



# Sophie Someone

Books Reviewed:

[Sophie Someone](#) [1]

Issue:

[214](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

Before she begins her narrative, Sophie tells us: 'Some stories are hard to tell ? And some words are hard to get out of your mouth ? Because they spell out secrets that are too huge to be spoken aloud ? So here?s my story. Told the only way I dare to tell it ? In my own special language.'

256 pages later, when those secrets are out, Sophie?s best friend Comet reveals why ? and how ? the novel came to be written: 'You don?t have to tell me any more, Soph. Not if you don?t want to. But maybe you should write it down.' Teenagers writing novels as therapy is a time-honoured, if improbable, convention in YA fiction, but Sophie *can't* just 'write it down'. Some 'brainless drongo' out there might post it on the internet (yes, that?s *internet* in her 'own special language') so she follows Comet?s advice to 'throw in a few random code words to keep any nubber pickers on their togs' (*throw in a few random code words to keep any nosey parkers on their toes* ? right?). Maybe an echo of the Nadsat argot in **The Clockwork Orange**, only the code words come more frequently.

Sophie?s story is close to incredible, but then you could say that the Great Train Robbery or the Hatton Garden jewellery heist stretched fact beyond fiction. When she was little ? she?s now fourteen ? she and her mambo and her don (that?s her *mum* and her *dad*) left the UK in a hurry for Belgium and a new life, even adopting Nieuwenleven as their family name and abandoning Pratt which, it turns out, was far more appropriate. As Sophie slowly learns, her dad had got involved in a bank robbery in the UK as the getaway driver. He?s not really cut out to be a bad guy though, and so he was easily tricked out of his share of the loot. They end up more or less down and out in Brussels.

Once Sophie guesses there are secrets, she ferrets around on the internet, takes Eurostar to London and then a train to Norfolk to meet the gran she?s never known. Sophie?s a likeable, resilient character and she learns a lot about places and people (including herself) along the journey which terminates in a sort-of happy ending.

There is enjoyable comedy of both plot and character here, but the pleasure on offer in this tale mostly lies in how it?s told. After a few pages of the coded narrative, you're into the flow of it. These examples must stand for the many on every page: 'Pulling my eyes away from the companion screen, I looked over my shrugger to the living root dormouse.' A vocabulary crib-list would show: companion/computer; shrugger/shoulder; root/room; dormouse/door. Sophie tells her little bruiser (*brother*) to 'Shush your mush?', or there?s reference to that popular novel, **The Hunger Graves**; so, familiar words 'mis-used' to disturb the expected sense, often with comic effect. But just a moment. If we readers can

crack the code easily enough, then why not all those dangerous drongos out there? I'm not being too literalist, but you do need a rationale which stands up. And when new coinages occur, you probably have to pause. Sadly, that means the telling may be more in the forefront of the reader's mind than what's being told; and over the length of the novel, a single joke may wear thin, no matter how witty. Inevitably, characterisation through dialogue is difficult and Sophie and her story sometimes disappear beneath the language games.

There are other, more familiar and often successful devices. The typeface shrinks or expands when characters might be whispering or shouting. Words tumble at angles in varying sizes down a page when a character's emotions are in free fall. Sometimes the plot moves forward through meteors (that's *emails*) or even bi-lingual meteors in the fortune cookies baked by Sophie's neighbour, Madame Wong, one of which ' to give the taste ' reads, 'Your whiffle is pregnant with your third chick?. There's much to admire, and some readers may well delight in cracking the code ' maybe even trying to imitate it ' and enjoying its effects; but the storyline might unfortunately be buried in the process.

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[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/214>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>