

Rozie Kelly - Kingfisher

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SPEAKERS

Speaker 2, Rozie Kelly, Podcast Intro, Sara Young, Speaker 1



Podcast Intro 00:01

Welcome to this episode of Inside publishing, the series where we interview industry experts on everything publishing.



Sara Young 00:12

Hi everyone. My name is Sara, and I am the podcast lead at SYP north. Today I will be talking to author Rozie Kelly about her debut novel Kingfisher, which will be the featured book at the SYP North online may book club. You can find more details online. We will also be discussing what it is like to be published by Sara band, an independent press the publishing scene in the north and Rozie's journey as a writer. Hi Rozie. Thank you so much for joining me on the inside publishing Podcast. I'm looking forward to discussing your debut novel, Kingfisher, which was published by Saraband press on the third of April this year. Congratulations. I'm looking forward to finding out a bit more about your journey as a writer and just having a bit of a chat about the industry in general. So did you want to read the blurb of Kingfisher to us, just so listeners can get a bit of a sense of the book?



Rozie Kelly 01:24

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. First of all, this is lovely, yes, so... 'She smelled like Jasmine. No, not exactly. She smelled like the earth beneath the jasmine plants on a hot day. "Most of us are poets," she said. "It's just a question of how it comes out." When a creative writing academic becomes infatuated with his colleague, the poet, it is not long before it begins to threaten his relationship with his partner, Michael. Michael is beautiful. Michael is safe, but the poet is everything he isn't. She has everything he wants while he writes about steel and sex, she dreams about the movements of swallows while he tends to his budding career, she writes from her big white house in the woods. As he slips between his old, old life and this new one, his fixation grows into something more powerful. The poet. His Kingfisher is

his sole focus. He is hypnotized, but when simultaneous illness is threaten to destroy the precarious reality he clings to, he's forced to question what he can and cannot take from someone. This is a novel about grief, power and desire and the tangles in between that make up a life that's great.'

S

Sara Young 02:35

Thank you so much for reading that out for us. So Kingfisher has been described as an unmissable debut and sublime. I have to say, I found it a stunning read, and I was thinking about the characters and the different dynamics in the novel for a really long time. After reading it, there's so many interesting themes running throughout which are really viscerally and skillfully explored. And it kind of also, for me, read like a love letter between writers and to the craft and process of writing as well. I don't know if that was the intention for you not to spoil anything for readers, but the relationship between the protagonist and the poet or 'The Kingfisher.' It kind of takes on an element of the characters almost inhabiting each other and and it sort of reminded me of the process of writing and like the embodiment of characters and narrative which takes place, which I'm sure at times, as a writer must feel like all consuming and the protagonist says, and I thought, this is brilliant, that 'Writing is like doing an ultra marathon in the desert, but only for an hour or two a day.' And with that in mind, I just wanted to know a bit more about your writing journey. You know what started a love a writing for you. Did it feel like a compulsion, or what brought you to it?

R

Rozie Kelly 03:01

Well, I mean, firstly, I'm so glad that you've said that about the kind of the love letter to the craft. I suppose. I don't think anybody else has mentioned that element of it to me yet, and it's something that feels very honest to me, because it is a love letter, but it's also not a simple one. It's not. It's not an easy love. It's not. It can be really complicated and hard and feel quite lonely. So I think that was something that really kind of was on my mind while I was writing it. So it's lovely to hear that kind of mirrored back for me. I think writing has always been there, kind of at different places, like more in the background and more at the forefront at different times of my life. According to my mum, I would like give her little poems and stuff when I was quite little, and I think I said I wanted to be a Writer when I was about five, so I clearly kind of latched on to it then, which is quite interesting, really as well, because I'm dyslexic. And around then, I was having a real hard time learning to read, and I guess even then, probably had quite a complicated relationship with it. But I, as I got older, I think I kind of moved away from it a little bit. I remember really liking creative writing and English literature in school, but at that point, I didn't really have a vision for what, what a kind of life that could make, I suppose, something I loved, but I couldn't really put myself into it. So I think I kind of fell away from it a bit as a young adult, was kind of working and traveling, and didn't really think about it. And then I very much came back to it, I guess, in my in my mid 20s. So I left school after my GCSE's as well. I tried at A levels, and then I left them as well. And I got to, I must have been 25 I think, and was like, my head was just, like, so fizzy and like, desperate for, like, food. I just kept thinking, I really need to, like, feed my brain. So I started the process of going back to school then, and I think that was kind of the trigger. So I did my maths GCSE, because apparently you need that for everything. And I did an access course. And then I started my Undergrad, which was creative writing and English literature together. And then I did my Masters, a Creative Writing Masters after that. And I think that whole process made it so clear

that this was something I had to do, like I was feeding that part of my brain that I think I had really started for quite a long time, and at that point, I think it probably did come become a compulsion. It's not something that I do every day, unfortunately, because I think life often gets in the way, but I can feel like...I can feel it in my body if I haven't done it for a while, and I think that kind of, potentially, kind of comes through in the novel a little bit. He sort of talked about really needing to write something, or he's going to make himself ill, and that sort of thing. And I think that that's kind of coming from me, really, that's how I feel about it.

S

Sara Young 07:25

And so interesting that you sort of kind of went full circle from sort of having that love at a young age going away from it coming back to it, and also just, I suppose, really interesting to hear about your sort of different journey to that, and kind of carving that out for yourself a bit later on. That's that's really interesting, and kind of Yeah, shows that there's different paths to it as well.

R

Rozie Kelly 07:58

For sure, there's this sort of wild expectation that anyone is going to know what they want to do when they're 15 or 18 or even 25 to be honest. Like, and I think actually, once you get into life, it doesn't really work out like that. Like, if you do know, then wonderful, but if you don't, that is not a failing of any kind, and if anything, it means that when you do find something you love, you're going to give it everything, because you're going to be so sure. And that certainly was my experience. As soon as I kind of got into kind of second and third year of my degree and then into my masters, I was I gave it everything because there was no there was no way I was wrong about this being what I want is.

S

Sara Young 08:42

Yeah you knew. That's really inspiring. Thank you so much for sharing that. So I just want to talk a bit about character in the novel. So there's some brilliantly funny moments for your characters, quite dark in places, but often sort of very relatable and very real humor and character studies. So for example, the descriptions of some of the characters that surrounded the protagonist were so brilliantly drawn. So there's a character called Rebecca, and there's a great line that says she has 'stolen time from everyone she meets.' And I absolutely love that. And then another character who's sort of very important within the novel, and she's described as being 'very good at restaurants', and it was just, you know, just absolutely brilliantly and just so accurate one liners about these characters that really summarized who they were and felt familiar. And I think in a previous interview with New Writing North, you said you felt so attached to the characters and that that's really apparent with your sort of very careful and objective handling of them, even sort of in in their darkest moments. And I just wondered, sort of, where did the characters come from, and how were they conceived?

R

Rozie Kelly 10:22

Hmm, yeah, I've been thinking a lot about how to answer this question, because it's not completely obvious to me. I think the protagonist is is more obvious in the sense that it just he

completely obvious to me. I think the protagonist is, is more obvious in the sense that it just, he just came to me as a voice. I just, like, suddenly had this voice in my head, and I began on page one, that has remained kind of page one of the novel. It was totally clear this person who, I think, as the novel progress progresses, it becomes very clear that he's actually very insecure and complicated and worries about everything. But at the beginning he feels like someone who is kind of maybe a bit blithe and arrogant and confident and just doesn't sort of question things. And I'd had this kind of urge to write someone like that, because I hadn't been writing people like that, and I didn't feel like that myself, and I just, I really wanted to know what that felt like. In many ways, it's quite liberating to just sort of be, yeah, I don't know, just kind of like not really care what anyone thinks, and habit voice. And he was really the catalyst for everything else that kind of happened around him, all of the other characters. So I think he has this friend, Jessica, who I think is my favorite. I just, I just love her, like I just so good. She's, literally, I love, I think she's, I think she's a genuinely wonderful person. And I think she's, there are lots of kind of elements of a character that I recognize in lots of women, not just necessarily, not even necessarily, in my life, but kind of just sort of the ways in which women inhabit friendships and relationships and friendship groups. And she has so much love and so much care, but she also she kind of martyrs herself to some extent. She doesn't really allow herself to be cared for in the way that she cares for others. And I think I was very interested in that. I think in general, that it's the women in this novel that I'm kind of most fascinated by I just happened to have kind of used this man, who I do. I do love him, the protagonist I do. I am very fond of him, but he was, he was my way of accessing these women around him, I think. And Jessica is also just very funny. And you, I think I could really feel what it would be like to be around her. I could feel like how she would make you feel, and but she again, she happened quite naturally. I needed him to have a conversation with someone outside of his relationship and outside of his own internal narrative, and just sort of threw him into a restaurant with this woman who he knew, and it kind of exploded from there.

S

Sara Young 13:25

Her development is so interesting, like you say, she sort of appears in the restaurant and then just becomes such a pivotal and interesting character.

R

Rozie Kelly 13:37

I think the initial scenes with any of the characters have remained largely the same. I think that kind of, whatever it is, the spark that makes something turn from just like a sort of narrative tool to someone that felt like a real person, those scenes have essentially remained and then everything else has kind of been developed from there, whereas I think The Poet, or Kingfisher is slightly different in the sense that she is like an amalgamation of all of the really powerful, interesting, complicated women I've ever admired. So she's writers that I love. She's people that taught me at University. She's kind of anyone who I've kind of looked at taking up space in the world in a kind of, in a way that felt interesting and unique to me. And I just kind of, I think, for her, because, because she rather than having, rather than having the opportunity to be a person in her own right, she is, she is kind of a motif in herself. She is representing so many things in the novel, as well as just like for me, individually, that's where she came from.

S

Sara Young 14:47

Yeah, and you really get the sense of that. I think there's so many different angles to her. You

yeah, and you really get the sense of that. I think there's so many different angles to her. You sort of find you see her in a different way. You see a different aspect of her personality. And like you say, I feel like that really encompasses so many different sort of strengths about about different women, so that that was yeah, that was that really came through.

R

Rozie Kelly 15:20

We also don't get to see it all, because we're seeing it through his eyes. So I think some, some of those, some of it requires reading between the lines a little bit, because he doesn't recognize the ways in which that she's strong in many ways.

S

Sara Young 15:35

No, that's really that's really interesting. Thank you for that. So obviously the title of the novel relates to a particular bird, the Kingfisher, and it becomes sort of clear why a Kingfisher has been chosen. And so birds continue very much as a theme throughout the novel, and I did learn a lot of great bird facts as a result. I just wondered what drew you particularly to birds as a vehicle, motive for telling this story.

R

Rozie Kelly 16:09

Well, I don't know a lot about birds. I learned, I learned about some things about birds, kind of in the process of writing this novel. I think the symbolism, I think it happened quite naturally, because, kind of similar to what I was saying a minute ago about her, the fact that she just, she almost doesn't get to be a full character in herself. She doesn't get to be rounded in the way that the protagonist does, or that Jessica does, or Michael does. I think she she is kind of representative of something throughout and I think the fact that birds are, it's something small and delicate and beautiful, sort of the have very they're very thin boned, and they fly, which we don't really understand. There's loads of things about them that we don't really know. Like lots of birds, we don't know where they go, or some of them don't land at all for like, you know, crazy amounts of time. And then they can see, they have these the cones in their eyes. That means they can see things that we can't see. So it felt like, I think it happened quite naturally. I'm not even really sure where the Kingfisher thing came from. I think I just wrote that scene, and it just sort of went from there. But I also think, I also think, to be honest, I probably, it's probably because I began writing it in spring. So a lot of the time I was spending kind of walking and thinking about what I was writing, I was surrounded by birds like I live, you know, in a quite a small town very close to the countryside. So I, you know, spend a lot of time. Still haven't seen a kingfisher, though, but, yeah, that's, that's my kind of, I'm I'm sort of hoping that maybe it'll happen, like on the launch day or something.

S

Sara Young 18:05

That would be fantastic, wouldn't it? The ultimate sign!

R

Rozie Kelly 18:10

But yeah, it just felt like it felt very natural as a way of, kind of representing who she, who, what she was representing in the novel.

S

Sara Young 18:23

I suppose, in terms of being unknowable in some respect?

R

Rozie Kelly 18:31

Yeah, people are envious of birds. I think we want to be able to do what they can do, and we can't.

S

Sara Young 18:38

Brilliant. Thank you. So if I can just talk to you a little bit about bit about, I suppose, prizes. So obviously, the Kingfisher, it won the Northbound Book Award, and that's what led to it being published. And I know you've also been shortlisted for the PFD queer Fiction Prize, and that was in 2023. I just wondered if you could tell us a bit more about that process, and what are your thoughts on the importance of prizes for emerging writers?

R

Rozie Kelly 19:11

Well, I mean, for me, I would have absolutely, I wouldn't have anything, any anything to build a career from without, without prizes, I think they are vital for so many people. And there are some really extraordinary prizes that are available actually, particularly in the North. If you think about the northern writers of water, there is just this extraordinary array of things that people can submit to. And I kind of have mixed feelings about it, because it's wonderful that those things exist, but then part of me is kind of sad that there aren't other routes into the industry, and so I think they're vital, and I think they're also very good, actually, for emerging writers. And getting used to submitting to things because like being rejected, writing kind of blurbs and synopsis and breaking things down and figuring out what it is you need and what kind of support you you you want to access, and all of those things are, like, really important parts of of that the process of, kind of entering this very kind of quite closed industry, really. So like, they can be really good for practicing those skills as well. But I do sort of also wish that maybe there was a slightly easier way or a slightly gentler way, I don't know, but my, like, my personal experience of it has been totally magical. I mean, winning the Northbound Award was amazing. It was, actually, was the last thing I submitted to, and last thing I submitted Kingfisher to before I decided to give up on submitting it anywhere, because I had been submitting it all over the place, to agents, development programs, to all sorts of different prizes for quite some time. Like I wrote it initially in 2021 so I had I submitted to that. And then I thought, right, okay, the universe is telling me stop. And then obviously that ended up, it ended up changing everything. And you know, my experience of that has been gorgeous, like every element of it has been lovely. Working with Saraband has been amazing. York University were amazing. New writing north have been amazing. Everyone is so kind and so open and supportive, and I think a combination of things. This the the short listing for the queer Fiction Prize, and also I won a place on the prototype development program last year - were both think

both of those things are instrumental in me getting an agent. So I can't, you know, personally, I can't speak highly enough, but I do also wonder, wonder whether there might, there should be another route, an easier route, or a kind of more obvious ladder into a world that seemed very closed, I suppose, because you have to have a certain amount, you have to be robust enough to keep submitting. You have to, some of them, you have to pay for, which not everyone can do you know that there is a certain amount of privilege required to even feel like you can and I attempt these sorts of things.

S

Sara Young 22:35

There's a big step between writing, submitting and then sort of winning a prize. There's a lot in between that isn't there, as you say, where maybe a bit more accessibility and different routes in like you say. It sounds like you've had, as you say, really positive experience, and that everyone that you've worked with has been, has been really good to work with. So on that. So obviously, our our Society of Young Publishers branch, we're based in the north, and as you mentioned, you work with Saraband, fantastic small independent publishers in the north, and their aim is to provide a platform for voices that are often overlooked. And so from what you've said, it sounds like there's a really great network in the northern publishing industry. And I just wondered if you could talk a bit about the representation of Northern writing?

R

Rozie Kelly 23:48

Yeah, I think, again, I can only really speak from my own experience, and I think I exist within that northern writing bubble. And so, like, I'm aware that there is this big sort of Goliath, main part of the industry, or the, you know, the bit with all of the power, sort of squatting down south in London. But I don't think about that very often, because this is the world that I exist in, and I it's quite a small world. It's full of camaraderie and support and people. And I think there's an extraordinary amount of talent in the north and like incredibly diverse range of voices, and I would like to see more of those voices, I suppose, represented in that larger part of the industry, but I do exist within this bubble. I also work for Arvon at the Yorkshire writing house, so I spend a lot of my time I get, most of, but not all, but there are a lot of Northern writers, obviously, because we're the kind of the Northern hub for for that organization. So I do live in this bubble, and it's lovely, yeah. I think it's, I don't know if it's a little bit like when people talk about moving to the north and you say, 'Oh, don't tell anyone. Don't tell anyone down south, because then they'll all want to' but I think the representation here and the things that small publishers can do here are really incredible. I just, I guess the problem is that the it doesn't, that doesn't get the air time that it deserves, and also the money, frankly, that you know, that is sort of always tied to London as it is with like so many other industries, and there are some really exciting things happening in northern writing, northern publishing, just really creative, innovative, and some really exciting sort of voices coming through as well. And I don't know whether maybe it's harder to do that when you're existing in such a kind of long standing, almost like, kind of, quite fully formed and set thing. Like, actually, I think perhaps you get to be far more experimental and playful when you're outside of the kind of, yeah, the sort of the powerhouse of it all, I suppose, yeah, yeah, yeah.

S

Sara Young 26:26

And so, speaking of that, then obviously you were published, or you are published by Saraband

and so, yeah. What's that been like, sort of working with an independent publishers? What was the experience like for you?

R

Rozie Kelly 26:43

I mean, you probably won't be surprised, based on what I've just said, but, like, totally joyful. It has been so lovely. They are amazing. And like, everyone that I've kind of worked with is so, like, genuinely loves stories and loves books and loves the opportunity to to give voice to stories that maybe, as you say, might be overlooked elsewhere. So there literally hasn't been a single step of the process that I haven't enjoyed to the absolute fullest. It's been lovely. Having an like working with an editor has been just like, watching my writing kind of like pulling on the threads of a corset, watching it tight was just like, absolutely gorgeous. And I mean, I don't have anything to compare it to, but I yeah, I loved it.

S

Sara Young 27:39

Yeah, fantastic. It does sound, from what you said, like it's been just the best experience and just such a, such a creatively satisfying process.

R

Rozie Kelly 27:49

I feel incredibly lucky, because I know, you know, it's not always like that for everyone, but yeah, I've, I've been very lucky.

S

Sara Young 27:59

So on that, would you have advice for sort of any emerging writers looking to be /published?

S

Speaker 2 28:09

Get comfortable with being rejected and get to the point where you can not be precious about receiving feedback on your writing, like I think there are, I think for me, anyway, creative writing courses of various different kinds, like, particularly degrees, they sort of get a bit of flack sometimes about, like, what, you know, can you, can you teach something like this? And for me, I firmly think yes, because I think it's a craft. It's like, it's, it's not like a sort of magical thing that you're either born with or you're not. I mean, there are talented people and there aren't, obviously, within that, but it's something that you can practice and you can hone.

R

Rozie Kelly 28:47

A big part of that is learning how to take on feedback, because you need to know what stuff to cut, but you also need to recognize that feeling in you, where you think, where you think, actually, no, this is the fundamental, important part of this thing that I'm trying to create, and it

can be really hard to learn that. And one of the things that those sorts of courses are really good for is they it's a bit of a baptism of fire. Everyone is doing it. You all feel a bit sick at first, and then gradually you kind of like, you get used to it, you you get comfortable with it. And then I think eventually you get to the point where you're like, 'please tell me that it's terrible. Like, tell me what is wrong with this. Like, tearing threads, like, I need it.' I think a similar thing happens with submissions. Like, get to sending things out. I mean, don't you know it's not like, willy nilly, send it when it's not ready. But like, recognising that this is like, an incredibly subjective thing, and if you have had a no, that doesn't mean that it is bad, and it doesn't mean it's always going to be a no. It just means that it wasn't right for that person, and that's actually great. You don't want to be taken on by somebody who doesn't like fully understand what it is that you're trying to achieve, and doesn't love it just as much as you do. And I think also finding a community is really important. There are lots of different ways you can do that. You know, there are free writing groups you can join. There are kind of like online like writing salons and clubs and things that you can join, or you can do sort of more formal courses. But those people are really important. When it's something that you are just sat on your own, on your laptop, or whatever, doing it, you can start going a little bit mad. And the other thing I would say as well is, like, any way of accessing the advice, or just like listening to the kind of the writing practices of other authors is really, I found really, really useful. And there are, of course, like lots of different ways that you can kind of access, those that don't necessarily have to cost money, because you soon realise that everyone is kind of, yeah, struggling through and that drafting and redrafting is really hard for everyone. And it does sort of feel like a marathon sometimes, and you are exhausted, and it does sort of, and also sometimes it feels like the most joyful thing in the world, and you have to hang on to both of those things I think.

S

Sara Young 31:16

That's great advice, especially, I suppose, about finding a community as well. Because, as you say, it can be, I suppose, a very, a very solitary experience. But if you can find a community to sort of, as you say, bounce ideas off and and critique and things that that that can make it, yeah, a bit more open, can't it? And I guess on the flip side of that, then, what advice would you want to give to publishers who were looking for emerging, emerging writers, and sort of, I guess, based on your own experience of the publishing industry?

R

Rozie Kelly 31:55

Gosh, that feels quite that feels quite hard! Because I sort of feel like, Who on earth am I to give advice to publishers? So I'm so very like, in this, this part in, you know, in this side of the industry, but I would, I think that like, as a kind of consumer of books, I think taking risks is so important. Like, I'm desperate for something to kind of feel original, or feel different, or to be a story from somebody's experience that I haven't heard before. And I think that is, you know, that is one of the things that's kind of changing gradually, and it's, again, one of the things that, like little indie publishers do so well, is is kind of give space for those stories, but in general, as a consumer, that's what I'm desperately looking for, I suppose.

S

Sara Young 32:50

Yeah, absolutely, that's good advice! So, yeah, slightly different question. But so what are you reading at the moment? And have you got any writers that you're particularly excited by that

are coming through?

R

Rozie Kelly 33:08

So I'm currently doing some research for a new novel project. So I'm kind of, I'm I'm reading around that quite a bit. So I'm in the middle of re reading John Burgess 'Ways of Seeing.' And after that, I'll be reading Susan Sontag's 'In Plato's Cave' and then watching various documentaries about obscure photographers, essentially. So I'm my head is like, very like in that tunnel at the moment. But I guess writers that I'm excited by - I read Ania Card 'Above Us The Sea' this year, and there was something about that that that I made me very excited to see what she does next. So that's one that comes to mind immediately. But, yeah, I've got like, the research blinkers on at the moment, I think.

S

Sara Young 34:15

I'm so interested now to see it like, to find out eventually what you're what the research is for.

S

Speaker 1 34:21

what

R

Rozie Kelly 34:23

Fingers crossed! It's so like, it's so fresh that I can't talk about in case I scare it away.

S

Sara Young 34:33

Am I allowed to ask what's next for you, though, without you telling me too much?

R

Rozie Kelly 34:38

Just to keep writing, to keep writing as much as I can, really. So I'm working on another novel at the moment, which is brand new. I had been working on on another novel, not another that sounded like a tongue twister, another project, but this idea kind of came to me in a way that felt similar to the to the way that I got the voice for Kingfisher. So I had to just follow my nose on that, I suppose. So, yeah, I'm just gonna keep going with that and see where I end up.

S

Sara Young 35:16

I'm so excited to see what happens and the next thing you're working on. Thank you so much for talking to me. I've really enjoyed it, and it's been really it's been really interesting to hear your thoughts and find out a bit more about your writing process. And yeah, thank you for

being our May book group book as well.



Rozie Kelly 35:44

I'm delighted about all of it. Thank you. Thank you so much.



Sara Young 35:50

Thank you for your time.



Rozie Kelly 35:52

Thank you.



Sara Young 35:57

Thank you for listening to inside publishing. I've been your host, Sara. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple podcasts Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts, it really helps us reach more people. Also feel free to let us know your thoughts on social media or send suggestions our way at podcast.syp@gmail.com. See you next time.



36:29

you.