



Writing contemporary YA in the age of the internet

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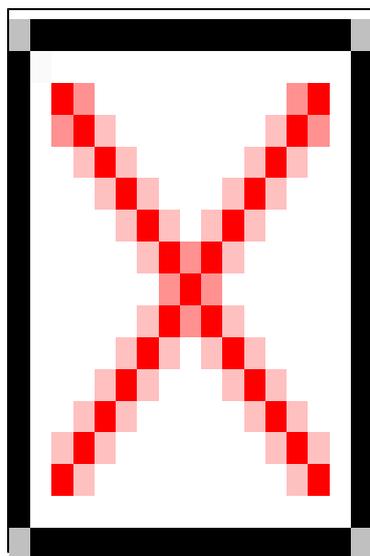
[Keren David](#) [1]

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Byline:

Is social media a threat to story telling? asks author **Keren David**

Author [Keren David](#) [3] reflects on the challenges of writing for 'Team Internet'.



'If I'm writing for girls up to about 16 and I haven't written a modern teenage book for a long time it's quite difficult to think of plots. If everybody's social networking, or whatever, they're not actually going out and doing stuff. And maybe the sort of stuff they are doing isn't quite the sort of thing you have in a children's book.'

So said Dame Jacqueline Wilson at the Hay festival this summer, explaining why she is concentrating on historical fiction, and putting her finger on a problem faced by all writers of contemporary YA fiction: how can we reflect modern life, when change happens so fast that a book can be out of date before it is published?

And has social media changed the lives of young people so much that you can no longer find interesting stories to tell about them? Are our own memories of being a teenager - whether we are 25 or 55 - rendered obsolete by technological progress?

So much has changed. There used to be a simple power hierarchy between parents and children - parents had more power, because they knew more. Now children do not rely on parents, teachers or even books to gain the knowledge they need, and they generally know more than their parents about social media and technology. So this fundamental relationship has changed; a crucial factor to bear in mind when writing about teens finding their way to independence.

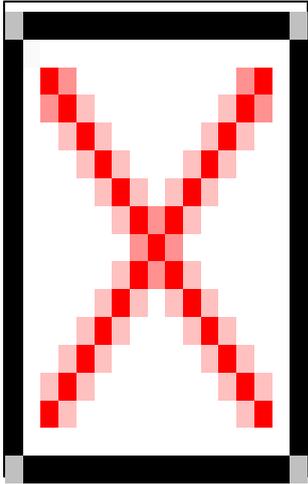
Teenagers have always been self-conscious. Talking with Rae Earl recently, whose teenage diaries were published and televised as the very true and very funny **My Mad Fat Diary**, my friends and I were amazed that Rae had kept her old diaries - ours had been burned or thrown out in a fit of early adulthood embarrassment.

Nowadays teens are less likely to have diaries to burn, and publication is immediate. I know teenagers whose first kiss became the subject of a Snapchat story, shared by a friend to hundreds of contacts. I know a girl who missed out on her

school prom, because she didn't want to be in the photos. And I know many others who spend much time editing their own image, so that the face they present to the world seems perfect ? and then refuse to walk down the High Street in case people see their real face. Siobhan Curham has addressed this in her timely non-fiction book **True Face**, urging teens to embrace authenticity and stop living their lives as though they were actors on stage.

I've found that far from killing off plot lines in my contemporary YA books, social media has suggested quite a few. In **Lia's Guide to Winning the Lottery** (2011), 16-year-old Lia finds that an eight million-pound jackpot comes with a Facebook hate page. In **Salvage** [4] (2014), adopted teenager Cass is found by her birth brother via her Facebook profile.

In my latest book, **This is Not a Love Story** [5], I wrote about Ethan, who condemns social media as fake, but is not



always as honest and open as he claims to be, and Theo, who feels diminished when his dad cuts off his access to the internet, but also fears exposure when his love life takes a turn that even he didn't expect. But the main user of social media is Kitty, a girl who builds her confidence by romanticising her life through a tumblr blog and an Instagram account, who moves to Amsterdam and posts films and pictures of a quirky, creative, beautiful life, which will just be completed by the perfect relationship. For all these three characters social media doesn't rule their lives, but it has an important role to play.

Of course, internet trends change, and the danger for writers is that your cool, modern zeitgeisty book is outdated within weeks of being published. Call it the Curse of MySpace, that near-forgotten website. Some circumvent this by inventing their own networks ? for example Hilary Freeman in **Don't Ask**, a cautionary tale about a girl who invents a fake profile and befriends her boyfriend's ex in order to discover his secrets.

Other authors shrug their shoulders, write about life as it is, and accept that their books will need updating in a few years, or slide gracefully into historical fiction. I take the view that it's more important to reflect what I see than try and future-proof. After all, when I read authors like Antonia Forest and Noel Streatfeild in the 1970s, the odd reference to shillings and rations didn't put me off at all.

So, authors shouldn't be scared of social media. It's part of teenage life, useful for plots and ultimately only as important as we want it to be. I listened to two teenage boys this weekend discussing how far they could go in giving up their phones for GCSE year. 'I can't do it,' said my 15-year-old son. 'I couldn't live without my phone.' And a little story idea started working away in my imagination.

Keren David is a journalist and writer. Her debut YA novel, **When I Was Joe** [6] won five regional awards, and was shortlisted for the **Branford Boase Award**, the **UKLA Award** and highly commended for the **Teenage Booktrust Prize**. It was listed as a **White Raven** 2011. **Salvage**, her fourth novel was shortlisted for the **2015 Bookseller YA Book Prize**, **The Romantic Novel of the Year** award and was voted one of the **Telegraph's** 40 best YA books of 2014. **This is Not a Love Story** was published in May 2015 by Atom.

This is Not a Love Story, Keren David, Atom, 978-0-3490-0140-1, £6.99

Lia's Guide to Winning the Lottery, Keren David, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1-8478-0191-3, £6.99

Salvage, Keren David, Atom, 978-0-3490-0138-8, £6.99

My Mad Fat Diary, Rae Earl, Hodder, 978-0-3409-5094-4, £8.99

Don?t Ask, Hilary Freeman, Piccadilly Press, 978-1-8534-0997-4, £6.99

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