1 92168 424 1  
**Christmas Countdown** (2011) 978 1 92168 425 8  
**Secret Safari** (2012) 978 1 92168 426 5  
*Susannah McFarlane, Lemon Fizz/Scholastic Australia, \$12.99 ea Pb*