

A Q&A with Sarah J. Harris

What inspired you to write *The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder*?

I've been interested in synaesthesia for many years, after coming across the condition during my work as a freelance education journalist. I was also fascinated by face blindness and read up a lot about it. The central idea for the book eventually came to me in a dream: a young boy running across a suburban street at night, terror etched on his face. When I woke up, I wondered what had traumatised the boy. Perhaps he had face blindness and identified people by the colour of their voices. What if the voice colour of someone he knew well had transformed to a horrific shade as they screamed? What if he had seen the colour of their murder? The idea for the book grew from there.

***The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder* is a really unusual murder mystery and touches on several different neurological conditions. What was it like to research these and then pull them together into an authentic voice for Jasper?**

I really loved doing the research for the book and my background as a journalist definitely helped. I wanted to make Jasper's world as genuine and believable as possible and that was only possible by checking every single element of it. I interviewed experts in synaesthesia – Jamie Ward, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Sussex and Dr Mary Jane Spiller, Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology at the University of East London. Both were

tremendously helpful and encouraging throughout the process. I also wanted to talk to synaesthetes themselves and was aided by James Wannerton at the UK Synaesthesia Association and Professor Sean Day, from Trident Technical College, South Carolina, who runs the world famous Synesthesia List. Both put out appeals for potential interviewees. I was overwhelmed with the response and the generosity of the synaesthesia community in terms of their help and advice – people got in touch from the UK, Germany and the US. I quizzed synaesthetes about the colours they saw for sounds such as a front door slamming, a doorbell ringing, a bird singing and a car engine revving as well as voices. I also interviewed people with face blindness – discovering the markers they used to help identify people – and checked plot points with Hazel Plastow from Face Blind UK. I researched autism and was assisted by The National Autistic Society. I felt I really knew Jasper from doing all my research and could hear his voice very strongly in my head. I dreamt about him too.

Was *The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder* the first book you wrote? Have you always written?

I've always written ever since I was a young child. I tried to get my first book published when I was about seven. It was called *The Moondrop Family* and I illustrated it myself. I had a very nice rejection letter from a publisher telling me never to give up and I didn't! Before *The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder*, I had three Young Adult novels published under a pseudonym, Sarah Sky.

Bee is a very layered character and, on the surface, she makes some choices that seem incomprehensible from an outsider's perspective. How did you balance her behaviour

as you wrote? Do you think it was important to make her likeable at all or was it more important to show her from all angles?

I enjoy writing complex characters because people are complex in real life – they don't fit into neat, convenient boxes. Everyone has faults. I thought it was vitally important to show Bee from all angles. Yes, she does terrible things, particularly to Jasper and Lucas, which I would never condone. But I don't believe she's a one hundred percent 'bad person', with no redeeming features – as Jasper says, she was 'good and bad and thousands of shades in between'. I tried to show that, despite her flaws, she also has good points – she's mostly kind to Jasper and considers him her only kindred spirit on the street, despite eventually using him for her own purposes. She's also a victim herself and has never been truly loved, supported, or protected as a child. She wants to feel loved, but looks for love in entirely the wrong places. I think it's okay to feel sorry for Bee *and* be utterly repulsed by her manipulative, exploitative behaviour.

What do you want readers to take away from *The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder*?

Hopefully, the message will resonate with readers that we all perceive the world very differently and that diversity is a wonderful thing. It's okay to be different and to accept others who are. We shouldn't have to try to conform to society's image of 'normal'. What is normal anyway? We often confuse normal with average and who wants to be average?

What are you working on next?

I'm working on my second adult book at the moment but I'd also like to write more YA books in the future. I always have lots of ideas bubbling away in the background for different books.