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Cressida Cowell [00:00:13] Hello there. I'm Cressida Cowell, author and illustrator of How to Train Your Dragon and Wizards of Once and Which Way to Anywhere, my new book series. And I'm so glad you've joined me for the Reading is Magic Festival. Sometimes, things that you do or say have a way of turning into something bigger than you imagined and carrying on longer than you thought they would. Like the Reading is Magic Festival, which started in 2020 when I was the Waterstones Children's Laureate and was inspired by my belief that reading is magic and magic is for everyone. All the events during the festival explore the themes of the charter I wrote when I was the laureate and celebrate all the things you have the right to. Creativity, having a planet to read on, seeing yourselves in a book, reading for the joy of it, and getting brilliant advice about books and about reading from people whose job it is to do that. I hope you enjoy this event.

Lauren Layfield [00:01:32] Hi everyone it's Lauren Layfield here! I'm a TV presenter. I've currently got my brown hair up in a ponytail today. I am wearing an orange and white stripy top and I've got this brilliant Reading is Magic Festival bunting behind me because that's exactly what we're doing this week. Now, question for you, have you ever wondered about all of the secrets that could be hiding in your local museum? Well, let's head over to Dumfries in Scotland to meet storyteller Mara Menzies to find out.

Mara Menzies [00:02:32] Hello, everybody. My name is Mara, and I have the best job in the entire world. You know what my job is? I am a storyteller. And one of my favourite places, one of the places I love to go more than anywhere else, is the museum. Now, you might be wondering why the museum? There are no stories in the museum. All you have is stuff in glass cabinets and boxes. But if you are a storyteller, you can see the invisible stories that exist everywhere. Here I am in Dumfries Museum and I'm looking around and my goodness, there is so many stories all around me. Now, if you have never, ever been here before, as soon as you walk in, you are surrounded by things all around you. And if you look very, very carefully and if you listen very, very carefully, and if you use your imagination, then you can find the invisible stories, too. I'm going to tell you a little story. And this story is about a little girl. Round about the same age as you. And she came here. She came to the museum. And she entered through the doorways. And she looked around, but she couldn't quite see the invisible stories. But as she slowly made her way around, she began to see things that piqued her interest. She saw things that aroused her curiosity. And one of those things was a hag stone. A hag stone? You might ask, what on earth is a hag stone? It has another name, she found out, a witch's stone. And I happen to have one right here. She looked at this stone and there was something quite familiar about it. She had heard stories about these kind of stones before, and she knew that this stone was a very special stone because this stone was no ordinary stone. It's a magic stone. And what the little girl found out about the hag stone is that it was made in nature. Water had swirled its way through and had created that little circle right in the middle, that little hole. But if you knew anything about the hag stone, you knew that the farmers who lived in this area would take that hag stone and place it in their barns. And the little girl found out that the reason for doing this is because if you were to peer through that little hole, you would see all the witches. And that is why the farmers used it. You see, in the middle of the night there was one farmer who lived just down the road, and every single day he would wake up in the morning, he would go out into his barn and he would see that all of the animals were completely and totally exhausted. They were snoozing and snoring and dreaming. The cows wouldn't give any milk. The sheep could hardly wake up and

Mara Menzies [00:05:50] baa! And he said, What on earth is going on? I make sure that the animals are well fed. I make sure they've got plenty of water. I make sure that they get lots and lots of sleep. Why are my animals so tired? And so he went out and he found a little stone and he decided to place it in his barn. And when he looked through it that evening, after hiding himself behind all the haystacks he saw a witch! She entered into the barn and she rubbed her hands with glee. And then she jumped onto one of the cows and she clicked her fingers and whoosh! She was off riding up across the skies over the clouds, bouncing and woohoo! having a whale of a time. And behind her, as she clicked her fingers, all of the animals were riding up behind them and they were whizzing across the skies. And after she had had all the fun in the world with all of her witchy friends with the farmer looking up at them through that hag stone, she returned whee! Back to the barn and the animals were utterly exhausted. And the farmer, now that he knew what had been going on, well, he decided he needed to make sure that the witch knew he could see her because witches do not like to be seen. And so he took the hag stone and he placed a few of them all around the barn. And that following evening, when the witch arrived, rubbing her hands with glee, ready for her night-time adventures. As soon as she entered, she saw the hag stones. And she knew that when the farmer peered through the hole, he would be able to see her. And she was so terrified. She screeched and

Mara Menzies [00:07:40] Screamed and ran out of the barn and never returned again. And the farmer, of course, was delighted because soon his cows produced milk, soon his sheep were strong and baaing happily in the fields, and all the animals were just fine. But the hag stones remained in the barn for a very long time. And the little girl? Well, when she picked up that hag stone and she decided to look through it, as she gazed at all the stories, she looked and she saw that in the glass cabinets there were so many things. There were books and plates and cups and she happened to spot a little canoe, and this canoe came from a far away place. And if she had not come to the museum, well, she would never have even seen anything like it. It was a very odd, strange and unusual canoe. Something that she had never encountered before. And when she read the little label, she saw that it was a canoe for a river sailing from Ceylon. And she thought, where is Ceylon? And she discovered that Ceylon is actually quite an old fashioned name for a very different place. It's now Sri Lanka. And as she discovered more and more about that part of the world and she travelled further around the museum, she saw some unusual paintings. And as she picked them up, she discovered that all around the edges there was some strange writing, all kinds of different alphabets. And she realised it was the Japanese alphabet, and that these ancient scrolls came from a very long time ago. But they told stories in different ways. And this one she saw was a hunting scene and it depicted Emperor Yuruyaku, who reigned in the mid fifth century. And in this picture, he was defeating a wild boar on Mount Katsuragi. And as she read the description of this and she looked at all the tiny details, she could almost imagine herself in that very same situation. She felt the excitement of the scene. She imagined herself encountering this great fearsome creature on a mountain. And it was very exciting. She decided to look at another scroll. And as she picked it up, she saw that this was one of the very few scrolls that had a lady in it. And as she looked at the painting, she saw that she was actually the dragon princess. And she was on a ship. And as she read the little description alongside it, she said it depicted Fujiwara no Hidesato, who was a 10th century archer, so very, very skilled in using the bow and arrow. And he was known for his courage, known for his bravery. And he was rescuing the dragon princess from a giant centipede. And this centipede, who was represented by lightning, lived in the skies right above Seta Bridge. And again, as she looked at that picture, she could imagine herself there. Everything was so clear. It was so lifelike. She felt the adventure. She felt the fear and the terror of this giant centipede leaping from the sky. And as she looked at all the other scrolls, she remembered a little

story that she had heard about two dragons. And these dragons they lived right down at the bottom of a lake. And these dragons were fearsome, fearsome dragons. And they held the moon captive. And there was an archer, a Japanese archer, who thought, I need to rescue the moon. But the problem was, there were plenty of other archers who had failed in their mission to rescue the moon. But this archer was very, very fearless. And he decided that he needed some help. It was not something that he could do by himself. And so he wandered around looking for the perfect, perfect assistant. And do you know who that was? It was a young girl. He asked her, I need your help to help rescue the moon so that we can free it so it floats and rises back up into the sky. And the lovely thing was that this girl was a fearless girl, too. And she said, "Of course, I'm going to help. However, how do you think we're going to get the moon from these dragons who live at the bottom of this great lake?" And the archer said, "I have a plan. You are going to distract them." And the little girl said, "Well, how how on earth am I going to distract them?" And so they hatched a plan. And the little girl, she took an orange from her field and she plucked that orange and she tied a little string around it, and she looped the orange around her neck. And then she headed out to the lake where the dragons lived. Now the dragons, deep below the surface, they looked up and they saw this young girl and they saw the orange around her neck. And they said, "Is that our moon? How has the moon left the lake? That moon is ours and we will not allow anybody else to take it." And so the two dragons began to swirl round and round in a great big wave, higher and higher and higher. And they leapt out of that lake and they started to swirl around the girl trying to find a way to get the moon back. And while they did that, the archer leapt down into the bottom of the lake. He grabbed hold of that moon, he drew it out, and off he went. He carried it higher and higher to the very top of the mountain and then with his bow and arrow. Whoosh! He released the moon back up into the sky. And the little girl, as she remembered this story, she remembered how the girl in the story was then able to take that orange from around her neck and throw it up into the sky where it landed in the lake, and the dragons immediately dived down after it and they never needed to come up again. And the girl could imagine herself right in that story. And as she looked around at these Japanese scrolls and all the other artefacts and exhibits in this particular glass box, she was filled with excitement. But then, her eye was drawn somewhere else. She reached what was probably her favourite glass cabinet because when she looked into this one, it was filled with dolls and toys and all sorts of weird and wonderful things. And she realised that all of these objects had been left by one woman. Her name was Jean Maxwell and she had gathered and collected all of these items ever since she was a little child herself. And then she had donated them to the museum. And as the little girl looked at all the different objects, the invisible stories began to fill her mind. She began to wonder, where did these dolls and toys come from in the first place? She looked around and she saw that there was one little samurai warrior. She saw that there were all kinds of strange animals. There was a little bear who was painting a picture. She saw that there was a little horse. She saw a rag doll of some kind. She saw a loo, somebody had painstakingly created a loo. And she saw dolls that were made of all kinds of strange and unusual materials, too. And as she looked around that little glass cabinet, she began to wonder how these objects came into the possession of Jean Maxwell in the first place. Were they gifted to her? Maybe she found them from gifts from different people who had travelled around the world. Or maybe she had travelled the world herself and collected them. Or maybe it was a mixture of everything. It made her think about all the things that she had in her own house. And where did they come from and what stories they had to tell, too. As she looked around, she began to create her own stories about what might take place in the museum when nobody else was around. She knew that Dolls did not like to be seen, a little bit like witches, I suppose. And she began to imagine that they might sit down at that little dinner table and they might drink little cups of tea together. Maybe, if nobody was watching, they would jump on board that little toy horse and they

would race around the museum floor and then they would settle back in for the evening. She began to think if they were friends at all or if sometimes they had squabbles, just like she and her friends and everybody else. And then they would have to make up again because they lived so close to each other. She began to think of the games that Jean Maxwell might have played with them too. I mean, there was a butterfly toy. There was the Russian dolls who had dolls inside of dolls inside of dolls inside of dolls. And as she began to explore those invisible stories, she began to imagine all the stories that the dolls might have told each other. There was a little toy, there was a little frog and there was a little goat. And how they were battling each other with somebody riding the goat. Who was that? How did that take place? She looked down and she saw the three little dolls who were fast asleep in bed. Now, these dolls were perhaps not the sweetest looking dolls, but surely there was a story there. Who decided to get which bed? Why were they asleep in bed all the time anyway? What made them so tired? She began to think of all the adventures that they might have been having. What kind of things did they get up to? She looked around and she saw a little flute, a tiny little piccolo, and she thought Ooh! Perhaps it's no ordinary instrument. Perhaps whoever plays that 'do do do do do do do' might create some magical tune? And anything could happen. She'd heard of stories where witches used flutes. And in one of those stories, there was one little boy who managed to save an entire village. And how did he manage to do that? He was not able to fall under the spell of the flute because he could not hear it. He was deaf and he was able to save everybody. She looked around and she began to imagine. What about Humpty Dumpty? How was he made? Who painstakingly stitched on all the little buttons? Did Humpty Dumpty actually fall off that wall? And she imagined the story of the little rainbow woman. Now, this little rainbow woman was carrying a goose. Her best friend, the person that she loved more than anybody else in the world. And one day, the little goose, who loved being petted, was going around and quacking and saying hello to everybody else in the glass cabinet. When suddenly, out of nowhere, one of the other dolls,

Mara Menzies [00:18:58] a big doll, a scary doll, happened to cross that little goose. And the goose was terrified. And off it took. And it raced around the glass cabinet, it managed to get out, it began to race around the museum. It got out of the doors of the museum and then it was out in Dumfries going crazy going everywhere. And of course, the little rainbow lady, well, she missed her goose. She was terrified. She was so sad that something might happen to her goose. And so she decided to leave the museum and go off in search of it. And as she exited the building and as she looked around and she tried to find out where her goose had gone, she looked up and she saw that the goose was flying across the sky and she had no choice but to follow. And so she began to spread her wings and she began to fly higher and higher and higher into the sky. But as she did so, all the woollen threads began to come loose. And so there was no longer a little rainbow lady flying across the sky. Instead, it was an actual rainbow. And the rainbow did not just sweep across the sky in a great arch. It flew around in great spirals and swirls as the little rainbow lady searched everywhere for her goose. And as soon as she managed to catch her little goose, she brought her back down to the ground. She began to assemble herself back into her little lady doll form. And then she carried her little goose back through the museum doors, up into the glass cabinet. And then after that adventure, they definitely went and had some sleep. The little girl looked around everywhere and she saw that there was a little tiny nut. And inside that nut there was somebody fast asleep. And it reminded her of all the stories that she had heard about tiny little children who were born to mothers and fathers who perhaps were not able to have children of their own. She searched everywhere and everywhere she looked she found story upon story upon story. And all of these stories filled her imagination, and she felt very, very happy. And when the museum was about to close, well, she thought to herself, there are definitely more stories to be had.

And so she planned to return as quickly as possible in search of more invisible stories. Here we are! Thank you so much to Reading is Magic for helping bring some of these stories to life. And if you are in search of some of those invisible stories, there is no better place to come than right here at Dumfries Museum. I love it and I'm sure you'll love it too.

Lauren Layfield [00:22:01] Oh wasn't that fun? Thank you, Mara, for taking us on a journey to discover the secret museum. And it's really got me thinking, I wonder what secrets are hiding in my local museum? If you want to discover some more brilliant stories this week, stick with us right here on the Reading is Magic Festival – loads of brilliant events coming your way!