



Authorgraph: Lisa Williamson

By *AndreaMReece*

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Article Author:

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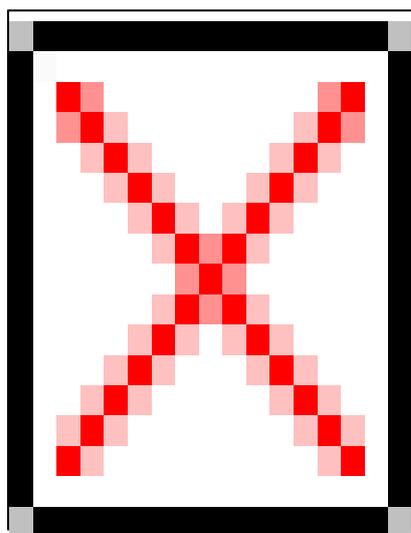
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Lisa Williamson interviewed by **Joanne Owen**

‘Stories that make you feel seen?’ - that’s how award-winning YA author Lisa Williamson describes the ethos that underpins her novels. *‘It’s something I instinctively do,’* she explains, and this instinct is brilliantly borne out by all her work, from Leo and David’s transgenderism in her 2016 debut **The Art of Being Normal**, to Jojo’s struggles with the tangled aftermath of becoming a teenage mum in the recently published **First Day of My Life**.



Alongside rendering invisible lives visible, Lisa’s characters and their authentically-portrayed lives and predicaments are remarkably relatable - her novels explore very specific situations while radiating universal resonance. Perhaps enhanced by skills honed during her acting career, Lisa’s work is also outstanding in its capacity to get under her characters’ skins, and the way their stories exude and stimulate empathy. She observes that *‘there’s a few actors turned novelists and I do think it’s a transition that works very well. For me it’s that experience of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.’*

‘The best feedback I could get is enjoyment. Entertainment comes first.’

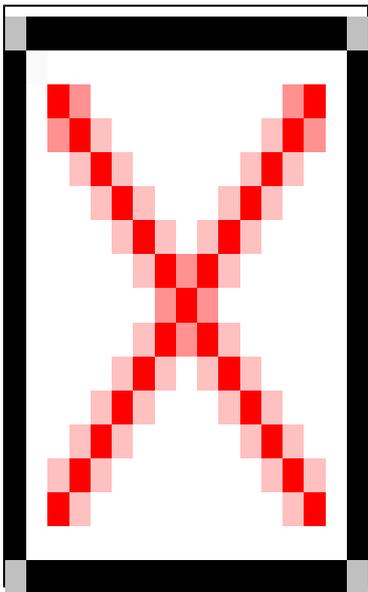
Together with empathy and authenticity, Lisa’s novels are characterised by their capacity to entertain, and we’re talking genuine splutter-out-loud hilarity here, along with plenty of heart-pumping, gasp-inducing *‘don’t do-it!’* and *‘did that just happen?’* moments. Lisa’s fearless tackling of big subjects - among them gender identity, dysfunctional parents and teenage pregnancy - is resoundingly engaging. While she wants readers to *‘feel that they’re seen,’* it’s always *‘entertainment first.* I want young people feel that the stories are authentic and not patronising?. Above all, she wants her readers to *‘want to read, and not feel that it’s a chore.’*

Perhaps this harks back to Lisa's childhood experience of reading. 'I didn't grow up with a lot of books in the house, and my parents aren't readers,' she shares, 'but my mum always took me to the library, so I always had the maximum books out on my library card. I wasn't a sophisticated reader - I read popular, fun books. I always read for entertainment.'

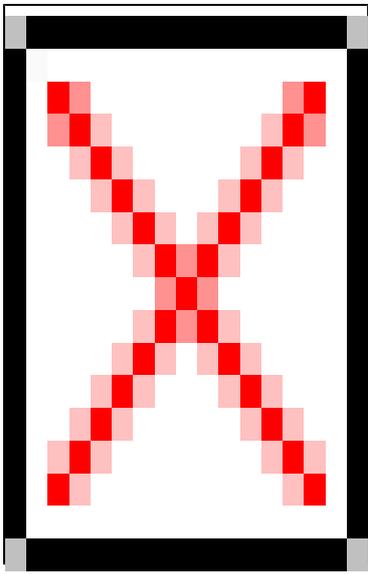
After writing 'a bit of a rom-com about an out of work actor' Lisa realised 'that the thing I should be writing about was what I was doing every single day - communicating with young people and their families' (she worked for the Gender Identity Development Service at the **Tavistock Centre**). Desperate to finish the novel she'd started on a course run by the Curtis Brown agency, Lisa discovered the Golden Egg Academy and here met her future editor Bella Pearson (now of **Guppy Books**, then of **David Fickling Books**), who, says, 'waved her magic wand and unlocked the rest of my book'.

Alongside voice and instinct, in-depth research plays a big part in Lisa's writing. 'I like to feel that I know what I'm talking about', she explains, though in the case of [The Art of Being Normal \[3\]](#), 'I'd done research by osmosis because of my job. I'd been researching for two years without even knowing it, and I wrote that book quite instinctively.'

While she finds research really enriching, Lisa's favourite scenes to write are those that have big emotions 'I find them quite easy to get on the page initially' - and her approach to writing isn't driven by detailed planning. 'I normally start with a character and a set-up and that's it. I often start writing and see what happens.'



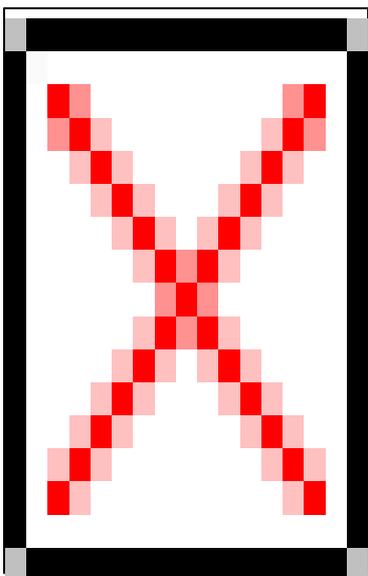
Interestingly Lisa's latest novel, **First Day of My Life** is 'the book I've done the least research for'. This poignant page-turner about friendship, betrayal and surviving secrets follows Jojo, a teenage mother who's driven to kidnap her own baby. Though gripping and moving, Lisa explains that 'its genesis is a bit silly. I was away doing school events with Juno Dawson and we were having dinner one night and just kind of batting ideas around. We were talking about what the mum character in **Paper Avalanche** could hoard and Juno just said 'Babies!' This spurred the question, 'what if a teenager stole a baby?' And then I just kept coming back to that idea'. Lots of 'what ifs' later led Lisa to the novel's ingenious set-up of Jojo going on the run with her own baby.



Without spoiling the experience for those who've yet to read it, **First Day of My Life** is shot-through with Jojo and Frankie's all-consuming, soul-searing friendship - a theme that runs through all Lisa's work. In **The Art of Being Normal**, we see it between David, Felix and Essie, and later between David and Leo. We see it when Mia's friends forgive her and welcome her back into their fold in **All About Mia**. We see it between Ro and Tanvi in [Paper Avalanche](#) [4]. And, linked to the theme of friendship, Lisa is also outstanding at conveying its abject opposite - loneliness - with heartrending honesty, such as when David in **The Art of Being Normal** says, "I'm so lonely it physically hurts." It's this sense of isolation and loneliness that drives Mia to career out of control in **All About Mia**. Realising that "people only seem to notice if I do something bad," what else can Mia do but behave badly? Which takes us back to that all-important, all-pervasive theme of the need to be seen.

"Not enough people stand up for the underdog," Alicia, **The Art of Being Normal**

Another strong theme threaded through Lisa's work is that of fairness and giving voice to the underdog. Recalling her own experiences, Lisa notes that "as a teenager you're not a kid anymore and you're not an adult, and there can be a lot of mixed messages. It felt dramatically unfair, and I want to explore that. I want to provide readers with a journey that's satisfying but also realistic."



Related to this, Lisa is also passionate about representing a range of backgrounds. "I grew up in an area where there was a lot of disparity between kids. I come from a working-class background, and generally I try and represent my school experience. I want to show that not everybody is rolling in it, and to show that there's a spectrum of working-class experience."

?I try to let readers know that it?s OK to not have a clue?

Similarly, through her novels and school events, Lisa strives to show young people that everyone is different, that there?s no right way to grow up, that it?s fine to not know what your calling is, to paraphrase Mia, who?s under constant pressure to decide what she wants to do with her life (?If I had a calling, wouldn?t I know what it was by now??). In her events, Lisa tries to ?drive home that you may have several careers in your life. I try to let readers know that it?s OK not to have a clue. I do feel in YA fiction the characters are quite driven and determined and have a passion, and that?s brilliant, but I always felt that there wasn?t much space for kids who don?t have a clue and have pressures on them that are slightly different. I feel like I?ve read the story about the really academic, really talented people, but what about the people who have pressure on them and don?t ?have a thing???

This gets to the heart of what makes Lisa?s novels so relatable - her characters and set-ups transcend well-worn YA tropes, typically centring the underdog to truly represent lived experiences. This approach extends to her adult characters too. Alongside inspiring mentor characters (?I love a wise older person!?), she never shirks from showing that life can be confusing no matter what your age. ?I think it?s really important to be reminded that adults don?t always have the answer even though they might pretend that they do. I think it?s important to show adults messing up and making mistakes acknowledging them.?

That?s certainly true of the adults in **First Day of My Life**, whose journey to enlightenment is smartly entwined with that of the teenage characters at its heart - three unforgettable young adults who are pummelled by turmoil, but emerge wiser, stronger and elementally altered. What?s more, this exceptional novel more than delivers Lisa?s overriding desire to write authentic, entertaining novels. It?s a punch-packing page-turner of the highest order.

Joanne Owen is a writer, reviewer and workshop presenter.

Books mentioned, all by Lisa Williamson and published by David Fickling Books

First Day of My Life, 978-1788451536, £12.99 hbk

All About Mia, 978-1788451321, £7.99 pbk

[Paper Avalanche](#) [5], 978-1910989975, £7.99 pbk

[The Art of Being Normal](#) [3], 978-1788451338, £7.99 pbk

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