



BfK Profile: Gene Kemp

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Philippa Milnes-Smith talks to **Gene Kemp**

Philippa Milnes-Smith in conversation with Carnegie Medal winner, **GENE KEMP**<!--break-->

PM-S: *Autism and Asperger Syndrome are in the news at the moment. Is this why you decided to write your latest novel, **Seriously Weird**, about a girl whose brother has Asperger's?*

GK: The writing of **Seriously Weird** went like this:

Down in Plymouth I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen for ages and he was in a helluva state because his son had just been diagnosed as having Asperger Syndrome. He felt he didn't know how to cope or what would become of his boy, who's aged ten.

?You and your husband used to tell us about Troy (not real name) and the things he did. He must have had Asperger's.?

?Yes,? I answered. ?Though in those days we had no idea what it was and we received no help from anybody, only criticism.?

We fell to reminiscing and comparing notes of our similar experiences. My daughter, Troy's sister, now joined us and added her anecdotes. Soon our friend relaxed and after a while actually began to laugh.

?I must go,? he said at last, ?but you've helped me so much. I think I can manage now. Troy is OK these days now he's older, isn't he??

?Yes, he's fine. Happier than most of the people I know. Calm and amiable. We're a cottage industry and he edits, prints and writes. Don't worry. Your lad will be all right. Best of luck.?

He thanked us. ?Write a story about Troy,? he said, ?and I'd like to read it.?

So I did. After all, if it made someone laugh it could be good.

But first, I had to ask my son if he agreed, or would he find it too embarrassing. But he didn't mind at all. ?I tell you what,? he said. ?I'll help you. Especially with the Maths. You won't be able to manage that.?

After all, he'd already contributed towards some of my books especially **Jason Bodger**, **Bluebeard's Castle** and some stories in Roundabout which had been broadcast on radio. Last of all, a title. Someone said to my middle granddaughter, ?You're seriously weird. ?That's it,? I cried. ?That's my title.

PM-S: *Do you want **Seriously Weird** to be thought of as an ?issues? book?*

GK: ?Issues? books do not make really good fiction. Characters, plot, description and dialogue make a book and what I

most enjoy when writing are unusual people setting about their lives as best they can, and, most of all, I care for the inadequate, the rebels, the fearful, the bullies and the bullied, the deprived and the underdogs and the strange. The latter quality in Troy and the chaos he causes because of this strangeness is the theme of the book and this is what I want to bring home to the readers. But the real interest lies in his character.

PM-S: *Did your direct experience of raising a child with Asperger Syndrome influence your writing?*

GK: Raising a child with Asperger Syndrome has made me aware of the problems children face in coping with home and school and this has influenced me a great deal in my writing. Danny in **The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler** is not at all bright and stutters badly. Rocket in **Charlie Lewis Plays For Time** is so intellectually challenged that my editor thought that there couldn't be children in a mainstream school like him and was surprised when I said that I'd taught several. **Seriously Weird** is just part of this pattern with difficulties caused through Asperger Syndrome.

PM-S: *What did you think of Mark Haddon's **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time** and its depiction of a boy with Asperger Syndrome?*

GK: It's a fine book that has done very well and has awoken people to the existence of people like the narrator which is an extremely good thing. The character himself is very appealing and I can see why it's very popular. I didn't like the production much, especially the print, but that's a matter of taste. I probably shouldn't say this but I found it rather contrived and unreal and I didn't like the pitchfork in the dog. However, I should like to commend such an original and progressive book.

PM-S: ***Seriously Weird** looks in at an autistic child from the outside; Mark Haddon's book looks out at the world from inside an autistic child's point of view. Why did you choose your particular narrative approach?*

GK: In several of my other books, especially 'The Cricklepit' books, I have written from the inside out, but this time I did not wish to do so because I did find Troy's reactions to life very different from mine and I wasn't sure that I could do it with the same conviction that I had with Tyke, for instance. His thought patterns and motivations were so unlike mine which was fascinating for me but I decided to use the middle daughter, Claire, as my narrator as she was so squashed down by her beautiful, clever, elder sister and the dreadful Troy. She's the child most helpful to her parents, but gets very little appreciation for it and finds her role so trying that she invents a doppelganger, Clarry, whom she talks to in the mirror. A reader who grew up with a schizophrenic brother found Claire's viewpoint very appealing because she could identify with it and all those whose own needs are neglected looking after the strange ones.

Gene Kemp won the Carnegie Medal and the Other Award in 1977 for **The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler** (Puffin, 0 14 031135 1, £3.99 pbk). **Seriously Weird** is published by Faber (0 571 21824 5, £5.99 pbk).

Philippa Milnes-Smith is a literary agent.

See also reviews of **Looking After Louis** (p23) and **Al Capone Does My Shirts** (p27).

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