



ANNABEL PITCHER'S NEW NOVEL KETCHUP CLOUDS

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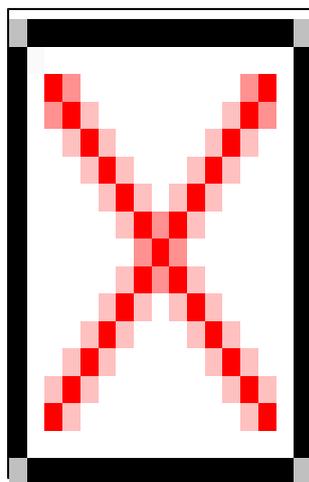
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Annabel Pitcher was one of last year's biggest breakthroughs in children's publishing. Laura Fraine talks to her about her new book **Ketchup Clouds**

Annabel Pitcher was one of last year's biggest breakthroughs in children's publishing. Her debut novel, **My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece**, was published by Orion in 2011. In 2012, she received many accolades, including the prestigious Branford Boase Award and a Royal Society of Authors' Betty Trask Award, as well as being short-listed for 24 other prizes including the CILIP Carnegie Medal. She also completed her second book, **Ketchup Clouds**, which is published today, 3rd January 2013. Laura Fraine talked to her for **Books for Keeps**.



Ketchup Clouds tells the story of Zoe, an ordinary teenage girl who has a dark and terrible secret. Unable to confide in her friends or family, she begins to write letters to a murderer on death row - someone who is sure to know all about secrets, betrayal and guilt; a sympathetic ear. Through these letters, Zoe writes her story.

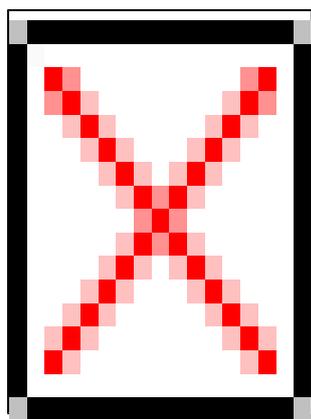
This is a quite different book from **My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece**, the story of a young boy whose sister died in a terrorist attack, and whose family falls apart as a result. For one thing, **Mantelpiece** has a universal quality which makes it as appealing to adults as to children and the stuff of school curriculum for years to come. An important difference is that where its protagonist Jamie is a victim of his experience, **Ketchup Clouds**? Zoe is the author of hers. It isn't only that Zoe is older (aged fifteen) but also that **Ketchup Clouds** is a book of first love, drunken parties, teenage awkwardness, emerging sexuality and regrettable decisions. As it is, I read the book in one greedy sitting. But I did so in part for my teen self, who would have lapped it up, crying for the girl whose life is so accurately depicted and whose blossoming romance is both the stuff of dreams and of nightmares. This is teen fiction of the best quality.

The writing still displays the blend of almost unbearable sadness undercut by a light and intelligent comedy, which may become Annabel Pitcher's trademark. 'I think my natural instinct is to write more slapstick, self-deprecating humour,' says Annabel, 'but I think you need to have that balance.' The story is cleverly told, almost as a murder mystery, in a

way which keeps the reader guessing until the end. Most impressive is the character of Zoe, who is such a naturally credible character it's hard to believe she's a work of fiction.

But perhaps in that studiously woven plot, it is possible to read that the author found writing her second novel a very different experience to her first. A graduate of Oxford University and a one-time television researcher, Pitcher had retrained as a teacher and was on a year-long honeymoon, when the idea for **My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece** came to her fully-formed one night. She began to write the story in notebooks as she and her husband travelled South America. 'I did little bits here and there. I wrote whenever I felt like it, and whenever I didn't feel like it or I was struggling I tossed it to one side for three or four days.'

While the writing came easily, she had only ever flirted with the idea of getting published. 'Obviously I'd looked into what it took to be a published author and I thought the odds were totally stacked against me. It was like aiming to be a football player for Manchester United – that's how ridiculous it felt as an ambition. I never even told my friends I was writing a book, because I felt like it sounded pretentious or no one would take me seriously.'



To her utmost surprise, getting a book deal was not the impossible hurdle she had expected.

She was picked up by the second agent she contacted and within weeks there was a bidding war in several countries. Her UK publisher, Orion, signed her up for an initial two books, and later contracted for books three and four. For **My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece**, the journey into the outside world began – but the author returned to her desk and struggled to write her contracted second book.

'The second book was much, much harder book to write,' she tells me. 'I was so stressed about it that everything I wrote just felt awful. It wasn't that I had writer's block – I was doing a lot of writing – but knowing that it would be published and that I had a deadline made me feel under pressure.' She's back with the football analogies, comparing the second book to footballers in a penalty shoot-out: 'tapping the ball into the net is this thing which they've always done and which they can do easily, but as soon as there is pressure it feels really difficult. That's exactly how it felt. You over-think it and worry. Writing had always come very naturally and it suddenly felt very hard, which I wasn't used to.'

Where **My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece** had seemed to practically write itself, **Ketchup Clouds** had to be carefully constructed?. 'My initial ideas were thematic – I knew I wanted to write a love story and a story about secrets and betrayal, but I had to invent the characters and work out how to tell their story.' Pitcher wrote the book several times in different ways, 'always the same characters, always the same plot, but just experimenting,' she says. 'I love playing with language and voice and structure. I'm quite happy to do it twenty times, because every time I do it there's a different slant which changes the tone slightly. The other thing is, I'm a very new writer. I haven't been doing this for years at all. The first book I wrote was published, so I suppose I was finding my feet and doing a lot of learning while trying to write the second book.'

If writing **Ketchup Clouds** seems to have been clouded by inner doubt, she admits: 'It was a lovely problem to have. *Oh my first book has done so well, there's pressure on my second. Getting published was such a huge ambition that you kind of imagine life would be perfect afterwards, but writing is job and there are good bits and bad bits about it. I wouldn't change a thing really. It is a real privilege to be in this position.*'

And hopefully those doubts will vanish on publication. **Ketchup Clouds** is an accomplished novel, but it's also one to

make this adult wish she were young again, on the cusp of those adventures in love which Pitcher makes so vivid and so real. Never mind the school set texts. This is a book to devour under the duvet and to pass on to friends afterwards.

[Ketchup Clouds](#) [3] is published in hardback by Indigo 9781780620305, price £9.99

[My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece](#) [4] is available in paperback from Indigo 9781780620299, price £6.99.

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