



# Life Beyond the Bunker

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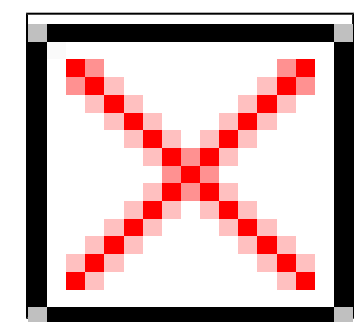
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Susanne Winnacker's **The Other Life** is sending shivers up the spine of diehard dystopian fiction fans. **Damian Kelleher** discovers why.



By rights, Susanne Winnacker ought to be well on her way to becoming a lawyer. She studied law in Germany (where she lives, with her husband), and even did an internship at a law firm in the UK.

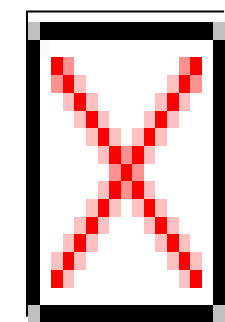
"I could go back to it tomorrow, or pick it up in two years," says Susanne, but the more we talk the more I realise that this is looking increasingly unlikely. What motivates this young writer more than matters of common law is fiction. And you only have to meet her to feel the enthusiasm flow.

"**The Other Life** is the very first book I've written, and when I started writing, I didn't even know what dystopian literature was!" she admits.

She certainly knows now. Ask Susanne what she's been reading and loving lately, and she'll give you a roll call of some of the very best of the genre.

Suzanne Collins, of course, **Across the Universe** by Beth Revis, James Dashner's **The Maze Runner**, **The Passage** by Justin Cronin, SD Crockett's **After the Snow**.

The list goes on. When I ask if she's read Moira Young's **Blood Red Road**, her eyes light up. "I've got about 40 books I want to read but **Blood Red Road** is one of them. I want to read it so badly!"



**The Other Life** is an impressive debut novel, a page-turning super-tense dystopian delight that packs a killer punch. Fifteen-year-old Sherry has spent the last three years holed up in an underground bunker with her family, almost a fifth of her life spent without any light – and not much fun either. Like a lot of heroines, Sherry has to learn to

cope with all kinds of dangerous situations when her family's food finally runs out ? and she and her father are forced to emerge back into the outside world. It's a world that has changed dramatically since a mutant strain of rabies has altered the landscape forever. Like so many dystopian protagonists, Sherry has much to learn ? and fast ? if she has any chance of survival. So how important are gutsy females to dystopian fiction?

?Girls should read about other girls who are strong and don't necessarily need a boy by their side to survive,? says Susanne. ?Many women have to raise children on their own, after all, and reading about these characters is a great way for girls to see we are just as capable as men. There are plenty of books out there that don't have strong female characters, so it's nice to have a balance.?

With the huge surge in popularity for the genre, why does Susanne think this type of fiction is such a hit with today's teens?

?In daily life we don't really face any survival issues ? at least not usually. It's helpful to see how people deal with problems. Characters like Sherry or Katniss from **The Hunger Games**, they give us hope. The struggle for survival often brings out the worst in people, but it also brings out the best: strength, and support, and love. So it's wonderful to see what people can do if they have to do it. Most of us don't really realise how strong we can be.?

For Sherry, the desperate situation in which she finds herself demands desperate measures. How many of us, after all, could survive in a bunker with the corpse of a close relative for company? When her grandfather dies, his body is stowed in the family freezer, a space previously set aside for fish fingers and peas.

?That's actually my favourite part!? Susanne says with macabre glee. ?But it's very practical ? her grandfather dies and they have to put him somewhere. He can't decay next to them. I watched a report about Mount Everest and if people die on the way up ? well, they have to leave their bodies there, frozen stiff. And I wondered, what do the climbers think when they come down and they have to walk past these bodies? I read about someone who always stored his dead rats in the freezer until he could bury them. Pretty creepy! I mean if I opened the freezer to get out some ice-cream and there were plastic bags with dead rats in it ? I'm sure it would put me off eating anything!?

So, if Susanne were in Sherry's situation, I wonder, how well would she be able to cope?

?Everyone has fears,? she explains. ?I'm scared of spiders ? I don't think I could touch one ? but if you're in a situation like Sherry's, well she wouldn't hesitate. If I were in a survival situation where's someone's life depended on it and I had no choice but to go into a room full of spiders?well, I'd do it! I think it makes us realise we're not as weak as we think we are.?

Sherry has to be especially strong to confront an awesome enemy; the Weepers. These former humans, infected by the mutant rabies virus, have transformed into savage and deadly quasi-animals. Yet unlike zombies, so prevalent at the moment in YA fiction, the Weepers still retain some human characteristics.

?I always liked characters or villains that have shades of grey; I hate black and white. The Weepers may have lost their humanity, but it could happen to anyone. Sherry has to confront this when she faces them. It makes it scarier if you start to imagine how that person came to be a Weeper??

And of course they weep real tears, which suggest they have emotions?

?Yes, I came across that in my research when I saw pictures of rabid dogs and it looked like they had tears; it actually looked like they were weeping. It's a scary image, I thought. Their tear ducts become overactive and with all the fur ? it looks horrible. There are some really terrifying pictures if you want to Google it!?

For a German, living and writing in her native country, it does seem a little unusual that she should write her first book in another language.

?It does seem a bit strange that I'm writing in English,? she explains. ?Many people just assume I'm from the US. But

about 90% of the books I read, I read in English. When I started doing research for **The Other Life**, and finding online writer's groups, I always communicated in English. So when I started writing, I did it in English, and it just felt right. Now, I can't imagine writing in German! I tried writing a short story in German and it didn't flow so then I switched to English and it just felt right. It's crazy I know??

It certainly makes sense when you consider the international group of writers Susanne communicates with via the internet. Together, they share views and critique each other's writing, and the group spans the UK, the US and even Australia.

?I've been working with the same group for 14 -16 months now, and we're all writers. If we have a new book, we send each other the manuscript and we critique each other's work. Over time we've become friends and met up with each other.?

If it's a tough and lonely life starting out as an author, Susanne certainly seems to have hit upon a practical solution. Daily contact with her virtual writing forum means there's a vital lifeline for all its members.

?Sometimes it's tough, and you have to motivate each other and just try to be supportive. It's really good to have friends who know what it's like. Real friends don't understand ? they think if a publisher accepts your book today, it'll be out in a week! They don't get it. Whereas my virtual group, they're all going through the same stuff.?

With a concluding sequel, **The Life Beyond** already written and due for publication in February 2013, will Susanne's next writing project be another dystopian story, I wonder?

?It's scary and a thriller, but not dystopian,? she says, quickly adding, ?It's still bloody! I like my books to have a lot of action. I don't have the patience to read pure romance ? I need some action or murder mystery to balance it out. I'd rather watch **Alien** or **Lethal Weapon** than a chick flick!?

*The Other Life* (1409536084) is published by Usborne at £6.99 pbk.

**Damian Kelleher** is a journalist and writer.

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