



# AN INTERVIEW WITH COSTA SHORTLISTED AUTHOR MATT KILLEEN

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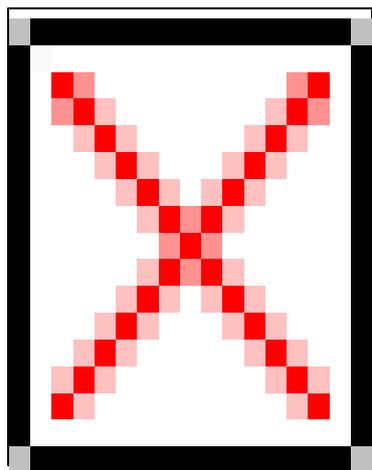
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The author of **Orphan Monster Spy** interviewed by **Michelle Pauli**.

Being shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award** for your debut novel is no mean feat and the Costa judges described Matt Killeen's book [Orphan Monster Spy](#) [3] as 'compelling, darkly thrilling debut - tense, cinematic and brilliant.' **Michelle Pauli** interviewed Matt for **Books for Keeps**.



Writing a novel set in a dark period of history and entwining the story closely with factual events is always going to be risky. When the novel is for young adults and the protagonist is an orphaned 15-year-old girl recruited by a sociopathic older man to fight the Nazis by infiltrating a National Socialist boarding school, the responsibility to tread that fine line is, arguably, even greater.

For Matt Killeen, author of **Orphan Monster Spy**, the danger of crossing the line into exploitation felt very real.

'As I was writing it the big nightmare was the fear that I wasn't doing justice to the subject matter. In the end I just went for it and tried to trust myself that I could keep it under control.'

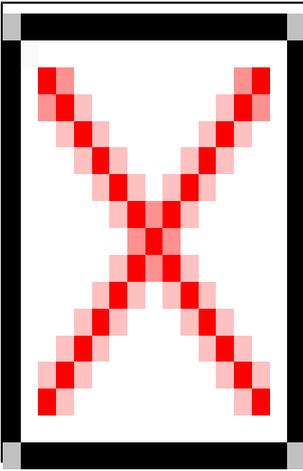
He succeeded. It's a cracking read - thrilling, appropriately disturbing and featuring a truly badass heroine who will have every reader rooting for her from the opening pages. The book's been recognised with a **Costa** shortlisting and **World Book Night** listing, the latter meaning that thousands of copies of **Orphan Monster Spy** will be given away on 23 April.

Killeen acknowledges the level of 'conscious naval gazing' required to write the book and keep it on the right side of darkness v exploitation. He argues that the key is 'emotional authenticity': finding the human truth - the word, phrase or small event that encompasses the truth of the wider historical context, a technique that Killeen honed from watching documentaries over and over again in search of that moment of truth. He holds by the historian George Macaulay Trevelyan's dictum that history needs to be burned into the imagination before it can be received into wisdom.

‘There were moments, there were things that I write in this book that made myself physically sick because they had to be there but if your head is with the oppressor and the oppressed simultaneously it can overwhelm you. It’s a complex process,’ he says.

At the heart of [Orphan Monster Spy](#) [3] is Sarah, a teenager we meet moments after her mother has been shot dead in front of her during a reckless attempt at escaping Germany in 1939. The odds are stacked against Sarah as a slight Jewish girl with no friends or family – she has been home-schooled by her mother, an actress who drank to numb the pain of being forbidden to perform for the past six years that the Nazis have been in power. Luckily, Sarah is resourceful, an accomplished gymnast, fluent in several languages and fantastically good at playing the piano (which, unlikely as it may sound, saves her life on more than one occasion).

‘She’s a piece of wish fulfilment on my part,’ says Killeen. ‘I learnt to play the keyboard listening to the Cure, so if it



requires more than two fingers I can’t do it, and I always wanted to be graceful and that hasn’t really happened either and considering I’m an English specialist I’m linguistically challenged – I can barely string a sentence together in any other language.’

Sarah came to Killeen during a bus ride past Stockwell tube station in London, when he noticed a mural celebrating the young British/French spy Violette Szabo on a bomb-proof lift shaft cover. Szabo, whose life was dramatised in the 1958 film **Carve Her Name with Pride**, was an astonishingly brave undercover agent for the allies who secured valuable intelligence before being captured by the Nazis on her second mission to France.

‘I noticed how young she was when she had volunteered. She was just 21 when she volunteered for what was essentially a suicide mission. The Special Operations Executive (SOE) went in behind enemy lines and, as spies, they could expect torture and murder if captured. I was thinking that at 21 I was a mess, there was no way that I could have made that kind of decision and then I thought that I wasn’t much more mature at 21 than I was at 19 or 17?’ says Killeen.

‘That was the moment that Sarah arrived in my brain, pretty much fully formed, and has been calling the shots ever since. I just start writing and she tells me what she’s going to say.’

Killeen started the book in 2010 as part of an MA in creative writing, undertaken while working in his dream job as a copywriter for the Lego company (‘I spent a lot of time with my inner seven year old but there was part of me that thought no, you need to write something else, something darker.’) Published in March 2018, the book was eight years in the envisioning, writing and editing but arguably it was a lifetime in the making.

‘I grew up in the 1970s which was a big war-obsessed period of British culture and all the stories, the books, the TV programmes, even the shoes we wore to school were war-themed,’ explains Killeen. ‘At the same time, my mother’s best friend was German and so we spent many happy summers with that family and I found it very difficult to reconcile the picture of the Germans portrayed in the media with the Germans that I knew, who were lovely, warm and rabidly pacifist. I couldn’t play with a toy gun or anything involving violence without a stern talking to about where that might lead. I found it very difficult squaring these two things and as I got older and learnt more about the Nazis and the Holocaust the tension grew even greater. It set up a lifetime’s fascination with the subject matter.’

With Killeen having left Lego to concentrate on writing full time, a sequel is due out in spring 2020 and there are rumblings about a film adaptation. 'I now live with Sarah in my head full-time, which is a challenge,' Killeen remarks wryly. 'But I am certain that the story I am telling needs to be told and so I have to do it.'

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

**[Orphan Monster Spy](#)** [3] is published by Usborne, 978-1474942386, £7.99 pbk

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**Source URL (retrieved on Feb '19):** <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/233/childrens-books/articles/featured-author/an-interview-with-costa-shortlisted-author-matt-k>

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