

Sanjida Kay in conversation about *The Stolen Child*

Tell us what *The Stolen Child* is about.

The *Stolen Child* is about a couple, Zoe and Ollie, who long for a baby but are unable to have one. They adopt a child from birth, a little girl called Evie. A few years later they have their own child, a boy called Ben.

The story begins when Ben is two and Evie is seven. Evie's starting to realise that she's different from the rest of her family, and beginning to understand what it means to be adopted.

One day she receives a card addressed to *My Daughter*. Inside it says:

Seven years ago, you were stolen from me.

Now I'm coming to get you back.

Love, your Daddy.

How did you come up with the idea for *The Stolen Child*?

A friend of a friend wanted to adopt a child from birth and she'd heard of a woman who was being forced to give up her baby because she was a drug addict.

I thought, what if that child was adopted and went to a lovely home, but then the father finds out what has happened and he wants his child back? What lengths would he go to find the daughter he believed had been stolen from him? Hmm, guess that's the thriller writer in me, turning a happy story into something darker!

What inspired you to write *The Stolen Child*?

The Stolen Child is set on Ilkley moor. From the age of eight, I grew up living on the edge of the moor and it exerted a powerful hold over me. I was captivated by that wilderness - I'd wander

over it by myself. Yeah, I know, different times! Right next to Ilkley, you can find ancient Neolithic sites, such as a stone circle, and stones with strange markings on that could have been used for blood sacrifices.

It's also Brontë country - Haworth moor is nearby, where the sisters grew up. As a teenager I loved *Wuthering Heights*, and I wanted to, in some way, pay homage to such a wonderful, dark and savage story, which has inspired me throughout my life.

My story, though, is really about love, the love that parents have for their children.

What was the inspiration for the title?

The title for my previous novel, *Bone by Bone*, is from an Emily Dickinson poem, which is about pain. *The Stolen Child* comes from a poem by WB Yeats. I'm half Irish and I grew up reading Irish poetry and folklore. The poem is based on an Irish folk story about a child who falls asleep under a rowan tree. When he wakes up, the fairies - or little people - have spirited him away. They

eventually release him, and he's still a child, thanks to their dark magic, but no one he knows is still alive.

I wanted to capture some of the atmosphere of that fairy story in a modern thriller.

What sort of research did you carry out for *The Stolen Child*?

The main areas I spent time researching were adoption, police protocol when children go missing, and how to poison a person. I'm surprised that MI5 are not on my doorstep right now!

(Warning - slight spoiler. Ed.) I tried to look at adoption from every angle that I could - the legalities of adopting a child, how to trace an adopted child and what it feels like for both the child and the parents. I'm lucky enough to have a good friend, Paul Whitehouse, who helps me with the police procedure in my novels. As for the poisoning, I had long discussions with an ex-science journalist friend, David Cohen. David has retrained as a doctor, so he brought both the rigour of his New Scientist days and his medical expertise to my story. Although it must have been a

worrying for the people eavesdropping on our initial conversation in a cafe!

This is your second thriller. What sort of response did you receive to your previous novel, *Bone by Bone*?

I think *Bone by Bone* really touched a chord in some people because of its realistic depiction about what it's like to be bullied and what it feels like to have a child who's being bullied. I received some harrowing messages from parents and people who'd been bullied as kids.

The book was also made into an audio book for Audible, narrated by a friend of mine, Gillian Burke; longlisted for the CWA Steel Dagger award, nominated as a must-read by the *Sunday Express* and listed by the *Guardian* as one of the best thrillers of 2016.

Do you have plans to write another book? If so, what will it be about?

I'm currently writing my third Sanjida Kay thriller for Corvus Books. It's called *The Perfect Family*. It's about a mother and her teenage daughter. The daughter, Stella, starts to suspect her mum has a secret. When she finds out what it is, it's much worse than she could ever have imagined... So far I'm finding it really therapeutic to write as an angry fourteen year old.

If you could choose a perfect place in which to write, where would that be?

I love my office. It's a beautiful white space with all the essentials: a huge oak desk, books, a sofa, scented candles, floral prints on the walls and coffee! But I'd be very happy to try out the Maldives!

What tip would you give to an aspiring writer?

1. Write. Every day. No one says they can be a virtuoso pianist when they can string two chords together. Writing, like everything else worthwhile, takes practise.

2. Think carefully about kind of writing you want to do. Being is a novelist is the literary equivalent of an ultramarathon runner. If you're more of a sprinter, perhaps Flash Fiction would be your thing.
3. Edit. As Ernest Hemingway said, 'The only kind of writing is rewriting.'
4. Read. Anything. Everything.