



Author Spotlight

Kendall Kulper chats to Graham Marks

Kendall Kulper is an American author who lives in Boston; here she talks to **Graham Marks** about her debut novel, *The Witch of Salt & Storm*.

I see from your bio that you started out working for the financial services company Bloomberg, was that as a journalist?

I was a producer and a writer for Bloomberg Radio, so I started out writing scripts for the news pieces you'd hear at the top of the hour; I did that for, I guess about six months, and then I was the producer for a talk show for about two and a half years.

What prompted the move from broadcasting to writing?

I lived in New York and my husband [then fiancée] lived in Chicago finishing his graduate degree and we were trying to figure out some way to get to be in the same city. I was enjoying my work, but I had kind of moved more towards a managerial position, rather than a writing position which is what I wanted to do, and so I was thinking about what I wanted to do next. Meanwhile I was working on a novel which was going well and it was a good excuse to try something new and to get to Chicago...I kind of told myself that I would give myself a couple of years to try and do this thing that I always wanted to do, and thankfully it worked out.

This is your debut novel, which on your website you refer to as just *Salt & Storm*, not *The Witch of Salt & Storm* - is that your shorthand for the book?

Salt & Storm is actually the US title, in the UK it's a little fancier.

How hard was it to be heard, to get your idea read and finally accepted for publication?

I would say it was a lot of work, but I wouldn't say it was difficult...[although] it was in the sense that the odds are stacked against you and you're up against a lot of other really amazing talent, and that can be very challenging. But this is actually the third book that I've written.

I wrote one book and tried to get an agent with that, but it wasn't the right book; so, I wrote another book and tried to get an agent with that one, but it also wasn't the right book, and I really just learned that the best thing you can be is adaptive and to take criticism and to constantly be working on new things.

You have to know when a project really isn't going anywhere – I think one of the traps that sometimes people fall into is they overwork a project for years and years and years because they love it so much, which is very natural; but sometimes the best thing to do is to just tell yourself 'I need to start fresh'.

So, once I had my third novel I really knew that it was a *lot* better than the first two – I had learnt a lot writing those first two - and I got my agent with that one and then I got my US book deal within about a month after signing with her. It was very quick when it got going, but there were also two and a half years of work that didn't really go anywhere.

Do you think either of your first two novels will ever see the light of day?

No! [laughs] No, no, no, no, *never!*

Having completed two novels that didn't go anywhere, where did the successful idea for *The Witch Of Salt & Storm* come from?

Well, I've always loved islands and I had a book about them, which I really liked, but I felt like it didn't capture what I knew about island communities – for years my family has had a house on Martha's Vineyard, which is a little island off the coast of Massachusetts, and we go there a lot of times in the off-season, so we know the community, when it's really just the people who live there.

I think island communities are so unique, [and Martha's Vineyard is] a very contained community and everybody knows everybody else, which can be really great, in some ways, and it can be really a problem in other ways. When you're there you have a feeling of safety, but also of suffocation. You're such a part of the community, which sometimes you don't want to be. And I really like that tension, and I think that's something a lot of teenagers can relate to, at that time in their life, so I wanted to write a book which would explore that. Since I know Martha's Vineyard really well, I began looking there...and that's where it started.

How long was *Salt & Storm* in your head before it made it onto paper, or at least its own file on your desktop?

I would say it was pretty quick...I usually try not to think too much about my next idea until I'm in a position to put some work into it and I really only like working on one thing at a time. Right about the time I was finishing an edit on what was my second book I started thinking about different things, a couple of different ideas that I'd had kicking around, and I think it was pretty quick, the time between having the idea and putting it down.

What's the attraction of YA fiction for you, as opposed to either writing younger or for adults? *The Life of Pi*, for example, has a child as it's lead character, but it's an adult book, *The Witch of Salt & Storm* has some very adult themes, but it's a YA book...how did you choose your direction?

I think I'm interested in the kind of things YA emphasises...I think the core of what YA novels get at is that very special, unique moment in somebody's life when there's a point where the child who they've been their whole lives starts to define for themselves what kind of person they are actually going to be; who do they actually want to be? I can think of so many things in my life right now that came out of decisions that I made as a teenager, and it's [also] the moment when you start to see your parents as people, and you're supposed to be interested in romance in a much more serious way. I think they are just so many great times in a person's life that begin in those years that I can't ever see myself moving away from writing about that period.

As far as what makes a YA novel and what makes an adult novel, I don't know if I'm super-qualified to make a distinction; I don't think that sometimes there is a distinction...and sometimes people draw a line in the sand [between them] a little bit deeper than it needs to be. I think that adults are reading YA novels and teenagers are reading adult novels, and sometimes they're not quite as different as people think.

How much history is there in your fiction?

Well, I was a History major in college and so research was huge for me; even though this is a fantasy I definitely made sure, to the best of my ability, that all the facts I was putting in there were accurate. So when [my heroine] is on a boat the boat has the right number of crew, the people are wearing what they're supposed to be wearing and eating what they're supposed to be eating.

I really enjoy history...a lot of people think that it's a little dull and removed and it doesn't necessarily have any bearing on their lives, but I think history is so rich. A lot of things in the book came from research, even the really fantastical items; all the magic in the book came from real stories. I was really pleasantly surprised at how much history there was that was rich and inspiring and gave so many details to the story. And that's really, I think, what makes the atmosphere, makes the world real, because it's grounded in things that actually happened.

You've said that the vast majority of your heroine Avery's world – even the magic – came out of real-life events, people and folklore; how close, in your mind, are magic and superstition?

Well, you could maybe say that they are two words that mean the same thing. Even today you have those who are incredibly superstitious and I think that certainly with something as vast and unknowable as the ocean...[pauses]...you know, I find it extremely scary, I don't like going on boats very much, and especially if you are in a situation where you can't see land. I think it's unsurprising, when you're faced with something that you really can't control, like the conditions on the ocean, that you would put your faith in something like superstition, or magic. I don't believe in magic [laughs] I don't think that it's real, [but, I can see why you might] say to yourself 'If I knock three times on my ship it's not going to sink', and maybe you'll sleep a little better.

In the book magic seems to me to be a metaphor – at least in Avery’s mind – for a yearning for individuality *in her life and control of her life.*

I wouldn't say that I set out thinking of it as a metaphor...I do think that in the book that I wanted to write I didn't want the magic to feel like it was puerile, or that once Avery became a witch all of her problems would be solved or that magic *could* solve any of these problems...I really wanted [magic] to feel almost like a commodity, almost something like electricity, a force that can be channelled and you have to figure it out.

There's an important moment in the book where Avery says 'I never received a manual of instruction in my magic'; she's really just trying to figure it out. And nobody has any of the answers, vis-a-vis how it functions...and I wanted it to feel like it's not as simple as you just have follow [the instructions] and it's just like anything else in life, that there is a lack of control and you have to adapt to circumstances.

So I wouldn't say exactly it was a metaphor, it was much more that I wanted magic to feel like anything does at that age: The way you *think* you really understand [something], but the more you find out the more you realise you don't know anything about it.

The book has a very individual feel, part gothic Victorian tale, very dark, laced-up and stultifying, and part dark fantasy, and it's also an intensely romantic coming-of-age story; was it hard to meld those different elements together?

It's interesting that you say that, because I just wrote the book that needed to be written, but I wasn't even thinking 'How do I put these elements together?'. I do think it's interesting how YA readers really need a romantic element...a lot of readers say they want to have [that], which I always find very hard for me to write. I always feel like these things happen over and over again – boy meets girl; there's a moment where they don't quite get along; then they *do* get along and there's happy love and romance.

How much of the angst Avery feels is based on your own experiences growing up?

I would say that Avery, as a character, is *very* different from how I was as a person [at that age], which I did on purpose...she's pretty cocky and full of herself and really thinks she has her whole life figured out, *everybody* in her life figured out. She feels that she knows what everybody should be doing, and how everybody should be treating her – and she's not afraid to tell people this – and she changes a lot throughout the book.

But I wasn't really like that at all, I was very quiet - not that I wasn't afraid to speak my mind - but I think I cared a lot less about what other people thought of me than Avery does; she certainly cares about that a lot. Actually, it was really fun when she would be confronted with something that bothered her, where my own inclination would have been to let it slide or to maybe not say anything or to maybe say something kind of snarky in my head, to know that I had a character who would confront that. It was really fun. She wouldn't let things slide, she would really get angry and say things that were stupid or rude or insensitive, and it was fun to wonder what would happen if I got in a fight with somebody and I *didn't* keep my mouth shut [laughs].

So yes, Avery's very different from me, and her mother is *very* different from my mother...I have been asked if I based the mother/daughter relationship on me and my Mom, and no, not at all. My Mom's wonderful and we have a terrific relationship.

One thing you do share with Avery is that you both have first name's which could be either male or not female – until I did a check online, I thought you were a guy who was very skilful at writing female characters - where did Avery's name come from?

Avery's name is not period-accurate – there is no woman who would ever have the name Avery in 1859, which is when the book it set - which I knew, going into it. I was very conscious, picking her name, I liked how it sounded like waves and there's a song called *Dear Avery* by the band The Decemberists that I really love and where I got the idea for the name. It's a lovely song, very beautiful, also about a man called Avery, not a woman; it's a song about childhood and protecting your child from danger.

Avery is such a popular name these days - I think it's in the top 100, maybe even the top 50 - and I wanted something that felt very contemporary, even though it's a historical novel. I'm not writing a historical document and I wanted something to jump out at readers and feel very modern, in a way.

You say you're not writing a historical document, and Prince Island in the book isn't a real place – did you feel you had to create your geography, because the story wouldn't work on a real island, like Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard?

I wanted to make my own history of the place, and Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket have both got their

own great histories and real people who have lived there...I wanted a chance to start from scratch and have control over everything, and I wrote a whole history of Prince Island - how it was discovered by the English, where it got its name, the fact that there were no trees - and I wanted to be able to have complete control of everything in the world, without having to worry about somebody who actually lived there saying 'You got this inaccurate!'. I wanted it to belong to me.

In some ways the book is pulled in two directions: You've allowed yourself to have freedom by creating a fictional island, but you've also tied yourself to whaling and all the things you *have* to get right about that subject. Do you now know far too much about whaling?

Yes, far too much. It is very funny...sometimes I think that I could kill a whale in multiple ways and get that oil; not that I would, but I could. I definitely know way more about 19th century whaling than I ever imagined I ever would. But like I said earlier, [this book] is not non-fiction, it's not historical fiction, it's historical fantasy. My editor and I would joke that whenever there were inaccuracies I would just say 'It's *my* book!', and she'd say 'Oh, OK, great!'.