

## An interview with Sarah Crossan, 26/07/2013

### ***What got you into writing for children?***

It wasn't really a conscious decision. I was a teacher for 10 years and had started to write an adult novel, but it just wasn't working. Then, one day, I got out a notebook, started to write, and it seemed like it was a children's book. Looking back it feels like that was the natural thing to do even though I had never planned to do it because, after being a teacher, children were the people I knew. I wanted to validate their experience.

I think I was a good teacher and one of the reasons for that was that I knew that for the kids sitting in my classroom their English homework wasn't the most important thing in their lives. What was going on between their parents or a fight they'd had with their friends was much more important. I try to recognise what's important to kids. I also try not to make too many assumptions about what I know about children. I think that assuming is a dangerous thing to do as a writer. You've always got to be trying to find out what is important to kids because the older you get the further away you are from their experiences. You really have to tap into your own memories of what it is to be a kid but also make sure you're up to date with what it is to be one now.

### ***What do you do to try to keep that knowledge and insight into what's important to children fresh?***

I haven't been in the classroom in a while but I have done some school events with kids and you do signings and things where you get to talk to children and they tell you which bits of the books matter to them and I get loads of e-mails from children. I also read as much as I can from the genre and that's really important for informing my understanding. I also watch things like *Newsround* and those kinds of programmes and websites just to see what news children are watching at the moment. But I do hope to go back into the classroom again and that is my ultimate goal. I don't want to feel too detached.

### ***Which bits of your novels do you think children find most important or relevant?***

Every kid I speak to is different, but I suppose with *The Weight of Water* it was the bullying aspect. They really engaged with the idea that bullying wasn't all about being physically bullied but about kids using relationships against one another. That idea came to me from reading a book called *Odd Girl Out* which talked about aggression between young girls. At first I thought it was going to be a girl's issue, but it was actually an issue that spoke to both girls and boys. This seems to be the new way to bully in general. You go on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, or whatever it is and bully that way. Even "good" kids do it and because it involves everyone it becomes less about *wanting* to bully and more about not being able to communicate and struggling with how to express feelings. That's part of the problem; we're not really giving young people the tools to communicate with each other.

### ***Obviously you engaged with Odd Girl Out, but what is your favourite work of contemporary children's literature?***

Patrick Ness is phenomenal and *A Monster Calls* is just amazing. I was asked to do an interview and say which book I wish I'd written and that's the book. I also read the whole Carnegie shortlist this year and they were all fantastic. *Maggot Moon* was a deserved winner.

***What about the stuff you read as a child? Which books most influenced you?***

The first book that I remember reading that really affected me was Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*. That was the first book that made me cry and made me think that literature could have an impact on me. I was also weirdly into Shakespeare when I was 13 or 14 because it made me realise that language could affect you without complete understanding and that was amazing.

***What do you think is the most difficult thing about writing for children?***

Writing has its difficulties whoever you're writing for. Just sitting down and doing it and not feeling like what you've written is rubbish compared to what has come before is difficult. I also have to get away from the feeling that my first book [*The Weight of Water*] might be my best book after it got so much acclaim.

In terms of writing for children specifically though, I think probably voice. You've got to be really careful because the voices have to be authentic. A kid just knows when you're doing a number on them and the voice isn't real. You can't be hung up on things like grammar because kids just don't speak that way. You have to use the language, similes, and metaphors that exist in their world and relate to them.

***What do you hope that children take away from the books you write?***

I hope that they feel validated as I've said. I want them to read books that tell them that their experiences are normal and valid and it's OK to feel how they feel. I also want to help them deal with the fact that the adults in their lives aren't necessarily right all the time. Particularly at the age I'm writing for [9-12], the child is coming to understand that their parents are perhaps not invincible and may even have some horrible things in their history; I think that's a really difficult period in a child's life. In the *Weight of Water*, Kasienska really has to face up to who her mum is and the fact that her father has another woman. She has to accept that her parents are people who are going to make mistakes just like she does. That is a difficult thing.

***Do you think there are any issues or topics that are off limits when writing for children?***

No I don't think so; you've just got to be careful how you deal with certain topics. In the book I'm writing at the moment, for example, there's a scene where the girl is at an adult's party and there is a sexual predator there. It's probably very clear to an adult reader what's going on but in the novel she's trying to figure out what's happening and why he's giving her this attention. I think it's important to bring those issues up with kids, but I think it's important that you deal with them correctly.

I think the child also has a very good filter; they'll read a book and just not see certain things. I once taught a book called *Al Capone Does My Shirts* and there's a scene where the main boy turns up at Alcatraz to find that his autistic sister has befriended a prison mate and is terrified when he finds them alone together. As an adult reader you know why but so many kids in my year seven class had no idea what was going on. Many didn't even ask any questions about the scene. They filtered to the point that even though the boy reacts to the prisoner and wants to beat him up they still didn't register the events. Then again, there was one kid who put his hand up and said "is he afraid in case his sister will get raped?" But then another kid's like "what?" and another "what does rape mean?" You've got such

a mix in a class; from a kid who's very astute and savvy on those things to one who doesn't even read or notice the scene. So I think, no, there's no off limit topics, but you've got to be very careful.

Although...it's a really difficult question because of course there are things I'm never going to write...I'm going to change my mind actually. Maybe there *are* things you don't include. If you think about *50 Shades of Grey* the subject matter of that is never going to be the subject matter of a children's book because it's just not appropriate and it's just not appealing to a child...but...I don't know the answer to this question actually. I don't think I've ever been asked it before.

***Do you expect adults to be reading your novels as well as children? Is any of your writing aimed at a dual audience?***

I think I mainly write for myself, but it also depends on the book. *The Weight of Water* was a personal project and was probably a book for me. I knew that ultimately it would be mainly for child readers but I was hoping not to exclude adults. The good response from both has been great and I like to think that it's a book that children and adults can talk about together. I don't aim for cross-over appeal but I think when I write a book for me there will be more because it's for children but appeals to me.

With *Breathe* on the other hand, I was very aware that I was writing specifically for young people. I do think there can be a problem with the way "young adult" literature is received though. There is a crossover between the older child who's called the "young adult" by the market and the actual "young adult". A lot of "young adults" in their twenties are reading these novels thinking it's for them when it's not and their critical responses are coloured by this.

***Do you feel you took anything from your Philosophy and Literature degree that has helped you as a writer or has stuck with you through life?***

Doing a philosophy degree makes you question every aspect of life and knowledge and it makes you very good at spotting when people are talking rubbish. It also made me read very important literature that I never would have read. For example, Augustine's *Confessions*; when are you ever going to read that if not on your degree? It made me think and analyse on a very deep level and read widely. I think that when you study philosophy you have a different way of looking at the world and I find it very interesting that so many writers have studied philosophy. I don't think it's a coincidence.

***What's next for you?***

*Resist* will be out soon – the sequel to *Breathe*. I'm also writing a middle-grade [9-12] prose novel at the moment, and after that I'm hoping to write a young adult verse novel – the subject matter of which is top secret!