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Stepmothers have a tough job. They're compared – often negatively – to biological mummies. They're portrayed as 'wicked' in just about every fairy tale ever written. And many struggle for years trying to build a healthy relationship with their stepchildren.

Things are often worse when there's bitter custody battles and bad breakups involved.

For many stepmothers, it can cause years of anxiety, family tension, resentment and relationship pressures. But rarely do we hear stepmothers speak out about their experience. Until now.

Author J.L Biggs knows all about it. As the stepmother to two children and biological mum to two, J.L spent many years being branded as a 'wicked stepmother'. So, after experiencing firsthand the hardships that come with forming a relationship with her stepchildren, J.L wrote 'Ella', her debut novel. In 'Ella', J.L sought to rewrite Cinderella's wicked and villainous stepmother, and give modern stepmothers a voice. "I wrote this book to encourage myself as well as others who are in difficult family relationships," J.L says. "I was the 'wicked' stepmother for years until recently, when my children suddenly realised I wasn't so wicked."

Here, J.L shares some of her own experiences and challenges as a stepmum, how they influenced both her and her character, 'Ella', and what other stepmothers and stepchildren can learn ...

Can you tell readers a bit about Ella and why you wrote this novel?

"Ella looks at the classic Cinderella fairy tale from the view of the wicked stepmother. Like any parent knows, children see things differently, especially teenagers. I started writing as a way to exercise my brain, but I don't have experience in anything to make a story come to life. I also didn't want to write just another humorous novel. My only qualification is a stepmother and mother who raised two biological children in a stepfamily. My husband suggested writing about my life but that might destroy the fragments of the relationship that had started to repair. We discussed other stepmothers and the most wicked we could think of was Cinderella's. What if Cinderella's stepmother was misunderstood as I had been, was never wicked and all we've done is listen to Cinderella's side? What would her interpretation of events be? What would have happened years later? Writing Ella was very therapeutic, as it forced me to look at both sides from a different perspective."

How did being branded 'wicked' impact you?

"I had always gotten along well with teenagers like my nieces and nephews by giving them respect and reasoning with them like adults. When my husband's children came to visit, though, that didn't work. It was frustrating. I was in a new marriage and desperately wanted everything to go well. I had no experience at all with children who rebelled against everything I said or did. The story they gave to my husband about the way I was toward them was very different from the way I saw it. What I was asking of them was no different to what my children would do. They viewed my children in a similar light to Cinderella's stepsisters – spoilt and protected. They didn't consider that my children had also gone through a divorce and now had a stepfather they had to get used to living with."



"Wicked? Moi? I wear my heart on my sleeve... and keep other people's hearts in a box!"

What were some of the challenges you faced?

"The boy was 14 and the girl was 12. My children were nine and seven. No matter how much I tried, everything I did was wrong. Even asking them to come to the dinner table had to go through my husband – they ignored me if I asked. They threw sandwiches in the bin as they weren't good enough. They would pick on my children over stupid things until the little ones cried. Even now, 21 years later, they do not accept my children as siblings. Finally, I had to put my foot down, so to speak, and my husband supported me. If they were going to come visit, they had to behave properly. My husband went to visit them instead. Afterward, every time we met, they turned their back on me when I tried to speak with them. If they couldn't get away, they wouldn't respond. It was as if I didn't exist. After seven years, I stopped trying and avoided family gatherings completely. It wasn't worth the pain. I didn't want to spoil my husband's visits as he loves his children as well as mine. He shouldn't have to choose."

Why was it so important for you to rewrite the 'wicked' stepmother stereotype?

"There are a lot of blended families in today's society and I felt it was time stepparents were given a fair hearing. Stepparents are given a hard time in fairy tales, even though they have huge obstacles to overcome at the start of a new relationship. I also wanted to show things change over time. Just because they didn't get along when Cinderella was young, what happened after she grew up and got married? After 20 years of being married to their father, my stepchildren finally came to realise I wasn't wicked. Once they were both in stable relationships of their own, I suddenly came into existence again. Through it all, I maintained who I am as a person and focused on the fact I married their father, not them. I felt it was important to show this same thing can happen in other families."



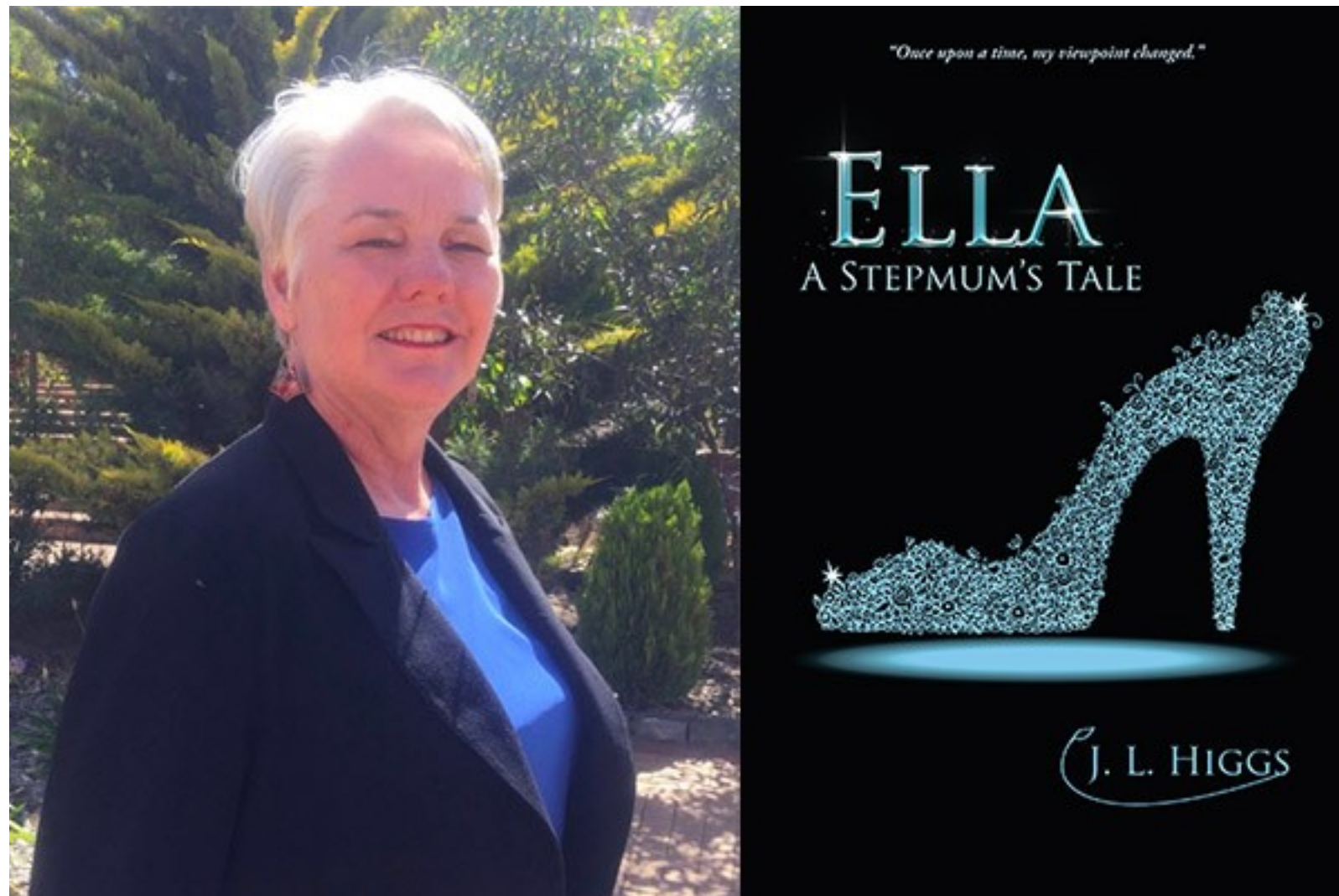
Hey Cindy, if the shoe fits, wear it! Image: Disney Princess (<http://princess.disney.com.au/>)

Who is 'Ella' aimed at? Stepmothers? Children? Teens?

"All family members can gain something from it. I wrote it from the viewpoint of the reporter, Sylvia so anyone looking in on the situation can learn the importance of not judging a situation from first appearances. Parents, whether step or not, can enjoy the humour and revenge the stepmother gets. Teenagers will hopefully see the stepparent is not being wicked just because the way they do things is different. Children love nursery rhymes and fairy tales, so hopefully they will see this as great life lessons as well."

What life lesson does 'Ella' teach children and stepmothers?

"I hope readers will see there are two sides to every story and sometimes even more. By looking at it from the other person's viewpoint, we can learn why they reacted the way they did and maybe even something about ourselves that we need to change. It is also important to realise things change over time. Don't keep people labelled according to the past, or relationships will never mend. Bad experiences happen to everyone at one time or another, but we don't have to remain broken or embittered by them. We need to pull ourselves together and maintain our self-respect."



Author J.L. Higgs and her debut novel, 'Ella'.

ABOUT: Since its inception, the classic tale of Cinderella has portrayed the princess's stepmother as the villain of the story. However, in 'Ella', the debut novel by author [J.L. Higgs](http://www.jlhiggs.com.au/) (<http://www.jlhiggs.com.au/>), readers get an alternate look into the world of this classic fairy tale.

The book opens with Sylvia Stark, celebrity news reporter with ABC News. Stark, tired of mundane celebrity reporting, sets out to learn the truth about Cinderella's 'wicked' stepmother, Charlotte. Readers follow Stark on her journey to uncover the truth about Charlotte, a wicked guardian who turns out to not be so 'wicked' after all.

'Ella' gives readers an inside look at the into the world of Cinderella from the stepmother's point of view. Ella is available at [Balboa Press](http://bookstore.balboapress.com/Products/SKU-001096388/Ella.aspx) (<http://bookstore.balboapress.com/Products/SKU-001096388/Ella.aspx>), [Barnes & Noble](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/ella-j-l-higgs/1124355034?ean=9781504303699) (<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/ella-j-l-higgs/1124355034?ean=9781504303699>), and [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/Ella-Stepmums-J-L-Higgs-ebook/dp/B01KKGR176) (<https://www.amazon.com/Ella-Stepmums-J-L-Higgs-ebook/dp/B01KKGR176>).

[J.L. Higgs](http://www.jlhiggs.com.au/) (<http://www.jlhiggs.com.au/>) was born in Tampa, Fla., where she spent her childhood years before moving to Australia. Higgs currently resides in Werribee, Victoria, with her husband and is currently working on her second book, 'Stepmothers Unite.'

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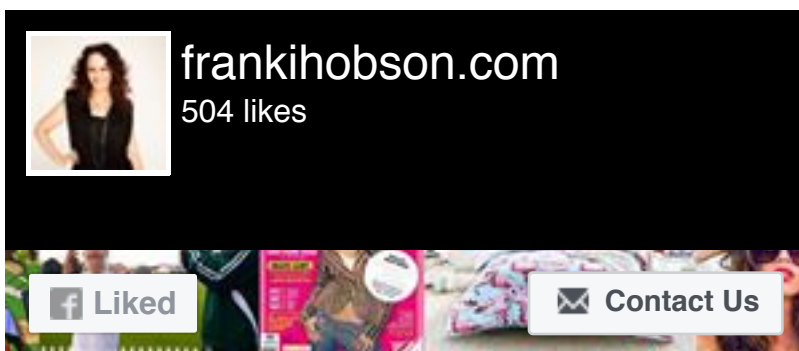
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