



Authorgraph 204: Keren David

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[Damian Kelleher](#) [1]

[204](#) [2]

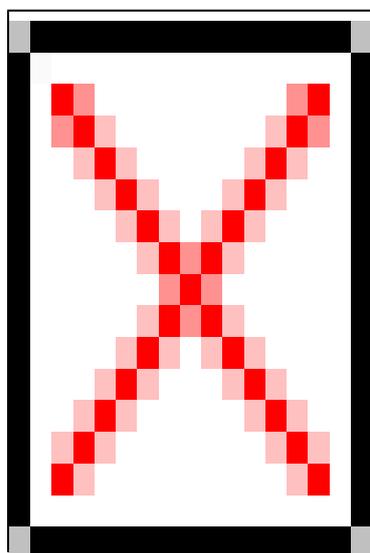
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Authorgraph 204: Keren David interviewed by Damian Kelleher

She leaves Kindles and notebooks in cafés, but there's nothing ditsy about Keren David and her cutting edge YA fiction. Damian Kelleher reports



Things are starting to move pretty fast in the world of Keren David. The north London author is publishing her fifth young adult novel, **Salvage** – pretty impressive when you consider that her first, the much lauded **When I was Joe**, was only published in 2010. It went on to win four regional teen awards and was shortlisted for the **Branford Boase Award**.

This is phase three in Keren David's career. She started out as a 18-year-old in journalism, and her writing talent and direct approach propelled her into a successful career. 'I got into journalism, loved it, turned down my place at university, and just worked and worked and worked with the aim of getting onto a national newspaper, which I did at the age of 25. What I wanted was a good staff job on a good newspaper. And the problem was, I got that. When I reached 30, I looked around and thought, well do I go on doing this?'

David wound up working as a news editor on **The Independent** but then moved to Amsterdam with her husband and young daughter. This was phase two. 'We were supposed to go for two years but ended up staying for eight. I wasn't wild about being an ex-pat wife, that wasn't really very me. When I look back now, I realise of course that what I should have been doing was writing books!'

Instead, Keren had a second child, threw herself into being a mother, and found a new part-time job as editor-in-chief of a photo journalism agency. 'I had a lovely life, really interesting job. But when we came back to the UK in 2007, that was my mid-life crisis point. I didn't really know what I was doing and I had no more ambitions left.'

Keren ended up enrolling on a course at London's City University in writing for children. 'I thought, oh I can go and

write nice short little books for little children. Be easy! But then reality kicked in and truth dawned. Writing books for children isn't a soft option. Sure it's about talent and imagination, but it's also about sheer graft and concentrated effort. It was an evening course and I was thinking, I'll write for 7 year-old boys, nice chapter books. I'd never written anything longer than 2,000 words. There was one fellow writer who told us she'd completed 20,000 words of a book and I remember thinking, "How does anyone write 20,000 words?" I'd never done it.

Somehow Keren made it through the course though. And by the time she'd finished, her confidence was up and she realised that it was time to step up her game. She signed up for a writers' workshop, and this time she had a goal in mind: to write a book in three months.

It was ten sessions over twelve weeks. And I basically set out to write a book in three months. It was perfect. I wasn't working so I had lots of time, but I didn't have a computer. So my husband and I were sharing a pc and I'd have to kick him off the computer every afternoon for two hours at a time. I was very disciplined and very focussed. I thought, I'm going to write this book, I'll find an agent and I'll get it published. And that was **When I Was Joe**.

When I Was Joe tells the story of Ty, a teenager who has witnessed a horrendous crime. After he and his mother talk to the police, they have no choice but to go into hiding as part of a witness protection programme. For Ty, reinventing himself as Joe has some definite advantages – he gets a whole new look and a cool new image too. But there are some pretty ruthless people hot on his trail, and keeping a new identity isn't as simple as it seems. Since **When I Was Joe** was published in 2010, its impact has been considerable; it's one of the most talked about YA novels of the past few years, and seems to have spawned a new generation of books on this theme.

Funnily enough, I saw it described in the American Librarian's Post as a "mini-genre". I think there was one American YA novel on this theme before mine – which I didn't know about at the time – but mine was the first British novel on the subject. I think it's probably because a lot of people didn't know there was a witness protection scheme in Britain at all; it's not much talked about. But I knew a lot about it through my job at **The Independent**. In fact it was Keren's journalistic training and instinct for a news story that brought this unusual theme to her as an idea for a YA novel.

I was watching the news one day – I was doing my first writing course and looking for ideas at the time – and there was a report about a father who had been caught up in an armed robbery – he was the manager of a huge warehouse where used banknotes were stored. The robbers had kidnapped the whole family and held them overnight, even a little boy aged 8. At the end of the item, they said the family had been taken into witness protection. And that got me thinking. We'd just moved countries, my kids had just started at new schools, and it was really stressful; my son was very angry because he wasn't in Amsterdam any more. It was a bit like taking our current situation and making it infinitely worse, infinitely more stressful and wondering if you would be killed at any time! All these things came together. How is an 8-year-old boy meant to remember he has a false identity? When I came to write it I thought I'd make my main character a 14-year-old, because at 14, everything is changing anyway; it was a metaphor for being an adolescent.

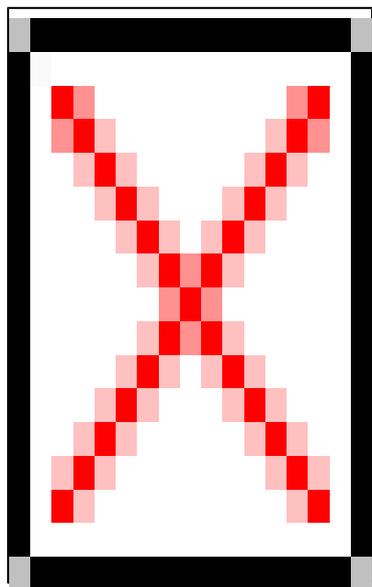
Such was the success of **When I was Joe** that Keren went on to complete two sequels, **Almost True** and **Another Life**. But it was **Lia's Guide to Winning the Lottery** that took Keren off in another new direction – something of a departure from the tense thrillers that had established her reputation so quickly in YA fiction. "When my first book was published, I had a very good reaction, but a lot of people thought it was grim; they saw it as gritty, quite serious. And I've always thought there was a lot of humour in my books. So I decided to write something much more aspirational, light and funny. Hence **Lia's Guide to Winning the Lottery**. Strangely, it turned out to be probably the grittiest of all my books!?"

For many teenagers, the idea of scooping an £8million fortune on the lottery at the age of 16 may sound like a dream come true, but in the book David highlights another side to sudden fortune, one that can be nothing short of a nightmare. She's currently in the process of turning her novel into a musical.

Out of the blue, I got this wonderful email saying "I don't know if you've ever thought about making your book into a musical?" Well why would I? I'm working with an organisation called **Perfect Pitch** – they're Arts Council funded and

they help people develop new musicals. The reason that they liked **Lia's Guide to Winning the Lottery** so much is that a lot of drama groups are dominated by girls.

This is complete collaboration? much more like my roots, working in newspapers. It's a bit weird. Sometimes I think it would be easier if the novel weren't there and we were just starting from scratch; it's been a process of de-coupling from the novel!



Keren's new novel **Salvage** is really going to make people sit up and notice, I'd say. Told through two voices, Cass and Aidan, it's a story of a brother and sister, separated by the adoption system, who end up on opposite sides of the tracks. As a contemporary tale with twists and turns, the two protagonists' voices send echoes and shock waves throughout the book; it has huge appeal for modern YA readers. But finding the novel's title? and the setting for Aidan's tough life? all happened thanks to serendipity.

I lost my Kindle in the Brent Cross shopping centre, Keren explains. I left it at a café? I had flu at the time and didn't know what I was doing? and someone picked it up. They looked at the list of books and of course it had all my books listed and they saw 'Keren's Kindle' at the top. So they thought, ah, it must be Keren David's Kindle! They tracked me down and they emailed me? a fantastic bit of detective work on their part! The family was absolutely lovely so I went and met them and gave their son who was 15 some of my books and it turned out the guy ran a shop called the Salvage Store in Burnt Oak. And he told me all about his business and it clicked in my head that it was a great title and setting. That was my inspiration. I'd already been thinking about writing a book about adoption so it all just clicked into place.

One of the major themes in the book is the concept of family in modern society beyond blood ties and DNA. David tackles these issues head on and, through the course of the novel, examines the roles of families and what they have to withstand nowadays to survive. 'What is a family? Who is a family? Can you create a family?' asks David. 'In my book, you have the adopted family of Cass, and you have Aidan with his girlfriend Holly and her son Finn. Do you look at family as being that nuclear group? Mum, Dad couple of kids? or do you look at it in a much wider sense, 'here are all the people who are supportive in my life'??

Aidan is a particularly intriguing character, a boy who has taken hard knocks and rejection throughout his life, but still seems to bounce back despite the disadvantages. I suggest Keren must have really enjoyed creating this complex character She agrees, readily. 'Aidan is not really in control. And he's never really had a chance. He had a period of stability and love in the middle of his childhood, and that was important. Otherwise he would have been too wild, too damaged and it would have been difficult to write about him. In YA literature there are some books that are too negative, books that would finish with a character like Aidan committing suicide. I personally think it's very wrong. Suicide is one of the biggest killers of teenage boys. If you devise problems that are so big they can only be presented in the context of possible suicide? and it has happened in a few books that I've read? you're basically saying that's a way out. And that's wrong. I would never create a character who sees suicide as the only solution.'

For her next book, Keren is turning to her time in Holland for inspiration.

It's a love story set in Amsterdam. I thought I've had 8 years of living in Amsterdam and I know it really well. I was there in October ? I spent a day in Amsterdam, walking around, taking photos, writing notes in my notebook. And I left this notebook in a café?? I raise an eyebrow. Kindles, notebooks. Keren smiles. ?You can see a bit of a theme emerging here??

Damian Kelleher is a journalist and writer.

Salvage, Atom, 978-0349001371, £11.99 hbk

When I was Joe, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847803795, £6.99 pbk

Almost True, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847803788, £6.99 pbk

Another Life, Frances Lincoln Children's Books

Lia's Guide to Winning the Lottery, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847801913, £6.99 pbk

Page Number:

6

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