



# Rosie Loves Jack: an interview with Mel Darbon

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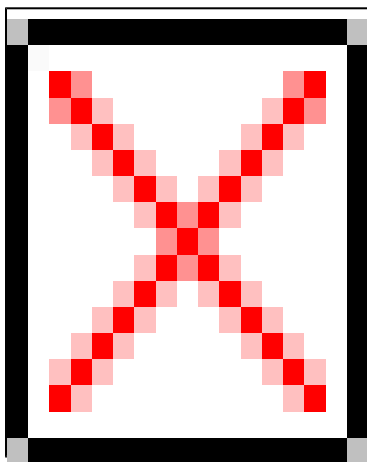
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The author of **Rosie and Jack** interviewed by **Rebecca Butler**



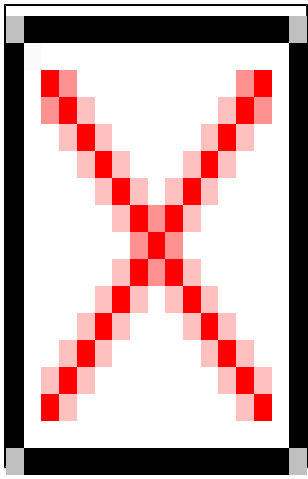
Mel Darbon's debut novel [Rosie Loves Jack](#) [3] tells the story of a sixteen year old young woman with Down's syndrome who falls in love and then heads off on an unaccompanied road trip to reunite with her boyfriend. A plotline like this could be paved with dangers for authors. **Rebecca Butler** interviewed Mel about the book for **Books for Keeps**.

Writing about people with disabilities is a difficult ask ? how did Mel conduct the research needed to make her portrayal of Rosie convincing? Mel explained that she worked for two years as a Teaching Assistant at a mainstream sixth form college offering specialist courses for students with learning difficulties. One such student was actually called Rosie, a teenager with Down's syndrome. In this college the students with or without special needs were encouraged to mix outside the classroom. Mel also accompanied some of the students with impairments when they went out on work experience jobs.

Unusually Mel's text is narrated in the first person by a disabled character, did this narrative voice create any special difficulties or opportunities for the author? Mel says that her aim was to present a convincing portrait of a teenager in love, not someone whose presentation is dominated by disability. Human emotions don't discriminate between disabled and non-disabled individuals. Don't assume that someone who has difficulty communicating has nothing to say. ?The words in my head are the same as yours ? sometimes they just come out wonky? says Darbon's Rosie.

Mel observes that people with Down's syndrome often show a marked sensitivity to the feelings of other people. But at the same time they may be misled into thinking that someone is kind and helpful when in fact that person has devious motives. They are inclined to live in the moment ? and take the moment at face value, being too trusting.

Mel faced another complex task replicating Rosie's speech in the text. People with Down's syndrome often have anatomical



changes in the throat and mouth that affect their speech. The author sometimes ran Rosie's words together to reflect these difficulties, while at the same time ensuring that the text was intelligible to readers. Mel's own family experience is relevant here. She has a brother who is severely autistic and who experiences great difficulty in self expression. Occasionally however he utters words that are coherent and clear. She asks an intensely compelling question: how do we know what anyone with a cognitive impairment might actually be capable of inside their minds?

Kindly and well-informed people may find themselves asking what they can do for the unlucky ones who have an impairment. Darbon makes the point instead that everyone can learn from everyone else, even from those with an impairment.

What about a character who simply cannot speak? I wondered how Mel would deal with a non-verbal character? Sometimes, she says, body language and gesture may be enough. But sometimes physical movement is impaired too. Increasingly, technology can come to the rescue. Mel's character Lou has a computerised 'voice' that allows her to demonstrate her character and her wit. She types her thoughts and the computer speaks her words. Such technology however has its limits. An author is obliged to recognise them.

What if the narrator had been non-disabled? How would the narrative have differed? Mel says that the character with Down's syndrome is more open and less judgmental. Having a disabled narrator also allows the author to explore issues of prejudice and exclusion. A non-disabled Rosie might well be more cynical, more inward looking and less trusting.

Does Mel feel that publishers of children's books are doing enough to help young readers understand the issues of disability and disabled people? She says she's detected some progress, especially in picture books. But in the 10-14 age group and young adults, there is still a long way to go. Publishers, she suggests, may lack confidence that enough readers will buy such books. Parents and teachers have a job to do.

Which were the easiest and which the hardest parts of her book to write? Writing about Rosie, Mel says, was easy because the character was so fully formed in her imagination before she began to write. When she got Rosie's voice right she found as the author she was seeing the world through Rosie's eyes. The hardest part to write was the section where Rosie falls into the hands of a man who wants to groom her for sexual exploitation. In such episodes there is a fine line between realistic depiction and sensationalism. It was a line that Mel had to tread with intense concentration.

I mentioned how few writers had tackled the issue of sexual exploitation and disability. Why did other authors regard this topic as out of bounds? 'There is a conspiracy of silence about this matter, a conspiracy that protected Jimmy Saville for fifty years. Even when the truth about such crimes emerges, there is a tendency for people to imagine it as something happening in someone else's world. We don't want to own that problem?.'

More generally, the question of disabled people and their sexual lives is one that is ignored. Society needs more imaginative books, films and TV to demonstrate that disabled people have as much capacity for love as anyone else. Dealing with sexual exploitation, the evidence of victims is of paramount importance. If disabled victims are incapable of verbal testimony, society washes its hands of them. It is essential that police and prosecuting authorities learn better ways of communicating with a silent witness.

At one point of the story Rosie becomes homeless. There's another major social issue crammed between the covers of a single book. Did Mel ever fear that she was tackling too many major social problems at one go? 'I was aware of the danger', she says 'But feel that I'm doing no more than reflecting life as it is in 2018. Problems abound on every front, not least for young people. Novelists should not ignore them.'

What about Mel's next book? No details can yet be vouchsafed. But the book will involve an autistic teenager, the British drinking culture ? and a double-decker bus! I assured her that readers of **Books for Keeps** would look forward to its publication.

**Dr Rebecca Butler** writes and lectures on children's literature.

**[Rosie Loves Jack](#)** [3] is published by Usborne, 978-1474937832, £7.99 pbk

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