



Sarah Mussi interview

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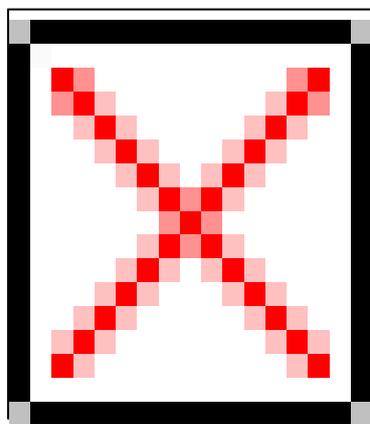
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Sarah Mussi talks to Anne Joseph about her new book **Angel Dust**

Sarah Mussi talks to Anne Joseph about her new book **Angel Dust**, launch title for new publisher **Hot Key Books**, and how a trip from New Cross to Lewisham led her to Paradise!

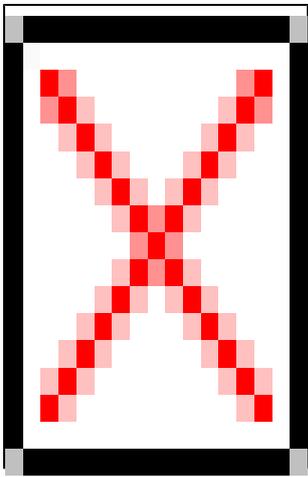


‘I wanted to raise questions, I didn’t want to answer them,’ explains Sarah Mussi,

referring to her third young adult novel **Angel Dust**, an urban paranormal love story. The story focuses on Serafina, an Angel of Death, who is tasked with collecting the soul of teenage gangster, Marcus Montague and take him to Hell. However, she falls in love and not only saves his life, she chooses to save his soul. Her ensuing journey takes her to places and forces her to make critical decisions that previously she had never thought possible.

The first published title on **Hot Key Books** launch list, **Angel Dust** presents major themes: religion, justice, love, morality and free will but Mussi is clear that she is not preaching to her readers. ‘I suppose the idea just came to me all of a sudden,’ she says, sitting in her publisher’s slick Clerkenwell office that is fittingly housed in the building of a former printer. A giant sized **Angel Dust** book cover looks down on us from the conference room wall.

The premise for the story began when Mussi was sitting in stationary traffic in New Cross on her way to work [she is an English teacher in a community school in Lewisham]. It is a route - from Brixton, through Peckham and New Cross - where hold-ups, yellow incident boards and police are not an uncommon sight she says, ‘You can sense tension and you know you’re coming into an area of anxiety.’ Her thought processes wandered from noticing that there was no church in New Cross to realising that the area must have been a crossing place for the Thames. ‘The idea of churches, bridges, crossing places and crosses all came together.’ She asked herself, ‘What would it be like if an angel stepped out into this crossing place and saw people standing around? And felt that tension in the air; that sort of palpitation of something about to happen.’ This initial concept then became a series of ‘what ifs.’ Why would an angel be there, would she have a mission and what would her mission be in somewhere like Peckham/New Cross? Eventually Mussi had her answer: a yellow incident board. There had been a shooting. ‘I thought, well, that’s what she’s come for.’



The book steps into the dark world of gang culture and the reader gains some sense of the overwhelming responsibilities, challenges and vulnerability that engulf it. Although Mussi admits that she has not had first hand experience of gangs, she says that she has been an observer, having raised her children in Brixton. 'On the street that I live on there have been children who've become involved with gangs and ended up in prison or dead.' Additionally, her school has a number of interventions for students who are falling into trouble or becoming vulnerable on the streets. She believes that the picture of gang culture she describes in the book 'is how it is.'

Marcus's surname, Montague, is no coincidence. Mussi says that not only did she want that slightly classical touch - 'Montague is definitely pinched from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet' - but she liked the alliteration of it too. Moreover, at the heart of **Angel Dust** lies a tragic love story. 'I wanted to write a story that was a metaphor for first love,' says Mussi. She explains that much of the book was written when her daughter had moved back home after a broken up relationship and she observed how 'love takes somebody who is really self-possessed and calm, in charge of their life and knows their role and literally rips them down from on high (which is where Serafina was, in Heaven) and tears the wings of fantasy, hope and desire off them.' She wanted Serafina to reflect this process. In fact, Serafina realises that she was trapped from the moment she meets Marcus. Each decision the angel makes creates a non-stop domino effect that eventually results in her 'crossing over' to a place of no return. Her ability to see logic and clarity has been lost.

Both protagonists get caught up between what is right and wrong, so is **Angel Dust** a morality tale? Mussi doesn't believe so, 'in the sense that it's a polemic that I'm struggling to convince a reader of any particular case that I make?' No.'

Although there is quite a strong religious element to the novel, Mussi says that she does not follow any orthodox path or any particular traditional religion. Instead she describes herself as spiritual and, 'I have a belief that there must be something beyond the everyday but I wouldn't like to say what that was.'

Perhaps Mussi possesses a little of Serafina's angelic energy considering that her writing schedule can run from 4am until 7am, during term time. As well as balancing her teaching and writing roles, she is chair of **Children's Writers and Illustrators in South London (CWISL)**.

Her depiction of Serafina's heavenly world is drawn from other references. 'I've tried to locate it completely within what already exists in the body literature that we have.' She carried out a considerable amount of research into the Bible and it was 'a purposeful choice to make it a Christian Heaven. I didn't want to start going down the road of 'what would an Islamic heaven look like?' In my imagination that exists on the next cloud!'

Mussi downloaded Milton's **Paradise Lost** onto her iPod and listened to it for inspiration while walking. Sources were sought from film too such as the big staircase in **A Matter of Life and Death**. She says she 'pinched and borrowed' whilst managing to place these notions within the traditional framework of her novel.

Conversation turns to the lack of black male protagonists in young adult literature. Why this is, Mussi is unsure but 'I can say that it's not because there aren't black readers out there.' She suggests that it might be a question worth asking the booksellers.

Mussi says that one of the most interesting parts of writing the book was trying to address whether free will exists, and again, it was a subject that she approached by undergoing significant research. At one point in the story Serafina poses, 'Isn't it just a choice of the lesser evil?'. Both main characters grapple with the complexities of the argument but Mussi is acutely aware that it is a debate that many young people might not be interested in although, 'I think they are interested in free will when they want to have their own way!' she concludes, laughing.

Angel Dust is published by Hot Key Books, August 2012

Anne Joseph is a freelance arts journalist and feature writer.

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