



An interview with Lauren St John

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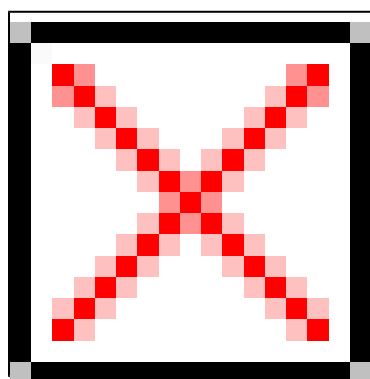
[Michelle Pauli](#) [1]

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Michelle Pauli interview Lauren St John

The timing of Lauren St John's latest book is uncanny discovers **Michelle Pauli** as she interviews Lauren about the book for **Books for Keeps**.



The plot of [Kat Wolfe Investigates](#) [3], the first in a new series for the **White Giraffe** and **Laura Marlin** mysteries author, centres on a network of former Russian spies living secretly in the US and UK, who are being killed off in mysterious ways. Kat Wolfe, a 12-year-old who starts a petsitting business when she and her mother move to a Dorset village, finds herself in a race against time to solve the mystery and save lives.

The book exemplifies St John's assertion that, although ideas for books may appear suddenly, as if from nowhere, they are often born from an accumulation of years of different experiences. It was St John's background in journalism, working on the **Sunday Times** magazine investigations team, that fed into **Kat Wolfe Investigates?** extraordinary plot.

She explains that there is a category of spies known as 'illegals' who work under deep cover as sleeper agents, taking on new identities and living, working and raising families in their adopted country for many years, ready to be activated in an emergency 'such as if an assassination is required.

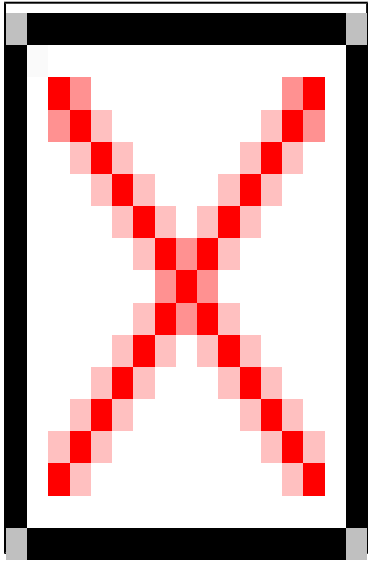
'It's something that's been a huge issue over the last few years and becoming more so,' says St John. 'I did a big investigation into illegal spies more than a decade ago when I was working for the **Sunday Times** magazine and I interviewed one of the highest ranking spies ever to defect to the US. He said a really chilling thing to me: that Russia was and is the only country to run illegals and they are Russia's most secret weapon of the future. When I was writing **Kat Wolfe** I looked up that old interview and it has much more resonance now; it's quite eerie how things have panned out.' The Salisbury attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia is, she adds, 'awful, heartbreaking?.'

While the Russian spy plotline is, perhaps, the most prescient example of St John drawing on her life experiences, she also makes use of her memories of training as a veterinary nurse when she was 17. Kat Wolfe's mum is a vet and, as you'd expect from any Lauren St John tale, eccentric and lovable animals large and small are key characters in the

story, from the near-wild Savannah cat that Kat adopts in her new home to her friend Harper's 'Pocket Rocket' racehorse and an Amazonian parrot that is her first petsitting assignment and kicks off her adventure.

St John grew up on a farm and a game reserve in Zimbabwe, with a pet giraffe the inspiration for her first children's book, **White Giraffe** and her books tend to roam far and wide. However, the Kat Wolfe series is set in the fictitious Bluebell Bay on the Dorset Jurassic coast and, unusually, there it will stay, says St John.

The Jurassic coast is such a rich place and there is so much to draw on with it the amazing history, the army base, the



dinosaurs, the tourists, all the different people who come in. And the beauty of petsitting as a device is that it allows Kat and Harper to go into all these different homes and meet all of these different people.

The different people, the setting, the animals all come together in an exhilarating, freewheeling plot that veers off in all kinds of unexpected directions but is deftly brought together by St John's immense storytelling skill.

It's very much a consequence of her writing method, which rejects detailed planning in favour of spontaneity. 'I start off with a general idea of what's going to happen and a rough beginning, middle and end, and then along the way and this particularly happened with **Kat Wolfe** I think, oh, wouldn't it be fun if this great thing happened, wouldn't it be fun if that happened,' explains St John. 'I never feel that I *am* my characters but I always feel that I'm *with* them and so I love the thing when you're writing that if you don't really plan things you can experience events with your characters.'

However, she adds, 'it does get a bit nerve wracking when there's lots of different plot strands billowing out and you're not quite sure how everything is going to come together...'

Although St John's writing range is extensive she has tackled non-fiction, YA and an adult novel it is clear that middle grade is where her heart lies. Like many middle grade writers she has vivid memories of the power of books and the feeling of sanctuary they can provide at that age.

'If people put down your dreams or make you feel like you can't do anything, you can step into the pages of a book and live your dreams and be brave through the characters. It's such an amazing feeling; I don't think you ever lose that,' she comments.

On the flip side, she also feels that she gains a huge amount from spending time with and hearing from her young readers. 'It's wonderful to see how they connect and care about things. They are still so open to ideas and compassionate and they want very much to make the world a better place,' she says.

It's a motivation that resonates with St John. She talks passionately about the loss of libraries (and in Kat Wolfe she honours them with a wonderful character, retired librarian Edith) and the need to speak out and campaign against their destruction.

'Libraries are not just about books. You can't complain about rising crime levels or social division or people being left behind if you're taking away a critical part of that equation. It's wicked and it is criminal to take that resource away.'

Libraries are a community, a place where people come together to bond, to share, to learn, she urges.

The environment is another passion. She is a [Born Free Foundation](#) [4] ambassador and has also just launched a new campaign, [Authors 4 Oceans](#) [5], bringing together 50 children's authors, including Michael Morpurgo, Jacqueline Wilson and Quentin Blake, to push booksellers, publishers, literary festivals and young readers to find eco alternatives to the bags, straws and bottles polluting the seas.

The idea that we can all do something to make the world a better place is a message St John is keen to share with her readers. Asked what she hopes they will feel at the end of reading Kat Wolfe she replies, simply, 'braver. That anything is possible. That it's within their power to make a difference within their own communities.'

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

[Kat Wolfe Investigates](#) [3] is published by Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1509871223, £6.99 pbk

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