

**Z**oologist, broadcaster, author and Bristolian Sanjida Kay – aka Dr Sanjida O’Connell – has a PhD on chimpanzees (“useful as I have a small child,” she says) and has published eight books, ranging from studies into mindreading to her latest novel, deliciously unsettling psychological thriller *Bone by Bone*, tipped by the *Sunday Express* as one of ‘the best reads in 2016’. We’d be treating ourselves to a prosecco at The Lido, too, if we were her. . .

**So Sanjida, what was the impetus behind your new novel, *Bone by Bone*?**

Just after I had my 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 and lacking in confidence all the time. What would happen if she finds out that her daughter is 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.

**Why the Bristol setting? What landmarks can readers expect to come across?**

I spent quite a long time walking round the streets of Bristol getting my daughter to sleep and thinking about my story, so it made sense to set it somewhere I knew so well.

It’s a mash-up of St Werburghs and Montpelier – recognisable, but slightly re-jigged! I aimed to write a gritty, urban thriller, but actually, most of the (terrifying) action takes place in Narrowways, a tiny nature reserve in St Werburghs. In real life, I frequently walk through the reserve, not feeling frightened at all, hoping to catch a glimpse of the wildlife there, from pipistrelles to foxes; wild flowers such as bush vetch and bird’s foot trefoil abound and dunnocks scuttle about in the old orchard. In summer, you see butterflies, such as the marbled white and clouded silver – pretty good going when we’re a stone’s throw away from Tesco Express!

**Have you ever experienced bullying yourself?**

I went to 10 different schools and I was bullied at nine of them. Most people won’t have had such a peripatetic childhood but, sadly, bullying is incredibly common. The NSPCC says more than half of our children are bullied at some point, and the incidence of cyber-bullying is even higher and rising steeply. As a result, I’m donating a percentage of any profits I make from the sale of *Bone by Bone* to Kidscape, an anti-bullying charity.



PHOTO BY BARBARA EVRIPIDOU

# SANJIDA KAY

The Bristol author and animal expert tells us about her debut psychological thriller, and the joys of St Werburghs

**Where do you like to write?**

I’m lucky enough to have my own office in our house, but in practice my office also doubles as the laundry room (it can get a bit humid!), spare bedroom (my mum often comes to stay to help look after my daughter during the school holidays) and imaginary world. The imaginary world is a sofa (the perfect place to curl up and proof-read) but most of the time it doubles as a train/plane/continent when my daughter is in here with me.

I often go to cafés to work too, once in a while, to escape from the monastic stillness of my office and fling myself into the real world, and partly because there’s never enough cake in the house. I like working in the Boston Tea Party on Cheltenham Road as the ambience and the coffee are so good.

**What’s your favourite place in Bristol for a special meal out?**

The River Station. It’s so calm there, being by the water and watching the swans float past, and the food is outstanding.

**What’s your local, and what are you having?**

It’s not local but I do walk there – The Lido! And while I watch all those people power-swimming, it would be rude not to have a glass or two of prosecco.

**What makes you want to get up on a soapbox?**

Damage to our planet. What the \*&%@ are we going to do when we have no bees? We will miss tigers and elephants, but without the mini beasts, obscure birds and tiny reptiles, our ecosystems will spin into chaos. In fact, here I am on my soapbox for the BBC: [www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zcmw6fr](http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zcmw6fr)

**Dream dinner party guests?**

I’d invite Charles Darwin so we could talk about God and evolution; Emily Brontë, so I could quiz her on the real meaning of *Wuthering Heights* and how she managed to pull off a masterpiece before she was 30; Neil Cross, so I can bend his mind on how he wrote the screenplay for *Luther*; we’d have a live, after-dinner performance by The Killers and Brandon Flowers can tell us what it’s like to be a rock god Mormon. And then, because those guys are all so darn serious, we’d need a comedian, maybe Eddie Izzard or Jeremy Hardy.

**What’s your most regrettable habit?**

Don’t ask my husband this one... I get annoyed with myself when I eat sugar. I wrote a book about it (*Sugar: The Grass that Changed the World*) so I know how bad it is for you. Still, I manage to eat chocolate and cake when I think no one is looking.

**Surprise us. . .**

I was the first person to devise a test to show that chimpanzees can work out what they think other chimps might be thinking. This ability is called theory of mind, and we acquire it when we’re five years old. Which reminds me, I need to retest my daughter... **BL**



***Bone by Bone* (Corvus), £12.99, is out now; [www.sanjida.co.uk](http://www.sanjida.co.uk)**