

Sourcing Ketchup Clouds with

Annabel Pitcher

There is an element of a fairy tale to Annabel Pitcher's emergence as an acclaimed, published author. The original idea for her first novel, *My Sister Lives on the Mantlepiece*, came to her whilst travelling in Ecuador and in her own words triggered the story like a chain reaction. Once being taken up almost immediately by an agent there followed a bidding war for the publishing rights, and a tremendous reception upon publication. It has since won two awards and numerous nominations including making the Carnegie shortlist.

We met for a snatched lunch on a wintry day in Covent Garden just prior to the publication of her second novel, *Ketchup Clouds*. Annabel was following a busy schedule which included a photo shoot with *The Independent* and an interview with *The Guardian*, reflecting the level of anticipation for her new novel. Refreshingly down to earth and approachable, Annabel readily acknowledges she was quite lucky how quickly things had transpired. "*Mantlepiece* was the first thing I'd written in its entirety. I'd started several novels and like most writers wrote three or four chapters and then thought, oh it's not the right idea, but with *Mantlepiece* it was completely different I just started and I couldn't stop."

The story is narrated by ten-year-old Jamie who five years previously lost one of his elder twin sisters in the 7/11 terrorist attack in London. His dad is unable to move on with his life whereas Jamie can hardly remember his sister. The novel ranges over a number of themes including aspects of grief, alcoholism and racism. The decision to make the narrative Jamie's account of events, rather than his other sister's, was never an issue.

"When I started writing, I wondered if I should write it from a girl's perspective, but the first thing I imagined was the boy. I watched a film about 7/11 during which a woman was interviewed who'd lost her daughter. She was clutching a locket containing her daughter's remains and explaining how what had happened had impacted on the rest of her life. In the background of the shot there was her other daughter and I thought, how do you feel hearing your Mum talk about the dead girl? I wonder if you feel jealous, resentful. You can't show any of those things, you have to be supportive. I went to bed thinking about it, and I saw a little ginger haired boy and this item on a mantlepiece that he hates and is jealous of. Once I'd seen him, I really had to write about him."



The voice of Jamie is memorable for its honesty and authenticity, as is the voice of Zoe, the narrator of *Ketchup Clouds*. Writing idiolect is a skill that comes naturally to Annabel, partly perhaps from her observations as a teacher.

"I find it easy to capture different ways of speaking. Once I've got a passage I'll say it out loud and anything that jars I'll take out. Whereas I have to work hard at the location; I sometimes forget to write about where characters are. I find it difficult to create a world or a place."

Growing up in Yorkshire, Annabel had an idea that she wanted to be a writer, along with other career aspirations to be an actress and a spy! She was always drawn to pen and paper and wrote angst ridden diaries as well as experimenting with plays and poetry. In her early teenage years she read Judy Blume and got hooked on the *Making Out* titles "a horrendous series about a group of kids on an island in America. They all fell in love and broke up." Her mother, who was an English teacher, encouraged her to read more widely. Annabel went on to graduate from Oxford with an English Literature degree and then worked as a script writer before teaching in a secondary school. Becoming a children's author was not a deliberate choice. "I really loved

young adult fiction. I admired authors like David Almond and Meg Rosoff. I suppose, unintentionally, I was thinking about becoming a children's author but I wasn't writing for anyone really. I never thought about whether it was marketable or any of those commercial things. The feedback I got from the first agent I approached said it was commercially disastrous because you can't write about terrorism in a kid's book."

Ketchup Clouds contains similarly dark and gritty subject matter. Written as a series of letters to a prisoner on death row, 15 year old Zoe unburdens her guilty secrets concerning her relationship with two brothers which has brought about the untimely death of one of them. Annabel had personal experience of writing letters to someone serving a sentence on death row as part of an Amnesty International organised campaign, but deciding how Zoe's story should unfold presented her with a challenge. "The thing that was hard was the style. I knew the plot, the theme, the characters, these elements didn't change, but what did was *how* I wrote it. I experimented with endless things... I considered writing it as diaries. At one point I had an old woman looking back."

Annabel felt keenly the pressures of what might be called "second album syndrome". She was anxious for *Ketchup Clouds* not to be a crushing disappointment and found the more "Mantlepiece" gained critical attention the more the second book seemed to be inferior. "I struggled to make it perfect and I had to realise that it's never going to be perfect. I kept asking for more time so it was a bit stressful... Whatever happens now to the book I feel proud of the effort that went into it. I feel at peace with it as it came out how I wanted it to, and I learned so much."

She needn't have worried; *Ketchup Clouds* is a remarkable achievement. Insightful in its exploration of the intensity of young love and the turmoil of carrying immense guilt, it deftly blends a suspenseful narrative with a convincing, vivid central character. Annabel didn't initially want to add the element of suspense because "it wasn't about that", and in her early draft disclosed the identity of who dies in the opening letter. "My editor thought it would be interesting if we left revealing that until the end. I'm glad that we did."

Some of the decisions made by Zoe's character are heartbreakingly difficult and wrong, causing the reader to feel tremendous sympathy towards her. Drawing on her own memories and her experiences as a teacher, Annabel is mindful of the situations that teenagers get into when "you're not mature enough to handle your own life, but you want to be independent, and you end up out of your depth." However, Zoe's story never becomes

sentimental and indeed, like the first novel, contains some very funny moments. Readers can't fail to be drawn to the character of Dot, Zoe's deaf younger sister. She shows a softer side to Zoe whilst also bringing much lightness and humour to the tale. Getting the balance between "light and shade" is something Annabel is keenly aware of. "It's important in a dark novel to have moments of airiness... I see writing books almost like writing for an orchestra. You've got many different moods and sounds. I try and judge the music and the tone of it. I ask myself "Is this chapter sad does it need something else?" If there are too many heavy chapters together I know I need to put something in that's a bit different so I try and think of it before that happens."

An interesting addition to *Ketchup Clouds* is a series of hand drawn pictures which Annabel explains tail off towards the end of the novel to reflect the change in mood and pace of Zoe's letters as the deadline for the prisoner approaches, and she has to speed up her writing.

Ketchup Clouds is ultimately an uplifting and life affirming tale. Although, as in her first novel, the story surrounds a death, Annabel is clear her novels are not primarily occupied with this theme. "The first book I don't even think of as being about death, it's about the aftermath. *Ketchup Clouds* is about guilt, it's not about grief. The main character has done something wrong and I wanted it to be the worst possible thing wrong. It's a novel about being stuck more than anything – Zoe is stuck with her guilt, her mother is stuck with the guilt of what happened to her daughter and Aaron's (Zoe's boyfriend) family is stuck. The criminal will never be unstuck but Zoe hopes that in death he will be released. And that's why I wanted the imagery of the birds taking off."

Her third novel isn't going to have a death in it, and will be narrated in the third person. She assures me it's going well. A busy year lies ahead promoting *Ketchup Clouds* and some opportunities for Annabel to engage with her young readers. She ponders for a moment on this interaction between a writer and the reader. "As a writer you do half the work and the other half happens with the reader. You put your novel out there and it only comes alive when someone reads it, and then they own it and make it real."

The vivid and truthful nature of her writing ensures Annabel will continue to connect with her readers in a satisfying way for years to come.

Elaine Chant



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