



Authorgraph 224 Elizabeth Wein

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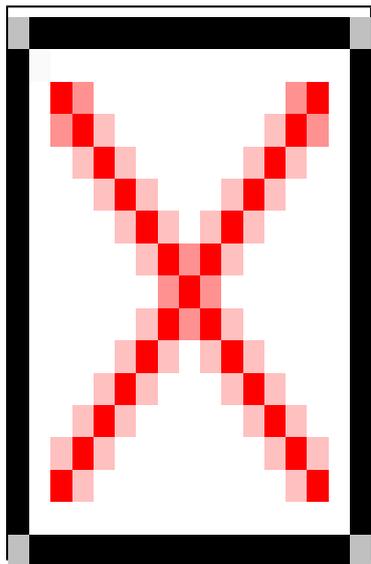
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Elizabeth Wein interviewed by **Anna James**



Elizabeth Wein's new novel, **The Pearl Thief**, may technically be a companion book to her 2012 megahit [Code Name Verity](#) [3], but it is resolutely its own story. It follows Julie, one half of the duo at the heart of Wein's Carnegie Medal-shortlisted book, years before those events are set in motion and readers can happily come to **The Pearl Thief** knowing nothing of what lies in store for Julie during the Second World War.

Here we get a younger and more carefree Julie, returning from boarding school to her home in rural Scotland for the last summer at the family estate before it is sold to raise much-needed money. Add in an accident, a host of potentially suspicious characters and some missing pearls and you have an old-school mystery book. Wein has long wanted to write a proper mystery story and the urge to revisit Julie was irresistible: 'I'm such a fan of classic mysteries, and I love the 1930s, between-the-wars setting and the character of Julie just presented herself because she would have been in her teens then. I absolutely loved writing her narrative voice, it was so easy to channel.'

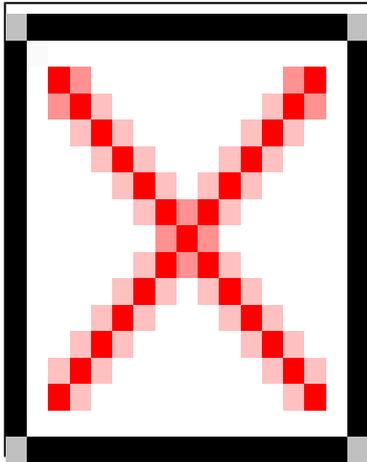
Although Julie will be familiar to many readers, **The Pearl Thief** isn't a prequel in any traditional sense; when it comes to the plot there's barely any foreshadowing: 'I tried very hard not to be heavy-handed. I left the war out, even though there would have been rumblings of war around them. The story is very insulated from that - it's a separate story. But Julie is the same and this is where the prequel quality comes in - you see why she develops into the character that she becomes.'

Although Julie's family are dealing with financial constraints, they are still a wealthy, titled family and Julie is forced to reevaluate what that really means in **The Pearl Thief**: 'It's interesting because I don't believe the word privilege was in use at the time. It's easy to talk about the book in terms of Julie's privilege, but that's not something she or anyone around her would have applied to her situation. So it was a concept I was dealing with very consciously, though not able to articulate it as such for any of the characters. The language of equality changes all the time - every term we use

becomes loaded with negative connotations and then we have to get rid of it and find another one.?

The book covers big ideas of privilege and prejudice, as well as Julie's burgeoning sexuality, but at its core **The Pearl Thief** is resolutely a mystery. Although several of Wein's previous novels have a thrillery sort of feel to them (?A lot of my novels are kind of mysteries - **Code Name Verity** even won an Edgar, which is supposed to be for the best mystery!?) with clues and reveals and plot twists, but writing an old-school mystery proved to be its own challenge: ?I knew what the big twist at the end was, it was how I was going to get there that I had trouble with! It was unbelievably hard to pull it all together and keep the tension up.?

Wein talks about having to research how long bodies deteriorate in water, how easy chimneys are to climb, and how to



fish for pearls among other more niche queries - she also mentions finding a note to herself that said only ?LEGS? in capital letters which she couldn't remember anything about. When she thought she was about there, and was two full drafts and five different editors in, a new editor read it and suggested a tweak on the reveal: ?And I was like ?oh my god yes!? - and of course that changed the entire plot and I went back and rewrote the whole book in six weeks and it just made so much more sense.?

The problem with writing mysteries is trying to see it from a reader's perspective when you know all the answers: ?I honestly don't know what it looks like to someone who isn't me writing it, what it looks like to a reader who comes to it fresh. I don't know where their minds go as they're working out the mystery and trying to figure out who did it. You have to give it to someone who hasn't read it yet and let them have a look. It was so hard; I just kept flailing and the timing kept going wrong - it was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be.?

What Wein's ended up with though is a tightly drawn mystery full of tension and genuine surprises. Julie finds herself embroiled in a mystery with deeper roots that she initially realises, one that incorporates family secrets, class tensions and a local family of travellers. Wein did plenty of research into the Scottish traveller community; there are several autobiographies from the time **The Pearl Thief** which she read. She also interviewed some of the authors: ?I spoke to Jess Smith [who wrote an account of her childhood as a Scottish traveller] after I'd written the first draft and she actually had quite a bit to add; not just in terms of bringing the traveller sections in line, but also with the plot! It was a fun collaboration.?

When I ask Wein if this is the last we've seen of Julie, she laughs: ?I don't want to be seen as getting everything I can out of this character, and to a certain extent I think people like to have a bit of mystery to her? but I do have ideas, I love writing her!?

But Wein has put Julie to bed for at least the moment and is working on a handful of other projects; two of which are in the middle of contract negotiations and so still under wraps. The project she can talk about is a middle grade non-fiction book about the women who flew as combat pilots for the Soviet Union during the Second World War. It's being published by HarperCollins in the US and is about to start looking for a British publisher.

Although Wein dabbles in other markets, she sees herself firmly as a YA author despite being regularly told she's wrong about that: ?I'm constantly getting people saying this book isn't YA about everything I write! The characters are too old, or there's too much violence.

I've always seen myself as a YA writer - why would I be anything else!?

Wein is, though, very careful about the way

she writes potential controversial subjects: ?I do feel a responsibility for things that I?m writing about - a responsibility to tell the truth. But you?ll never get graphic scenes of torture - or sex - from me. You get my characters? emotions, their reactions, their interactions, but no actual graphic violence.?

The Pearl Thief does has distinctly less torture scenes than many of Wein?s previous books: ?My books are always miserable! Well maybe not miserable, but certainly intense. There?s a darkness in them, and I think this one has a lot more light. It was a fun book for me to write and I hope people will enjoy reading it - but if there?s a message it?s one of tolerance, and appreciation of the things we have that we take for granted.?

Anna James is a writer and journalist. Her debut children?s novel book **Pages & Co** will be published in September 2018 by HarperCollins.

The Pearl Thief is published by Bloomsbury, 978-1408866610, £7.99 pbk.

Code Name Verity is published by Electric Monkey, 978-1405278423, £7.99 pbk.

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