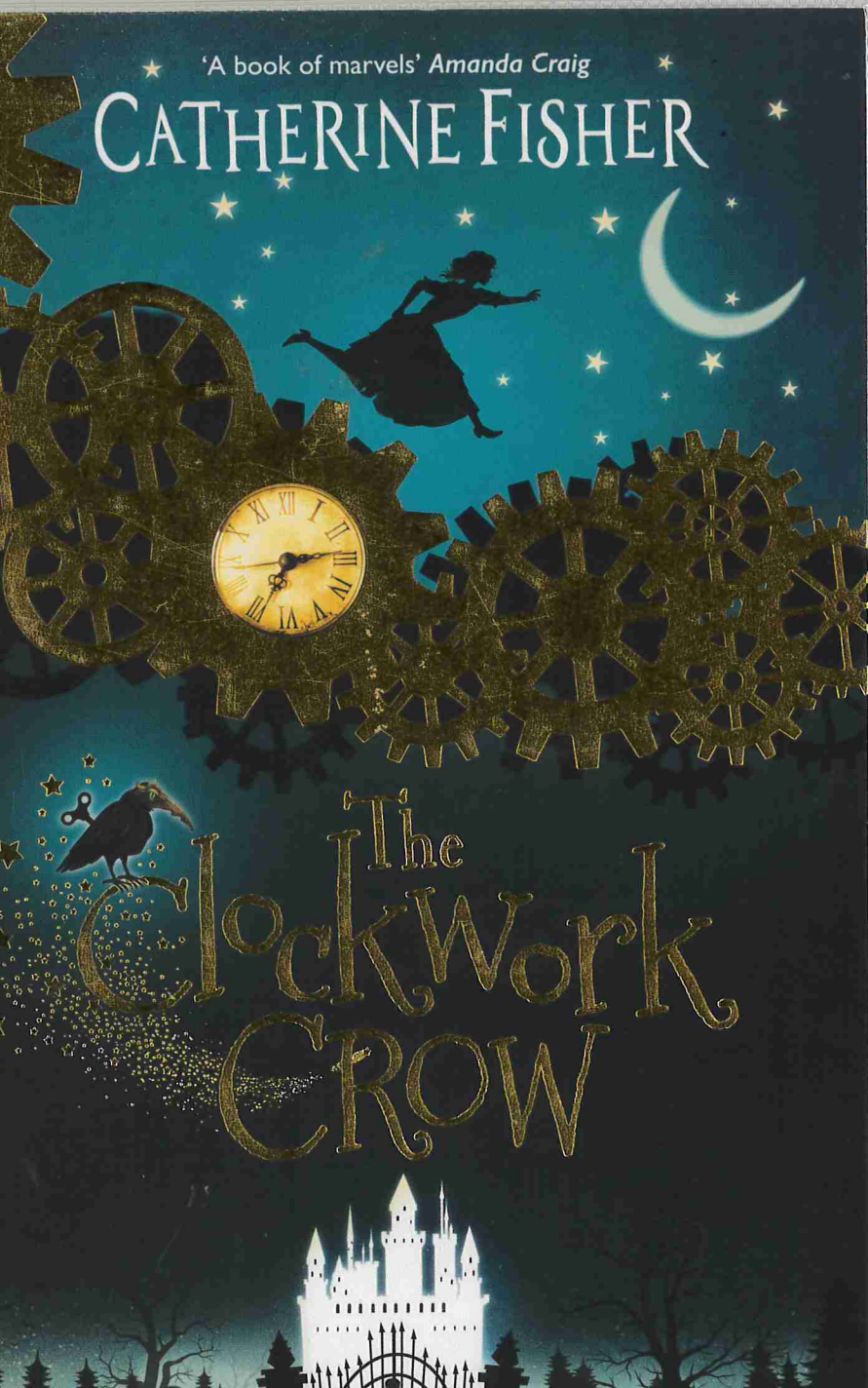


★ 'A book of marvels' *Amanda Craig* ★

CATHERINE FISHER



The  
Clockwork  
CROW



# A daughter to us now

*In the joyful Christmas dawn  
Even stars can find a home.*

The sky was black.

At first that was all she knew, and that she lay under it, and it was like lying in bed, deep under a soft white quilt, because she was so warm and comfortable. Stars shone high above, and a sliver of moon.

It was only the Crow's voice that startled her.

'Are you going to lie there forever?' it croaked irritably.

Seren sat up. She was in a bank of deep snow. Tomos was sprawled face down beside her, and

around them all the sleepy animals were waking and fleeing into the wood, the foxes with yelps of joy, the weasel with a scutter through the snow.

And there before her was Plas-y-Fran with its windows all blazing! People were running out from the house over the snowy lawn, a man and a woman, and behind them Denzil, racing as fast as he could manage, and Mrs Villiers behind them, amazed, on the steps.

The woman was Lady Mair. She ran past Seren and swept up Tomos in her arms. She was crying out his name, over and over, just sobbing and sobbing, and she fell on her knees with her arms around him. The captain ran up and hugged both of them. There was so much emotion on their faces Seren couldn't bear it, it was too much, and she looked away. Then she scrambled up in dismay because the Crow was lying scattered all around her, in bits.

Its wings lay in the snow; one eye peered out and she had to search hard for the two claws and hurriedly gather up all the spilled clockwork of its chest. Its beak croaked, 'key...' before its voice ran down and the wheels in its chest creaked to a stop.

Hastily she hunted for the key and found it



trampled underfoot. She slipped it into her pocket, turned and realised they were all looking at her.

Tomos pulled her close. 'This is Seren. She found me. I would never have got back without her.'

Lady Mair's face was streaked with tears but she didn't seem to care at all. She caught Seren by both hands. 'Oh my dear, dear girl,' she breathed. 'How can we ever repay you!'

Seren smelt her scent, and felt the fresh warmth of her skin. She said, 'I only ... wanted to help.'

'You have saved us all,' Lady Mair whispered. 'I will never forget that.'

Screeches of delight made them stare. Denzil and Tomos were dancing round and hugging each other stupidly in the snow.

'Seren,' Captain Jones was looking down at her. His eyes were wet and he seemed dazed. But he said, 'You are going to be like a daughter to us now. I promise you that.'

She was so stupefied she could barely answer.

It was all too wonderful to be true. Her joy was a bit scary; she almost dared not be so happy.

A voice behind her asked, 'Did you really go there? Where They live?'

Gwyn stood there, breathless.

Seren nodded, looking at the snowy lawns and the blue frozen lake and the birds fluttering away among the dark branches. 'I must have,' she whispered. 'But I don't even know where it was.'

And then Mrs Villiers came running from the house, all out of breath, her dark hair coming unpinned, and she knelt down before Seren in the snow and hugged her tight, and then she pulled back and looked at her.

'I'm so glad, Seren,' she said. 'And so sorry I was cross.'

Seren smiled. 'So am I,' she said.

They told her she had been gone for a whole day and night. As soon as Mrs Villiers had found the letter on her pillow the house had been thrown into uproar. Denzil had ridden to the station with a telegram, and Lady Mair and the captain had arrived within hours.

Since then the house and the estate and all the lands around had been searched, but nothing – not even a footprint – had been found, and they had despaired.

'It was so terrible,' Lady Mair said later, toasting

crumpets over the fire with a long fork. 'You had vanished like Tomos and none of us knew where. And then! Then we heard that sound. Such a strange sound! Like a bell at first, a high bell ringing, and then an explosion, as if a ball of glass had shattered into a million pieces, and we ran out, and there you both were, lying in the snow!'

Everyone was in the kitchen. Tomos was cramming his mouth with hot toast, as if he could never get enough of it. Mrs Villiers poured tea for everyone, and Denzil just sat there, staring, with the cat on his lap. All their eyes were on Tomos, drinking him up, feasting on the sight of him.

Captain Jones came in and stood by the fire. He looked relieved and restless all at once. He said, 'But what I don't understand is...'

His wife glanced up at him. 'We will have the whole story. But not now. Not tonight.'

He put a hand on her shoulder. 'No,' he said. 'Because this is a very special night.'

'I'm sorry your toy got broken,' Denzil muttered in Seren's ear. 'Let me have it and I'll put it back together for you, if you want.'

'Oh, I can do that.' Her eyes widened. 'But ... what day is it, Denzil?'

He smiled at her in weary delight. 'That's just it, Seren. It's Christmas Day. And what a Christmas it will be!'

It was already nearly dawn. Seren was hustled up to bed, though even when the door of her room was closed she could hear Tomos and his mother talking softly as they passed up the stairs. What was he telling her? Would she believe that he had been in that enchantment for a year and a day and never even known?

She shook her head. She felt so happy and tired, but somehow sore, as if she had gone through a great bruising struggle. All she wanted was to crawl into bed.

But there was one thing she had to do first.

Putting the Crow back together took longer than before. A few cogs were bent, and its beak was even more crinkled, as if the explosion had damaged it.

But finally she finished, and she wound the key round and sat back.

The Crow groaned. 'Oh, my poor head!' It shook out one wing, then another. 'The agony of



being in that ghastly cage! I'm all aches and pains. Pins and needles!' It flapped around and took a short test flight, then hopped onto the bedpost and looked down at her. 'Kek kek. So. You did it.'

'We did it. But not everything's right.' She smiled sadly. 'You're still stuck as a Crow. I don't know what to do about that.'

The Crow sighed and wrinkled its beak. 'You can't have everything, Seren.'

She nodded and climbed sleepily into bed and blew out the candle. Through the slit in the curtains she could see the snow falling again outside, but now it was a soft, normal snow, not the hard glitter of enchantment, and it soothed her, and even as she fell asleep she thought she heard, far off over the lake and the house, a shimmer of sleighbells.

In the morning there was a parcel at the end of her bed.

She wriggled down and opened it, and said, 'Oh!' in amazement, because there was the most beautiful dress of dark purple calico, with tiny pearls on its collar and bodice. And there was a shawl too, of warm wool, with a fringe that swung

as she whipped it round her shoulders and paraded up and down on the bed in it.

'Look at this!' she breathed. 'Look at it!'

The Crow's jewel eye fixed sharply sideways. 'There's more.'

Seren dived back into the parcel. Tucked in the depths of the starry tissue paper was a tiny box, and a note on it.

*Dear Seren,*

*This belonged to my mother. Now I want you to have it.*

*Merry Christmas*

*Lady Mair*

She opened it. Then she put it straight down and put both hands to her cheeks and said, 'Oh, my goodness!'

The Crow hopped closer, and tipped its head sideways. 'Very nice,' it said, greedily.

On the paper lay a silver necklace with tiny silver snowflakes all along it. Each one glittered, frosty and bright. Seren hardly dared believe it was hers.

'You might have been an orphan before,' the Crow remarked, 'but you're a princess now.'

What a day it was! She wore her new clothes, and everyone went to church in the carriage, and all the people stared and murmured when Tomos was seen, and whispers went around the congregation like wildfire. And the singing of the service was so loud, and afterwards Lady Mair announced, 'This evening the Waits must come to Plas-y-Fran, as they used to, and you are all welcome to join us!'

Denzil wasn't there, and neither was Mrs Villiers. To Seren's surprise Gwyn was driving the coach. But when they got home she realised why, because Plas-y-Fran was a house transformed, all its windows blazing, fires lit in every room, and not a white sheet in sight. Servants bustled everywhere. From the kitchens the smells of pies and cooked meats and cinnamon rose and, as Tomos and Seren came into the hall, they both cried out with joy, because there, fresh from the wood, stood a huge Christmas tree, all lit with candles. Toys and baubles and sweetmeats hung from its branches. Angels and stars peeped from its top.

It was far better than the ones Seren had seen in the shop windows in London.

In fact it was the most wonderful thing she had ever seen.

There was Christmas dinner under a chandelier glittering with candles, and then the Waits came, so that the singing of carols rang through the house. Seren sat on the steps outside, listening, a happy grin on her face.

Until she saw, at the back of the crowd, the thin man.

She stood up. He edged through to her and took off his dark hat and his face was worn and weary. He said, very quietly, 'Where's my brother?'

She hadn't expected that. 'Your brother?'

He nodded, sadly.

Quickly she led him away from the house round underneath her window. They looked up. The Crow was on the sill, watching the carol singers. When it saw them, there was a moment when Seren thought it would dart back into the room and hide, but then it spread its moth-eaten wings and sailed down and landed on her shoulder.

The thin man said urgently, 'I've been so worried about you! You have to come with me. I may have found a cure for you.'

The Crow made an irritated *kek kek*. 'I was just getting to like it here.'

Seren said, 'You can't stay under a spell all your life. You have to find out how to be human again. So, now, tell me the truth. Not that silly story about the witch. How did it really happen?'

'It happened,' the Crow said stiffly, 'because I was a foolish old man who thought he could be a magician. I found a book of spells and said one over myself. I wanted to be able to fly. Well, that came true! But then I didn't know how to get back, and it was years ago now and the book is lost...'

The thin man held out a hand, but the Crow just looked at him darkly. 'This is Enoch, my younger brother. He's trying to help but he just makes more of a muddle. And I will NOT be taken apart and wrapped in newspaper again.'

Enoch sighed. 'Very well!'

'Promise?'

'Promise. But please, let's go. The train leaves in half an hour, and I've found a magician in York who might help us. Let's go, before *They* come.'

The Crow karked a laugh. '*They* won't try anything. They've learned their lesson.'

It looked back at Seren. And whether it was the magic of the night or just her own imagination she never knew, but just for a moment she saw reflected in the windows of the house a man with a hooked nose and a sly smile and dark jewels of eyes.

Then it was just a Clockwork Crow.

'Goodbye,' she whispered. 'I will miss you so much.'

The Crow shrugged. It plucked out one black feather and put it into her hand. 'Listen, girl. If you're ever in trouble write a message to me with this quill. I will probably come ... if I'm not too busy.'

Seren grinned. She kissed the Crow quickly on the top of its head. 'Thank you!'

'Get off,' it spluttered.

She smiled, and watched the thin man turn and trudge away through the snow, the Crow flapping over him like a shadow.

Above them the moon balanced on the tops of the dark trees. At the edge of the wood the thin man turned and waved. The Crow sailed up and round and she heard its voice come back, faint and far.



'Behave yourself, Seren Rhys.'

'I will,' she whispered.

Behind, from the house, came an urgent shout.

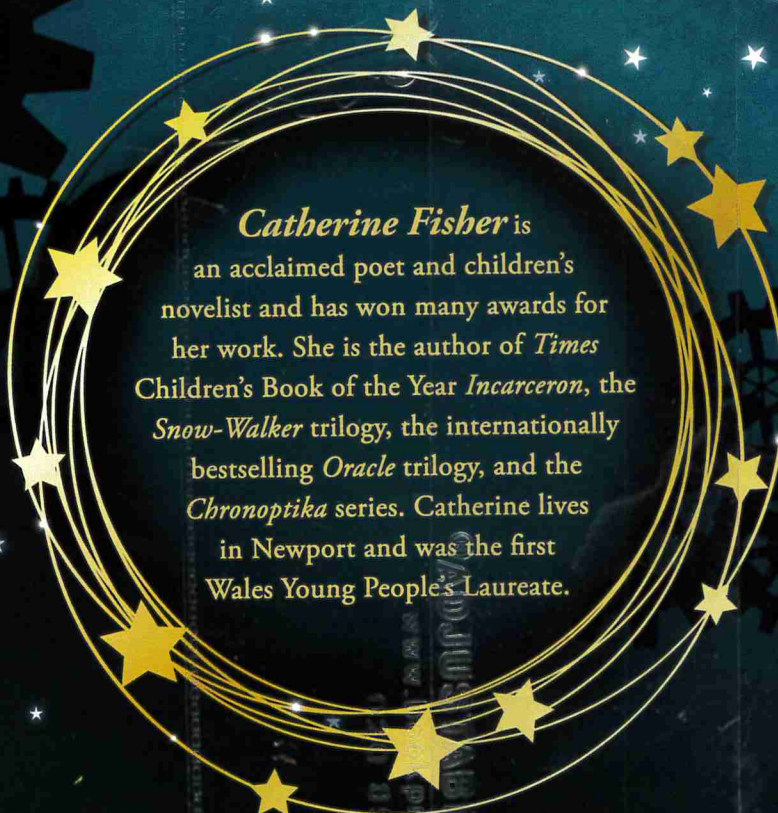
'Seren!'

She turned.

Tomos was on the top step wearing a crooked paper hat. 'Come on! We're going to play hide and seek.'

Her eyes went wide. She had never played that. 'I'm coming! Don't start without me!'

She turned, and ran home.



*Catherine Fisher* is an acclaimed poet and children's novelist and has won many awards for her work. She is the author of *Times* Children's Book of the Year *Incarceron*, the *Snow-Walker* trilogy, the internationally bestselling *Oracle* trilogy, and the *Chronoptika* series. Catherine lives in Newport and was the first Wales Young People's Laureate.