



Costa Children's Book Award, Shortlist Interviews

2017: Sarah Crossan

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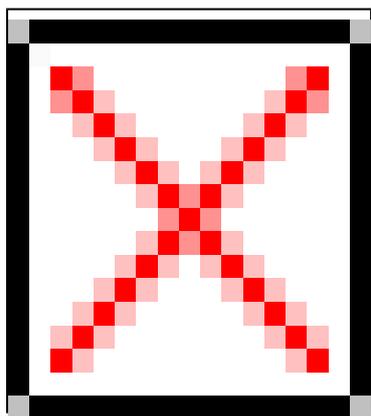
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An interview with **Sarah Crossan**, Costa-shortlisted author of **Moonrise**.

In a series of features on the authors shortlisted for the [2017 Costa Children's Book Award](#) [3], **Michelle Pauli** interviews **Sarah Crossan**.



[Moonrise](#) [4], Sarah Crossan's Costa-shortlisted verse novel about a boy's goodbye to his brother on death row, was prompted by a documentary film. Perhaps more unusually, it was a film Crossan had seen more than 20 years earlier in a religious studies class at school. **Moonrise** is a book that's been a long time in the brewing.

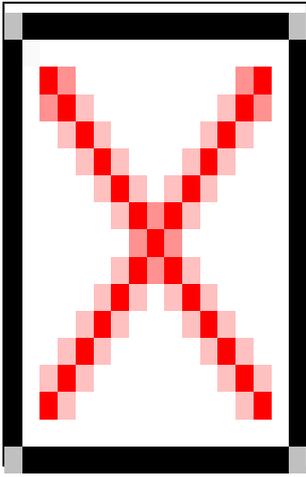
The film, [14 Days in May](#) [5], followed Edward Earl Johnson's final fortnight before execution in Mississippi and it has haunted the author since the age of 15. 'I was devastated by it,' says Crossan. 'And I continue to be devastated by it. I watched it again and again as I became an adult, went to university, became a teacher and began teaching about the death penalty. It never left me.'

Crossan was fixated less on the condemned prisoner than all the other victims created by the death penalty and the criminal justice system - the families left behind who have to say goodbye. She knew there was a story to be told but finding a way into it was not as easy as she first imagined.

'I wrote it as a verse novel but it wasn't working. My editor said, there's just something missing in it, it doesn't have the same Sarah Crossan heart to it as your other novels. So I went back to the drawing board and wrote almost 90,000 words in prose and still that wasn't working. So I went back to the drawing board again?? And still it wasn't right.

The problem, she discovered, was her starting point. 'I realised it had become an issue book, a book about the death penalty and not a book about brothers. When I realised that, the story then came to life for me and it ended up being about how do you say goodbye, as opposed to a book about the death penalty.' It then worked perfectly in verse.

The brothers at the heart of the book are Ed and Joe Moon, who grow up in a dysfunctional, poor New York family with

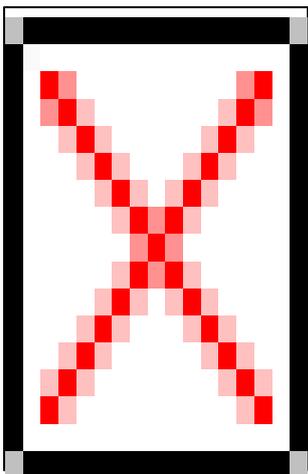


an emotionally, and then physically, absent mother. When we join the story Ed is on death row in Texas and has been for 10 years, since his little brother Joe was seven years old. We learn about Ed from Joe's perspective, from their shared obsession with **Star Wars** to his sudden disappearance and the call revealing that he had confessed to murder. When the news comes that Ed's execution date has been set, Joe relinquishes the chance of a high school athletics scholarship he's been working towards and travels from New York to Texas to speak to Ed for the first time in a decade and spend as much time as possible with him in his last days, all the while hoping for a reprieve. There's a tricky love interest along the way but the heartbreaking power of the story lies in the relationship between the brothers.

It's a familiar theme for Crossan - her Carnegie medal-winning novel [One](#) [6] was about conjoined twins - as is the emotional intensity of the book. As a method writer, she doesn't make life easy for herself.

"I really feel that when I write I have to be in the emotional state of the characters and so I spend a lot of my time being sad because I write these sad stories," she explains. "I have to access those stories in myself and my own personal history in order to be able to write authentically. I feel that if a writer wants a reader to go to a certain place emotionally, they have to do the work themselves."

Crossan is clear that method writing doesn't mean that the novel is not firmly grounded in reality: "to do the topic justice" she also undertook lots of research into the death penalty and the criminal justice system more generally, to the extent that the weight of the research initially risked tipping the book over the edge.



"I was so overloaded with this information I wanted to convey and I wanted the reader to come away understanding how barbaric this system was, that it felt like a lecture rather than a story," she comments. "I want character to drive the story and not issue. I'm not interested in writing an issue book or doing a number on my teenage readers. I want them to ask questions, not to come away with an answer I've prescribed for them. That was the problem with doing a lot of research for the book. Once I did find the question, which was "how do you say goodbye?" then I could leave some of the research behind and just write the story."

The free verse of [Moonrise](#) [4], like her hugely successful **One**, is a form Crossan has made her own and championed in YA fiction, since her debut, [The Weight of Water](#) [7], a collection of poems about a young Polish girl's move to

England. Always a more popular form in American YA, Crossan is starting to see a shift towards verse in the UK and Ireland and notes that her own agent is receiving many more submissions in verse form as people start to recognise, as a result of her own success, that it has commercial viability.

Crossan believes that the demand is being driven by the readers of her books ? and the librarians who champion them ? rather than by adults who think that poetry is ?a good thing? for children.

?It stems from children feeling ?wow, I can read a novel in two hours, not in 16 hours and normally I can?t read any novel at all? and having success with it. I think the beauty of a verse novel that?s written to a decent standard is that it really does encourage the reluctant reader to get into reading because it might be 17 words on a page or 127 words on a page and so there?s all that white space that makes it feel less daunting.

?Then, for the much more capable reader, that white space provides an opportunity for them to do the writing themselves, to intuit what was intended by that line break or indentation or space. When adults see that children are not resistant to it then librarians and booksellers will stock it, parents are prepared to buy it. I think it had to come from the children, though. It had to be children saying this is something we value and we want more. That?s really what?s happened.?

Nevertheless, reactions in school can still vary. As she puts it, ?sometimes you?ll go in and say you?re there to talk about poetry and the kids will look like they want to stab themselves in the face with a pencil because you?ve mentioned the P word! But give me 20 minutes with the kids and I can usually win them over. And that?s the thing about young people ? they are prepared to be won over. They want to try something new and different that the adults aren?t reading.?

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

Moonrise [4] is published by Bloomsbury, 978-1-4088-6780-8, £12.99 hbk

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