



# AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSIN NIELSEN

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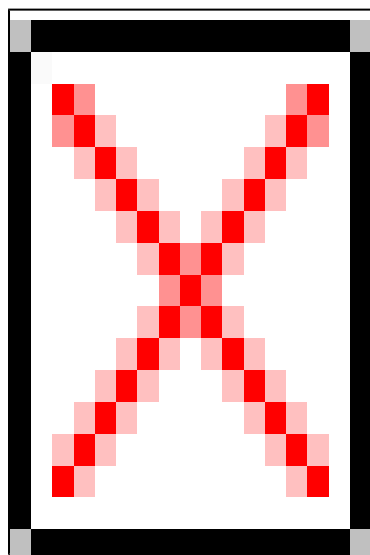
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An interview with the award winning author of **We are All Made of Molecules**

Canadian author Susin Nielsen has been attracting attention and critical acclaim in the UK since publication of her book **We are All Made of Molecules**. **Books for Keeps** editor **Ferelith Hordon** caught up with **Susin** while she was at the recent **Youth Libraries Group Conference** to promote **Word Nerd**, the latest of her books to be published in this country.



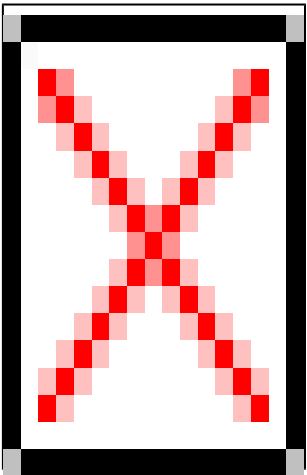
Author of [We are all made of Molecules](#) [3], **The Reluctant Journal of Henry K**

**Larsen** and **Word Nerd**, Susin Nielsen's voice is distinctive as are her characters, who are always unconventional, but always plausible. Where does it come from? It was always her ambition to write and her first first break came in television, writing for teen shows fittingly, as YA was the genre that most appealed. She was very successful and TV scriptwriting kept her busy for twenty years until she finally finished **Word Nerd** published in 2008. Susin agrees that her background in TV has influenced her writing, especially in the way she structures her books. For example, in television the cliff hanger is always important and 'I always try to have chapter endings that make you want to read the next chapter'. She reads her work aloud too which she says helps her 'to peel away any flab'. Dialogue has certainly benefitted.

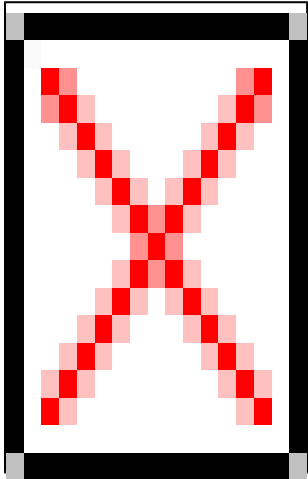
Dysfunctional families are very much a feature of YA writing today, but usually with a strong teen protagonist as central character. Susin's characters are rather different. Ambrose for example, in **Word Nerd** is isolated, lonely, socially awkward. 'Ambrose had been talking to me for quite a while', she tells me, 'but I always thought he was just a fictional character I had invented, until soon after the book's publication I discovered a diary I'd kept when I was about ten and realised that I was Ambrose at that age'. Like Ambrose, she had moved house with her single mum and had no friends except her cat and her doll, Raggedy Ann, though 'according to the diary at least - she didn't mind; she always had the glass-half-full attitude to life that is also evident in her novels. She gave Ambrose his passion for Scrabble because she

wanted him to have something he was good at and sport was not an option. Susin herself plays Scrabble and enjoyed researching the background, though the scrambled chapter headings which reflect the plot and the emotional state of the characters only came later in the process.

Her novels seem to feature characters whom readers might identify as falling on the autism spectrum; Ambrose in



particular, though this is not something that she planned. "Maybe Ambrose does fall within that spectrum, but I just wrote him as a kid who's missing some of the filters that other kids have learnt or acquired". Is it because Ambrose's mother is so protective that he lacks social skills? "I don't like the thought of blaming the mum for everything" she says, "I take pride in the parents in my books because while they are very flawed I hope they come over as real people with real characteristics and experiences that inform their actions?"



So far all her novels have been first person narratives. Would she ever choose a different approach? "I don't know", she says, "For me every time I have an idea for a book it begins with the voice of the character starting to speak to me". She feels that writing in the character's voice allows her not only to really get into their head, but also to add the humour that is such a feature of her books despite their often difficult or serious subjects; she cites **The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen** as an example. In the story, Henry's psychologist encourages him to keep a journal to help him deal with a traumatic event gradually revealed to be the suicide of his brother. His diary entries are honest, unflinching, but with a snarky teen humour too.

In **We are All Made of Molecules** she writes in the voices of two very different protagonists, uber-geek Stewart and teen queen Ashley. Stewart arrived first, she says, Ashley proved more difficult until she realised that she had been a minor character in an earlier novel still to be published here, **Dear George Clooney, please marry my mom**. She admits she finds boys easier to write but quickly points out that her next book **Optimists Die First**, to be published in the UK next spring, features a girl as the main character. As with her previous books, the girl, Petula, has much to cope with, a tragedy that has struck her family. Susin is sure that her own family background - growing up with a single parent, acquiring a step-father, discovering she had a second family "made her the writer she has become". "You can't choose your family, and families are what shape us, for better or for worse." And anyway, she adds, "Where's the drama in a happy family?" It's good to know that we can look forward to more dramas to come from this very fine writer!

**Ferelith Hordon** is active member of **CILIP YLG** and has served as Chair of both YLG London and of the National

Committee. She is editor of **Books for Keeps** and of **IBBYLink**, the online journal of **IBBY UK**.

Books by Susin Nielsen, all published by Andersen Press

[We are All Made of Molecules](#) [3], 978-1-7834-4376-5, £7.99 pbk

**The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen**, 978-1-7834-4366-6, £7.99 pbk

**Word Nerd**, 978-1-7834-4460-1, £7.99 pbk

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