

1999/March KATE PETTY - Publishing News

If there's one thing Kate Petty has proved to herself, since leaving behind Random House, and her position as Editorial Director of its non-fiction Riverswift imprint, it's that there surely is life after the corporate experience. Probably best known for her non-fiction books - her first ever title, published in '78, was *Looking at Pictures with Rolf Harris* - she's written 100 books since starting her career at Jonathan Cape in 1972 and won plaudits in the business for originality.

Mainstream success has come from the extraordinary grammar and maths pop-ups she's done with Jenny Maizels. And now I'm sitting with Petty in her new guise of series fiction author, in her office at Orion - where, as it happens, her husband Mike also ploughs an editorial furrow - although Kate is quick to point out that he arrived after she did, following the acquisition of Gollancz.

The question may be obvious, but it has to be asked...why *another* teen fiction series? "Because *Girls Like You* is a UK series," replies Petty quite forcefully. "When my daughter was 13 she read all the American stuff and as hard as I looked - as a parent and a publisher - I couldn't find an English equivalent, and I couldn't believe it didn't exist."

It was, says Petty, an extremely simple idea: a group of teenage girls all agree to have holiday romances and report back. And not only did Petty have her own template - complete with friends - living at home, she also liked the characters, and the way they made her laugh. "I wanted the girls to be British, go to State school and shop at M & S," Petty goes on, "and above all I wanted the series to be light - as opposed to heavily issue-based."

Series fiction, like its soap opera cousin on TV, has, in recent years, tackled some fairly serious subjects - drugs, abortions, incest - in an attempt, you sometimes feel, to lose their 'fluff' image and be taken more seriously. It hasn't done the genre an awful lot of good as those who'd always complained about its lack of substance complained all the louder when characters had to deal with the 'real' world. No one's going to accuse

Petty of producing Literature, and that was never what she set out to do, but neither will they be able to get in a stew about the subject matter.

“These kids live in a world where they’re bombarded by news and adverts... they know what’s happening,” says Petty. “Their world’s full of little dramas, because in most people’s lives friends don’t die of drug overdoses or in car crashes, but there’s stuff happening in the background...it’s teenage life as I perceive it.” And how did her daughter take to this invasion of her territory? “The books are dedicated to her, and approved by her,” says Petty. “When I wrote the first one I had no idea how I was doing, so I gave the first half to my daughter to read - the wait was the most nerve-wracking two hours of my life! But when she finally emerged from her room she was smiling and asking for the next chapter.”

Your own kids are often a notoriously inaccurate barometer - they’re either after something, and therefore of the opinion that your shopping list is worthy of winning the Booker, or they’ve just discovered they hate every molecule of your existence...no, really, every single one. So, to reinforce her daughter’s commendation with an unbiased opinion, Petty asked the English Department at her local comprehensive to give out copies to 12-year-olds for comment. “It was taking ages to get anything back...I thought no one was bothering, but it turned out it was because the books just kept getting passed round,” smiles Petty, recalling her favourite quote from a reader. “One girl wrote ‘she captures puberty in an egg cup’, although I’m sure she meant nutshell!”

It wasn’t simply that Petty had turned out to be a highly skilled observer of human nature. She had a secret weapon. Her diaries. “I wrote them at school from the age of 13 until I was 20,” she tells me. “I got them all out, in secret, and they turned out to be very useful - crammed with tiny detail, much of it of the ‘he looked at me!’ type of thing, but it brought back the feeling of what it was really like...reminded me of how trivial events could really set me off, how my moods changed and how easily embarrassed I was.”

Orion is launching *Girls Like You* with four titles, *Sophie*, *Hannah*, *Maddy* and *Charlotte*, two in April, two in July. Was Petty at all worried at the

prospect of an ongoing series? “Not really...I’ve been through a very steep learning curve with these books,” she says, “and I’ve got a lot more ideas for what the girls could do...there’s lots still to write.” What about letting someone else write books about her characters, in true series fiction style? “If they followed my rules,” she nods. “if the books were light and romantic...and I also have views on sex and teen fiction - there’s a reason the girls are 14, and it’s because I’m writing about *romance* and not sex. When you write for kids you lay your fantasies on them, and I feel strongly that you shouldn’t lay your sexual fantasies on the 11-year-olds who are probably going to be picking these books up.”

The characters talk about sex a lot, as girls do, and naturally there’s groping “...but that’s the world we live in, it’s on the front page of just about every tabloid paper and magazine and we all have to deal with it, kids included.” Petty thinks her girls are real in a way that many characters in other series aren’t; real, and with an awareness of class so you’ll know they really are truly British. “I’d love the books to go to the US,” says Petty, “but I suspect they won’t as American kids won’t understand - or want to understand - the culture, even though the subject matter’s pretty universal.”

For someone who, by her own admittance, usually gets away with 12 spreads in a book, this has been something of eye-opening experience. “These are 40,000 words each - proper books!” says Petty. “They’re holiday reads, and I don’t mind if they’re called light fiction as long as kids are reading - it’s good to read!” With Red Fox re-issuing *Jake’s Book* as a Readaloud, *The Magnificent Music Book* publishing in September and work progressing on a fourth, no doubt equally magnificent, pop-up, Petty looks like having a year to remember.