



Authorgraph 214: Sarah Crossan

Article Author:

[Clive Barnes](#) [1]

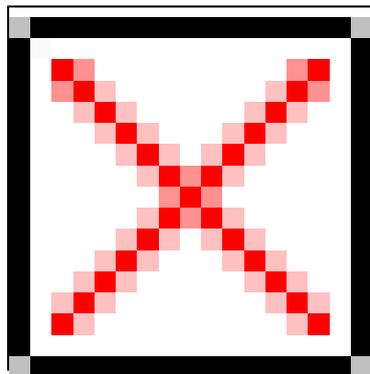
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The author of **One** and **Apple and Rain** interviewed by Clive Barnes.



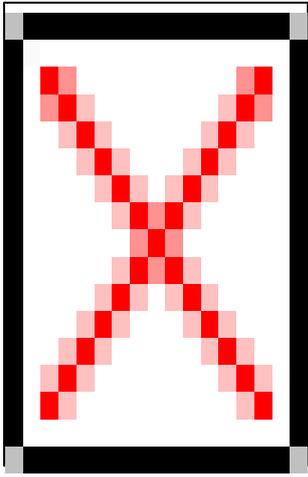
At one end of Sarah Crossan's kitchen is a blackboard that takes up nearly a whole wall.

While Sarah's daughter could be expected to make some contributions there, it's a fair bet she didn't write up the quote from Aristotle or the admonition well out of a three-year-old's reach to 'work hard and be happy' (if I remember the gist of it). Sarah has certainly been working hard. Her first book for young people, [The Weight of Water](#) [3], was published in the UK in 2012, and in the three years since there have been four others, with her newest title, [One](#) [4], just published. Already she has a sparsely furnished, eco-friendly, en-suite version of a writer's shed at the end of the garden.

While she always wanted to be a writer, Sarah says that she lacked confidence. She studied Philosophy and Literature at Warwick University and then chose to train as a teacher partly, she says, to get over her shyness with people. She taught for a couple of years, and it was while teaching that she decided to return to Warwick to do an MA in Creative Writing. 'I was teaching kids and telling them they could be anything they wanted to be, and then they would ask me, so did you always want to be a teacher then? And I would have to say, well no, not really.' She says that she knows that some people doubt the validity of a degree in creative writing but, for her, it meant that she was told 'I was not terrible' and could for the first time feel justified in taking herself seriously as a writer.

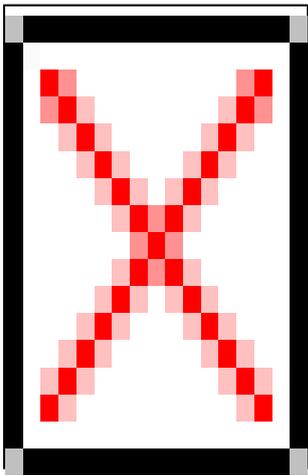
By the time Sarah graduated, she had met her future husband and moved to New York with him. Not able to find work, she came back after six months and returned to teaching, maintaining a long distance relationship for three years. She then rejoined her husband in the USA and spent seven years teaching in independent schools, before they finally moved back to the UK after the birth of their daughter and the publication of Sarah's first novel.

It was while teaching at a private school in New York that Sarah gained an Edward Albee fellowship, enabling her to

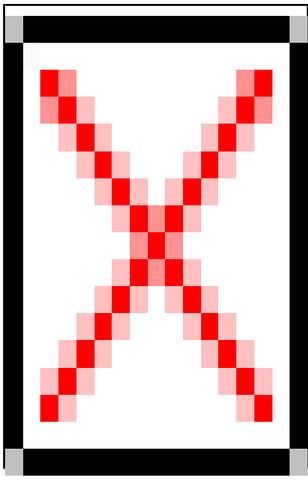


retreat to a remote converted barn on Long Island to write for a month in the company of other writers and artists. Her intention was to complete the adult novel she had been working on for about six or seven years. In the event, what emerged was the first draft of **The Weight of Water**, written in the intensity of the moment, 'getting up at 5 in the morning and writing until 10 at night.' She was persuaded by a friend to send it out, and it was picked up by her present literary agent, Julia Churchill. 'Having been a teacher, and really loving young people, writing for them was sort of natural, and I don't know why I hadn't done it before. And then I thought, okay, this is what I am meant to be doing.'

Although written in the States, [The Weight of Water](#) [3] is the story of Kasienska, a young Polish immigrant living with her mother in a one-room flat in Coventry and finding her place in a new country and a new school. What makes it distinctive is that it is written from Kasienska's point of view as a series of short poems, each rarely more than two pages long and sometimes as short as six or seven lines. Sarah was aware of the verse novel for young people as a popular form in the USA. She had taught Karen Hesse's Newbery Award-winning **Out of the Dust**. 'But I hadn't realised that, although in America the verse novel sells really well - you've got writers like Ellen Hopkins who are bestsellers - in the UK it's much more of a hard sell and Julia said we'd have to find a publisher who had real confidence in the book. I was very lucky to find Bloomsbury.'

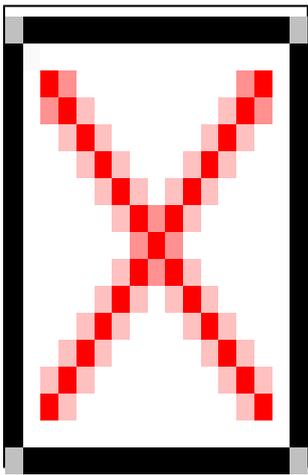


To say **The Weight of Water** was well received would be an understatement. It was shortlisted for the **Carnegie Award** and won a clutch of other awards. It was followed by two prose dystopian novels, **Breathe** (2012) and **Resist** (2013). These are set in a future polluted time where the air is so contaminated that survivors are confined to a hermetically sealed dome in which social divisions determine access to oxygen. Sarah returned to a contemporary story with [Apple and Rain](#) [5], published in 2014, about a young girl adjusting to the sudden arrival of her long-lost mother and a new sister. This was also in prose, but with a big supportive role in the story for poetry and Apple's poetry-loving English teacher. This, too, was shortlisted for the Carnegie. And now there



is this year's new novel, **One**, the story of conjoined twins, again in verse.

Sarah believes that with the dystopian novels she was finding her feet, 'working out what kind of writer I was'; and, although they were successful commercially, she probably won't go back to genre writing. 'I feel more comfortable with contemporary fiction and I feel really comfortable writing in verse.' True, verse is more intense and can sometimes be difficult to write, 'because it's about the melody, and the rhythm of the language?', but 'I really like that stripping away. There is a lot of narration in prose and you don't necessarily need that. I think that writing in prose is like a film and that writing in verse is like a series of photographs. With verse, you leave the reader to do a lot more work and it gives the reader a lot more credit.'



She doesn't feel that she actively chooses the way that she writes. She says that, however pretentious it might sound, it's the story that demands a particular approach. She began **One** in prose believing that, with the medical detail that she might need to put across in the story, this would be the way to do it. But, after thirty thousand words 'half a book!' as she says in remembered exasperation 'it just wasn't working. When she began it again it was in verse. Set in New York, it's the story of twins, Grace and Tippi who share a single body below their hips, and how they adjust to going to school for the first time in their lives and to being the subject of a TV documentary. It looks at how adolescence and its hopes and dreams, especially in terms of love and identity, might be experienced within a relationship so physically and emotionally indivisible. Sarah had at first thought that she would tell it from both Grace's and Tippi's point of view but, having begun it from Grace's point of view, she found that 'Tippi just wouldn't speak to me.' Nor did she anticipate the ending, which has moved some of her readers to tears. 'The ending is just as the ending needed to be. I don't want to manipulate the reader in any way.'

She feels a keen responsibility to her readers just as she did to her students when she was a teacher. 'I felt that my job when they came in was to make them want to be in the room.' And she feels that verse novels, although relatively unfamiliar in the UK, may be a good way to connect to teenage readers: 'The kids read them so quickly.' She feels, too, that verse novels can be a way of making poetry relevant to young people's lives rather than it just being the subject of study in English Literature classes. She believes that writers for young people should deal with challenging themes. Thinking about a book that she had been asked to review recently which dealt with sexual abuse, she says, 'There is a responsibility to address every single subject, because that's the reality for young people. They may be living lives where they are bullied or abused.' But she feels that this must be done carefully without traumatising readers, and the hallmarks of her work to date are its sensitivity, empathy and humour.

So far, she has written from a girl's point of view but she doesn't feel that her books are necessarily girls' books and the book she is working on at the moment is about a seventeen-year-old boy. 'I don't think the books have been marketed as girls' stories and I have good reactions from boys when I meet them.' Each of the protagonists in her contemporary stories are, in one way or another, outsiders finding their way in new social situations or relationships. In each book school, family and friendships play a big part. 'There's a weird balance in a young person's life which is, how can I fit in but also how can I be different and stand out, how can I be special? We all have those insecurities but it's so pronounced when you're young. So even though a book is about a Polish girl moving to England, or about conjoined twins in a private school in New York, we're all feeling that way. I think my job, as it was when I was a teacher, is to validate young people, to tell them that it's going to be okay.'

It looks as though her own career as a writer is going to be more than okay, with the publication of **One** and the imminent announcement of a publishing deal for a verse novel she has already completed as a collaborative project. She is immensely proud of appearing on the Carnegie shortlist, the posters for which are in pride of place above her desk. She says that it made her think that she could 'actually do this as a job. It made me want to keep producing good work.' Yet she is still getting used to the idea of herself as a successful writer and gives huge credit to her agent and to her editors at Bloomsbury and at Greenwillow in the States for their support and advice. Her agent is the first person with whom she discusses her work: 'It's like a marriage, where you have to be honest with each other and have difficult conversations. In terms of my writing Julia's the most important person in my life. She picked me out of the slush pile. She knows the kind of books I want to be writing. I owe her a lot.'

Sarah is very knowledgeable about the younger generation of writers for young people, and there are writer friends whom she can call up when the solitary business of writing gets a bit too much. Born in Dublin, she feels especially privileged to have been welcomed into the Irish as well as the British and American children's book scene. She says that she is naturally gregarious and misses teaching. 'But part of writing for young people is about meeting young people, and doing school visits and doing events. And they are so excited and you get the nicest e-mails. That's what's lovely about writing for young people. It feels like an activity that happens in a community.' So she doesn't think that she will go back to writing for adults. But for a writer of her talent at the beginning of her career, there are plenty of challenges. She wants to make poetry more a part of young people's lives. She has been approached for picture book texts too, something she has thought about as she tries to find good books for her daughter. She knows that, contrary to what some people might think, writing picture books would be 'really, really hard'. But, given that she can already be credited with introducing the verse novel to young people in the UK, I don't expect that to deter her in the least.

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

Books, all published by Bloomsbury Children's Books:

[**The Weight of Water**](#) [3], 978-1-4088-3023-9, £6.99 pbk

Breathe, 978-1-4088-2719-2, £6.99 pbk

Resist, 978-1-4088-2720-8, £7.99 pbk

[**Apple and Rain**](#) [5], 978-1-4088-2713-0, £6.77 pbk

One, 978-1-4088-6311-4, £10.99 hbk

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