



# Authorgraph 222 Juno Dawson

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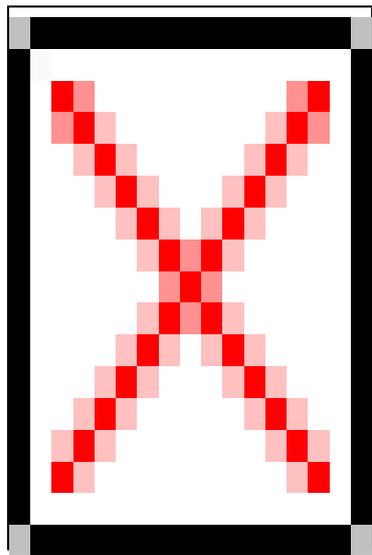
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Article Category:

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**Juno Dawson** interviewed by **Michelle Pauli**



I meet Juno Dawson in the artisan bakery-café in Hove where she writes, accompanied by her adored chihuahua Prince (who, banned from Dawson's lap by the café management's 'paws on the floor' policy, instead makes lickily enthusiastic attempts to befriend anyone who sits nearby). We meet just before Christmas, at the end of what's been a busy and transformative year for the former Queen of Teen. It's included a name change, a bestselling World Book Day title, and a settling back into the city where her writing career kicked off, five years ago.

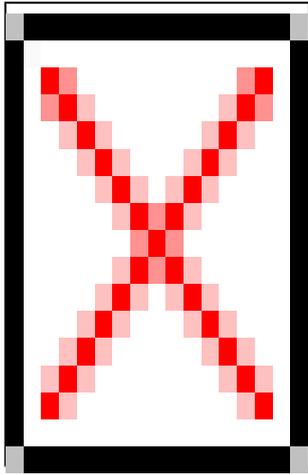
It was a long, damp school holiday here on the south coast that turned Dawson the primary school teacher into a writer. 'I was so bored!' she says, laughing. 'It was 2008 and all I wanted to do was read on the beach but the weather was just not having it. My friends were all at work so I ended up sitting at home watching America's Next Model on YouTube and going slowly mad.' She pledged that the following year would be different 'and the result was [Hollow Pike](#) [3], her first published novel. A paranormal thriller about friendship, it was spurred by the shortcomings of **Twilight**.

'It feels almost churlish to criticise **Twilight**,' she says. 'I think everything that can possibly be said about **Twilight** has been said about **Twilight**. But it did strike me that it was so much about a girl who was very wrapped up in her boyfriend. I vividly remember that at my school, all our fun and all our dramas were about friends, not boyfriends. The fact was that, in **Twilight**, Bella didn't have any friends, so I thought maybe I'll write a book about my friends and, since we spent a lot of our time at school wishing that we could develop powers so we would kill our bullies, I was kind of like, well, let's do that then.'

Dawson swiftly got an agent and a bidding war for the book followed, eventually won by Orion, keen for **Hollow Pike** to spearhead its new Indigo YA list in 2012. While Dawson can, perhaps surprisingly, sound a little downbeat about the experience of publishing **Hollow Pike** ('the unfortunate thing with **Hollow Pike** was that the train from supernatural town had very much departed and all anybody then wanted was **Hunger Games**-inspired stories?'), it set her career off at a pace ('the first couple of years did feel like being dragged behind a moving vehicle') and sparked a move to a new

publisher, Hot Key, for her next eight books, the latest of which is **Margot and Me**.

It's a novel that may surprise those familiar with Dawson's work so far, and Dawson admits that she's "really, really



worried" about it. She needn't be. However, she's right that it's "more ambitious, perhaps" than previous books. It's a gripping tale of the relationship between a wilful teenage girl and her equally strong-willed grandmother, set in rundown rural Wales and spanning two historical time periods more than 50 years apart, 1941 and 1998.

Resentful of having to leave behind her London life to stay with her cold, critical grandmother Margot, so that her chronically ill mother can recuperate in the countryside, and struggling to settle at her new school (which comes complete with nasty, flush your-head-down-the-loo girls), Fliss sees the discovery of Margot's wartime diary as a chance to get her own back. But, as Fliss delves deeper into Margot's extraordinary story and life, and then has to deal with a tragedy of her own, the two women draw closer.

Dawson is clear that, although the wartime section includes a love affair, the book is not a historical romance: it's a "love story about family" and "a proper weepy".

"It occurred to me that there wasn't a book in my life that I turned to in the way I would turn to the film **The Notebook** (starring Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams) on a rainy Sunday afternoon when you know that you're not going to go out all day and you just want a really super-weepee love story, a **Breakfast at Tiffany's** kind of thing. I wished there was something like that in a YA novel," explains Dawson.

Margot's wartime diaries are absorbing, not just for the pacy revelations about her life as a teenager, but also for the period setting, for which Dawson drew on her years of teaching primary school kids about the second world war and its blitz evacuees. She also gave herself a get-out clause on historical detail with the diary format: "I'm sure I've got some things wrong, but I think that, unless it renders the story impossible, I almost don't care. I think what's more important is Margot and Fliss and the drama that's happening in their lives, not the type of soap available in 1941."

The school library "and a hot school librarian" feature heavily in the Fliss sections of the story and, as in her other books, represent Dawson's tribute to the vital role school libraries play in some teenagers' lives, drawing on her own memories of school.

"School libraries have always been a safe space for marginalised young people to not get beaten up. There is always an adult there, keeping an eye on things. From 1994 to 1999, at lunchtimes and break times, I was in the library," she says

Growing up in Bradford in a single parent family and "co-parented" by her grandmothers from both sides of the family, Dawson is clear about the influence of matriarchs on both her writing and her life.

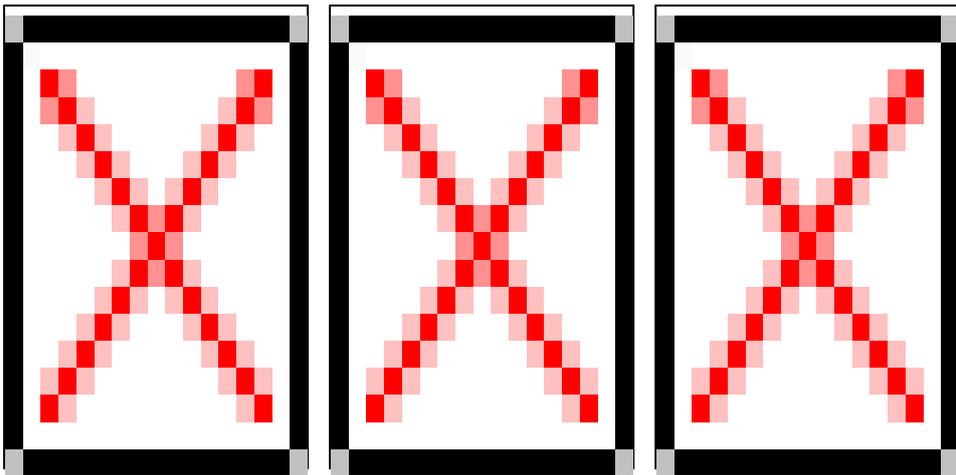
"I was surrounded by women - a sister, a mother and two grandmothers - and it never really occurred to me that women weren't in charge of things, so I think that's very much an influence on all my writing."

Dawson's family were supportive of her transition from James to Juno Dawson, announced in October 2015, as were Hot Key. As for her fans, "I knew there'd certainly be one group of people who wouldn't have any issues - my readers,

because my readers are nothing but fantastic and open minded.? While there have been some administrative headaches (from dealing with Amazon pages to public lending rights returns), Dawson believes that, professionally, the announcement may even have helped with her profile, opening up new opportunities, thanks to the current media interest in gender transitioning.

It's not all been plain sailing and, despite being able to stop teaching to become a full-time writer as soon as she got her first book deal in 2011, Dawson is concerned about the pressure on debut authors, as a result of her own experience.

?Publishing?s tough. If your debut doesn?t immediately catch fire, publishing can be quite a lonely place and I think, as an industry, we need to think more about building careers ? I?ve worked really hard but that?s about being a freelance writer. It?s like a plumber, the more taps you fix the more you get paid. The more I write, the more I get paid.?



Dawson is certainly a grafter ? and a versatile one at that. In the five years since **Hollow Pike**, she has published four YA novels (**Cruel Summer**, **Say Her Name**, **Under My Skin** and **All of the Above**) as well as three non-fiction self-help books (**Being a Boy**, **This Book Is Gay** and **Mind Your Head**) plus a World Book Day novella, **Mind the Difference**. She also writes a monthly column for **Glamour** magazine on being a transgender woman. This year she publishes three books, including an adult memoir, **The Gender Games**, a gothic ghost story illustrated by Alex T Smith, for Barrington Stoke, and is about to start modeling for a skincare company. However, she's clear where her passion lies.

?The only thing I really like doing is writing stories so, as long as I can carry on writing stories and as long as people want to carry on publishing them, I?m happy,? she says.

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

#### Books mentioned

**Margot and Me**, Hot Key Books, 978-1471406089, £7.99

**Hollow Pike**, Indigo, 978-1780621289, £6.99

**Cruel Summer**, Orion Children?s Books, 978-1780621753, £7.99

**Say Her Name**, Hot Key Books, 978-1471402449, £6.99

**Under My Skin**, Hot Key Books, 978-1471402968, £6.99

**All of the Above**, Hot Key Books, 978-1471404672, £6.99

**Being a Boy**, Red Lemon Press, 978-1783420001, £7.99

**This Book Is Gay**, Hot Key Books, 978-1471403958, £7.99

**Mind Your Head**, Hot Key Books, 978-1471405310, £7.99

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