



# AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNABEL PITCHER

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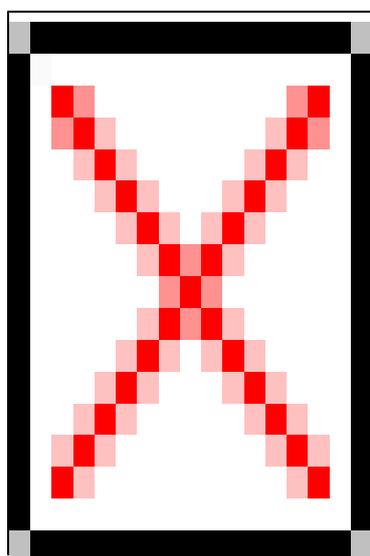
[Philip Womack](#) [1]

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Byline:

**Annabel Pitcher** interviewed by **Philip Womack**

Annabel Pitcher's debut novel, [My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece](#) [3], discussed love and loss from a ten year old boy's point of view; it won many admirers, whilst her second, [Ketchup Clouds](#) [4], told of a teenage girl writing to a prisoner on death row, and won the **Waterstone's Children's Book Prize**. Her books are deservedly loved for their warmth, humour, honesty, and insight into the teenage mind. **Philip Womack** interviews her for **Books for Keeps**.

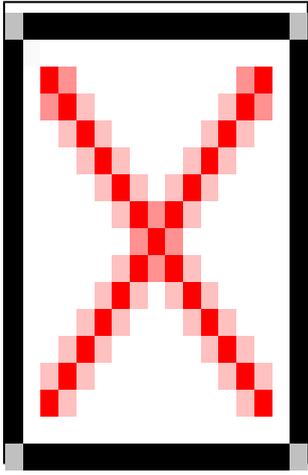


At her publisher's shining new offices on the Embankment, I meet the rising young author Annabel Pitcher. She has so far produced three novels for young adults; her latest, **Silence is Goldfish**, is about a girl who, on discovering a family secret, decides to become mute, and develops a fantasy friendship with a torch in the shape of a goldfish.

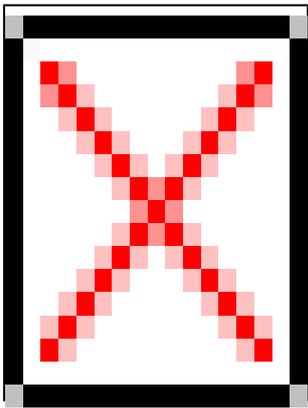
Pitcher, though having arrived from Dublin the day before, and due to do an event later, seems unruffled, even calm. Her soft Yorkshire tones are often punctuated with a giggle. As we slurp tea from enormous mugs, I ask why she was drawn to being a young adult writer. 'It was never really a conscious choice,' she says. 'I was a huge reader at university [she studied at St Catherine's College, Oxford] and I was just drawn to that in bookshops. I didn't even think it was particularly weird that a 21/22/23 year old would want to read children's books ? it's just what I loved reading.' At university, she was particularly enthralled by **Harry Potter**, a phenomenon that at the time was just beginning to engulf the world.

Escapism played a large part in that reading. As a child, growing up in a large family in Yorkshire, she loved spending time with her much younger sister: 'I just was a complete Peter Pan.' She even put on a play of the film **Titanic** when she was 18 ? and her sister 11. 'For the old lady I had a shower cap that I stuck cotton wool all over to look like a wig of grey hair,' she says, grinning.

Playacting, too, is an important component in her writing. Tessie, the heroine of **Silence is Goldfish**, acts out



dialogues with her goldfish torch companion, who answers in wry tones that place him in a similar lineage of animal companion to the Psammead and the Phoenix. But how on earth, I ask, did she light (no pun intended) on the idea of the torch? "Well," she says, "to write a book about a mute girl is challenging. And in the first draft [...] she didn't speak at all, to any one, and it's very difficult to bring a character to life in that way. ... I felt as though I needed her to have an ally." The goldfish was "perfect because it's in a bowl, you know and it opens and closes its mouth and bubbles come out that look like empty speech bubbles." A real goldfish, being untransportable, would be out of the question. When she stumbled across a fish-shaped torch on the internet, the idea of a light guiding the lonely appealed "and so the germ of the book was sown."



Her books deal with this sense of loneliness: of insignificance in a massive universe. She loves stargazing "even if it's a gale force wind, we're out with our anoraks on", adding that "it's just that feeling of you're kind of connected to everything but at the same time you feel completely dwarfed by it, and depending on your mood it's either really comforting to think that you're insignificant, or it's terrifying. And I think it really captures that feeling of an adolescent."

The adolescent Tessa in **Silence is Goldfish** retreats into silence "something that interests Pitcher greatly. I ask if she felt that her heroine might be too circumspect in her reactions? "It made sense to the psychology of the character [...] that you would bury your head in the sand, maybe because I'm a coward," she says. She refers to a short story, about a wife pretending not to have discovered her husband's affair: "it's so sad and I think really human, and I think that maybe if you were in that situation it's too frightening to face the truth so you just avoid it." There is revelation, though in the end, and when it comes, it's powerful.

Pitcher is an admirer of Jenny Downham, Jenny Valentine and Meg Rosoff: "When I was living in London and just starting to take writing seriously, I read [How I Live Now](#) [5], [Broken Soup](#) and [Before I Die](#) [6], and I was just like "these women are unbelievable. ... They capture these teen voices and it's so poetic and it's so real but it's just beautiful at the same time, and that's such a hard thing to do, to make it into a work of literature, and that's what I aspire to." A noble wish; and one that I am sure she will have no difficulty in attaining.

Philip Womack's latest novel is [The King's Shadow](#) [7].

**Silence is Goldfish**, Annabel Pitcher, Orion Children's Books, 978-1780620008, £12.99 hbk

[Ketchup Clouds](#) [4], Annabel Pitcher, Orion Children's Books, 978-1780620312, £6.99 pbk

[My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece](#) [3], Annabel Pitcher, Orion Children's Books, 978-1780621869, £6.99 pbk

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