Q. Tashi is such a vivid character. What inspired her?

Mal: Well, some of Tashi’s personality comes out of the story, of course. Her kindness and determination and so on. But to be honest, she really springs to life in Juan’s beautiful pictures. When we saw them, it was like meeting her for the first time, even though we recognized her straight away.

Q. The legend of tea-picking monkeys is centuries-old, but many of your readers may not be familiar with it. Tell us a bit about where you learned of it and how you then came to write Cloud Tea Monkeys.

Elspeth: I write a lot of nonfiction, and I came across the story while I was researching for a book about tea. I saw the germ of a sort of fairy tale in it. I didn’t start writing it for quite some time. I let it brew in my head—so to speak. When it had a shape, I talked to Mal about it. Luckily, he liked it.

continued . . .
Q. Tea is one of the key elements of the story. You depict it as a precious commodity and also portray the pleasure that comes from brewing and drinking it. Do you have a great affection for tea in your own life?

Mal: Ah, this is a bit embarrassing. The terrible truth is that neither of us drinks tea. We're strictly coffee people.

Elspeth: It's a shame, because I like all the ritual that goes with tea. And I like teapots and proper cups and saucers and all of that. Stuff Mal and I don't have.

Mal: I suppose we should have done Cloud Coffee Monkeys.

Elspeth: Except that there's no such thing.

Q. Could you tell us what it’s like to write together? How does it differ from writing individually? Will you work on any future writing projects as a team?

Mal: The way we work together is a bit . . . random, I guess. For picture books, it's almost always Elspeth who comes up with the ideas. Then she nags me until I say I like them.

Elspeth: The truth is that we talk about the stories while we walk our dog, Alfie. There's a river walk that's good for stories. This might go on for weeks. Fortunately, Alfie is old and walks slowly.

Mal: And when I can't stand it any more I go up to my room and write a first draft. Then Elspeth reads it, and we have lots of fights . . .

Elspeth: Creative discussions.

Mal: Yeah. And slowly the final version emerges.

Elspeth: We've already written what you might call a companion story for Cloud Tea Monkeys. It's called Night Sky Dragons. And we're working on a third one. Alfie is getting lots of walks.