



Authorgraph No.176: Kaye Umansky

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[176](#) [2]

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Kaye Umansky interviewed by **Julia Eccleshare**

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In these times of instant success and the much vaunting of brand new writers, there is something particularly pleasing about the revitalising of the older, or should I say, longer established ones. Bloomsbury, who are 'bringing back' Kaye Umansky's much loved Pongwiffy titles alongside the publication of her new books about Clover Twig, a new magical character, highlight that this is a comeback and have every confidence that a revised 'brand' look will bring Pongwiffy to a whole new audience.

And the omens look very good indeed. Having navigated the almost San Francisco style roller coaster streets around her home, I'm greeted by Kaye who has just hung up a call from Bloomsbury telling her that she is one of a select band of authors chosen for the 2010 World Book Day flip books. Kaye, who is by nature optimistic and expansive, is clearly and quite properly ecstatic. 'It's the most posh thing that's ever happened to me,' she says before asking, 'How does this flip book work, Julia?'

I explain that the story she writes will take up half of the book. Flip it round and the other half will be by the writer she has been paired with - Philip Ardagh in her case. Clearly this title is to be the funny one. There will be just a handful of the £1 books which children can buy with the vouchers they'll get given next March. It's a great distinction and a mark of popularity to be chosen as well as an excellent way to become yet more popular.

And that's just what Kaye is hoping for. Kaye wrote her first story about Pongwiffy in 1988. Simply called, **Pongwiffy, A Witch of Dirty Habits** it was a bestseller and a handful of titles about Pongwiffy followed. Gradually, however, Kaye felt that, without much positive backing from their original publisher, they were being allowed to lose their place in the market. When Bloomsbury bought her new and also witchy **Clover Twig and the Incredible Flying Cottage** title and its sequel, they took over the whole Pongwiffy backlist. Kaye couldn't believe her luck, 'I'm just so pleased that they've got so much faith in the series,' she says.

But the new Pongwiffy books are not just re-jacketed, Kaye is also revising them, making changes that will make them more appealing to a modern audience. 'I put in some very silly things,' she says. She also has to take out all kinds of things that had been fine at the time. 'I can't say gipsy' and I can't quite think why not. I think it's a lovely and poetic word,' Kaye muses. 'And of course there can be no references to smoking so the genie has to lose his cigar, and no references to body images. Apparently that's especially important.' Kaye is more amused than angry about this kind of editorial control and is doing the job willingly.

Like many humorous writers, Kaye feels that funny books are all too often overlooked in the discussion of children's books. She was a judge of the inaugural Funny Books Prize, brainchild of Children's Laureate Michael Rosen, which

aims to celebrate the importance of such titles. 'I don't think funny books are given nearly enough clout,' Kaye says. 'Laughter really matters. It is a relief of tension and children especially really need it. I think the Funny Prize is a brilliant idea and will make a difference.'

Kaye herself becomes very serious when talking about the difficulties of writing humour. Shaking her head, almost as if she can hear the buzz in it, Kaye says, 'I can never quite capture how the book sounds in my head onto the page.' As she explains, humour is all to do with timing which means every word has to be exactly right so that the joke comes off in the right way. 'And you have to be very careful how you write it because, if you're not, you lose the spontaneity.' And it's not just getting the timing and wording of the humour right,' says Kaye. 'What I find especially hard is that you have to be funny while also keeping all the other things that are important in stories such as the strong characters and the story arc going too.'

As a result Kaye finds what she laughingly calls long novels (30-40,000 words) 'I know we're not talking J K Rowling here?' particularly difficult to write. She sets her bench mark very high, comparing herself to the people she really admires. 'Richmal Crompton is a goddess. The William books are the best. I just can't criticise them.' The result is that she is never really happy with her longer novels. 'I always seem to have so many characters,' she laments. 'And that means so many loose ends to tie up. But, throughout it, you have to keep people smiling and that's exhausting.'

Kaye shows no signs of exhaustion or of losing enthusiasm for her writing although she says that it is slowing down, 'I used to write a 30,000 words book in just four months. Now it takes me much longer.'

But last year she toured not only the UK but the world visiting schools and promoting her books. 'I think it's important to go into schools and give children a really good day. When I was at school, no one ever came to talk to us except for the local policeman and he wouldn't even let us try his helmet on.' Kaye's sense of outrage seems as fresh now as if it had happened yesterday and certainly her school visits, complete with some very witchy props, would liven up any classroom.

Kaye came to writing and performing very young. The only child of elderly parents in Devon, he a headmaster and she a music teacher, she did a lot of music and performing as well as writing plays in little notebooks bound up in ribbon. For her eleventh birthday, Kaye's parents gave her a typewriter. 'It was the best present I could ever have had. I knew then that I really was a writer.'

As Kaye starts talking about her childhood, her husband Mo, who has never been far from the conversation, joins in resolutely. It's partly that he's about to put the lunch on the table but it is also that Kaye and Mo obviously work as an inseparable team and the rest of Kaye's story is intertwined with Mo's who prompts when needed. He is Kaye's first, and usually, very positive reader although on just one occasion he did make Kaye cry by not being so positive 'and she re-enacts it noisily for us.

Following the advice of the careers teacher who utterly crushed Kaye's first hopes, which were to go to drama school, she moved to London to do a primary school training. And she did teach 'how long for, Mo? Yes, off and on for about the next ten years. I liked the children but not the hierarchy. But I wasn't cut out to be a teacher. I was a cherry picker. I loved music and drama 'I absolutely loved putting on the Christmas play 'but the quiet, sensible maths, I hated.' Musing on how schools are now, Kaye knows she wouldn't last a minute. 'It's all so quiet in schools now,' she says. 'I did a lot of shouting. It was nice shouting and the kids shouted back but it was very loud.'

And then, in 1969, Kaye met Mo, then a bass player in a band 'a semi-professional band,' Mo emphasises. Kaye joined them some of the time and wrote songs for them. Out come some wonderfully 1970s photographs of the band with Kaye and Mo looking gorgeous and every inch what you'd expect of the time. Was it fun? 'Sometimes, sometimes not,' says Mo, but with enough of a smile to show that yes, it was. 'Although Mo did wreck his knees,' Kaye chips in. 'Carrying the heavy equipment up and down endless flights of stairs 'we didn't have any roadies then 'took its toll.'

'Kaye was writing songs but it was when she went on the course that she really got back into it,' Mo prompts us back. Kaye had been lucky enough to spend a year doing a drama course at the Central School of Speech and Drama 'still on

full pay from her teaching. ?I started writing again. I did a film treatment of **Titus Groan** and I wrote some very short plays.? ?And you wrote a song about a witch,? Mo adds.

And that?s where Pongwiffy began. Kaye wrote some songs for her very first book, **Phantasmagoria**. ?I wanted a smelly, dirty witch and I came up with Pongwiffy.? From a small start Pongwiffy, who is about to celebrate her 21st birthday, has been a very large part of Kaye?s life. Her study, complete with a most enviable ceiling woven through with sparkling fairy lights and filled with both a desk and a piano, is also home to much Pongwiffy artwork and, had they not been out on loan to a friend doing a Harry Potter event for World Book Day, Pongwiffy?s witchy accoutrements.

With the World Book Day title to write, Kaye looks set to be celebrating many more Pongwiffy birthdays.

Julia Eccleshare is the children?s books editor of the **Guardian** and co-director of CLPE (The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education).

Photo courtesy of Bloomsbury Publishing.

The Books ? a selection

From Bloomsbury (illustrated by Nick Price):

Pongwiffy, A Witch of Dirty Habits, 978 0 7475 9692 9, £5.99 pbk

Pongwiffy, Back on Track, 978 0 7475 9694 3, £5.99 pbk

Pongwiffy and the Goblins? Revenge, 978 0 7475 9693 6, £5.99 pbk (June 2009)

Pongwiffy and the Spell of the Year, 978 0 7475 9691 2, £5.99 pbk (July 2009)

Pongwiffy and the Holiday of Doom, 978 0 7475 9690 5, £5.99 pbk (August 2009)

Pongwiffy and the Pantomime, 978 0 7475 9689 9, £5.99 pbk (September 2009)

Pongwiffy and the Spellovision Song Contest, 978 0 7475 9699 8, £5.99 pbk (October 2009)

Clover Twig and the Incredible Flying Cottage, 978 0 7475 9063 7, £5.99 pbk

Clover Twig and the Perilous Path, 978 14088 01871, £5.99 pbk (March 2010)

From A & C Black:

Phantasmagoria: 33 Songs, Story Lines and Sound Adventures, ill. Chris Smedley, 978 0 7136 3072 5, £14.99 pbk

The Snow Queen: A Sparkling Spine-tingling Musical, composed with Stephen Chadwick, 978 0 7136 6525 3, £24.99 pbk + enhanced CD, complete performance pack

Three Rocking Crocs: Making Music with Traditional Stories, with Helen MacGregor, 978 0 7136 7756 0, £12.99 spiral bound

From Barrington Stoke:

Meet the Weirds, ill. Chris Mould, 978 1 84299 114 5, £4.99 pbk

Wildly Weird, ill. Chris Mould, 978 1 84299 366 8, £4.99 pbk

From Wayland:

Cruel Times: A Victorian Play, 978 0 7502 4121 2, £4.99 pbk



[Kaye Umansky.jpg](#) [3]

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Page Number:

10

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