

## **Q&A with Sanjida Kay, author of *Bone by Bone***

### **What is your favourite genre to read?**

Psychological thrillers! Although I do like the odd classic and work of literary fiction too!

### **Who is the biggest influence on your writing?**

The writer that has most influenced me is Emily Brontë and, in particular, her novel, *Wuthering Heights*. I'm haunted by the relationship between Heathcliff, Cathy and Edgar Linton; the Gothic savage beauty of the moors and the undercurrents of class, racism and misogyny.

Margaret Atwood is another great influence because of the way she weaves science and politics into her work. I prefer her later books, *Oryx and Crake* and *Year of the Flood*, for their creativity, environmental themes and because her writing has a lightness of touch it lacked when she was younger. Cormac McCarthy is one of my favourite novelists; he writes about the landscape and nature in such an elemental way, as if human nature were allied to it. And Henry James, especially *The Golden Bowl*, for his understanding and subtle portrayal of how people think about what others are thinking about them.

### **What inspired you to write *Bone by Bone*?**

Just after I had my own daughter, I used to take her out in the buggy to get her to go to sleep. I felt incredibly vulnerable - recovering from the birth, on my own and now responsible for a tiny, fragile newborn.

I started to imagine a character who has a much older daughter than mine, but feels vulnerable, isolated, lacking in confidence all the time. And I imagined what would happen if that person found out that her daughter was being bullied. She would want to protect her child with all her heart - like any parent - but she might not have the resources - particularly if there's nothing the bully won't do to her child.

### **What were some of the challenges you faced whilst writing this novel?**

It's incredibly upsetting to write about bullying, both from the point of view of a parent and a child. Every time I read through a draft of my novel, I would cry. From a technical perspective, it was challenging to put myself in the head of a nine-year-old, especially as it's a long time since I was nine!

### **You're Bristol-based – how does the city inspire your work?**

I've always been inspired by landscape and the natural world and it features heavily in my fiction. When I came to write *Bone by Bone*, I thought I'd aim for a gritty urban landscape, graffiti-ridden and litter-strewn, in Bristol, where I live.

What actually happened was that I ended up placing most of the action in a tiny urban nature reserve!

*The lines began to sing, a shrill, electric song, and then the cacophony of the train roared out of the darkness. The carriages were almost empty and painfully bright as they hurtled along the tracks to the heart of the city. In the fleeting light she saw the meadow, dotted with stunted hawthorns, their twisted limbs dense with red berries, and then a shape: achingly familiar, child-sized, shockingly still.*

*Bone by Bone* is set in a mad mixture of two areas in Bristol: Montpelier and St Werburghs. For those who know Bristol intimately, it'll be obvious that some of my descriptions are realistic but that I've shunted whole sections of the landscape around to make my plot work!

**Do you feel that multiculturalism is sufficiently represented in the current literary climate?**

I think it's lacking. I'm mixed race and I rarely see my experience portrayed in the books I'm reading. In psychological thrillers, which are very middle-class, the majority of authors and characters within them are white. I include racial diversity and prejudice in my novels as standard - rather than writing stories that are solely about race.

**It's rare for a book concerning childhood bullying that places the parent's perspective at the forefront of the narrative. Did you feel it was important to represent Laura's point of view?**

It's hard for any parent to see their child being hurt, whether it's because they're picked on at school or they fall and hurt their knee. On the one hand, we want to protect our children, and on the other, we want them to grow in courage, independence and confidence so they can survive the bumps and bruises the world throws at them. It's a difficult balancing act, for parents and children.

**Do you feel that the public is suitably aware of the continual issue of bullying? Do you think that children are provided with adequate support?**

I'm delighted to announce that I'm donating a percentage of the profits from my thriller, *Bone by Bone*, to the anti-bullying charity, *Kidscape*. The *NSPCC* says that almost half of all children are bullied. I don't think parents are aware the figures are so high - nor do most people know what to do about cyber-bullying, which is increasing. *Kidscape* has some fantastic resources for schools, carers, parents, children and young people.

**How would you describe a typical working day?**

I start my writing day by exercising - writing is such a sedentary job, I need a bit of a buzz and some movement before I begin! Then I have a strong coffee and start! I aim to write at least 1,000 words a day during the writing period. I have set hours for writing - I love it but I treat it like a job. I spend at least three days a week working on my novels. Usually I write in my office, which is lovely. It's all white with botanical prints and an oak desk. It looks out over the allotments that feature in *Bone by Bone*. I need peace and serenity to help me write. Sometimes I'll go to a cafe and write too - if they do good coffee and cake! It's a welcome contrast to the monastic stillness of my office. If I get stuck, I grit my teeth and force myself to sit in front of my computer screen. When I need to think big or wrangle with a knotty plot problem, I'll go for a long walk.

## What are some of your favourite contemporary thrillers?

*Gone Girl* has an incredible plot, the characters are chillingly Machiavellian and the prose is pitch-perfect for this kind of thriller. Flynn's previous novel, *Sharp Objects*, doesn't have such a rollercoaster plot, but it's much edgier with a searing twist; perfect Southern gothic-noir. I loved Peter Swanson's *The Kind Worth Killing*, Maggie Mitchell's *Pretty Is* and *The Black-Eyed Susans* by Julia Heaberlin. The prose in Jane Shemilt's, *Daughter* and *The Drowning Lesson* is beautiful. On my bedside table is Holly Seddon's *Try not to Breathe*.