



# AN INTERVIEW WITH KONNIE HUQ

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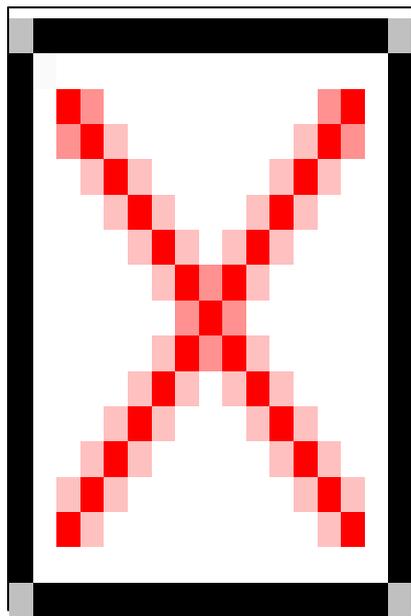
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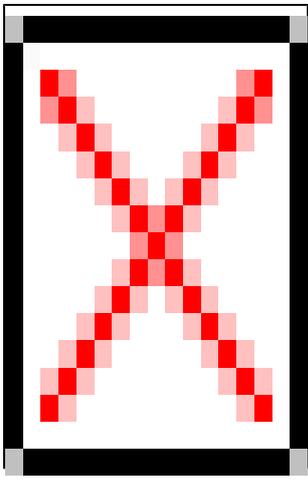
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**Konnie Huq** introduces Cookie, star of her new series

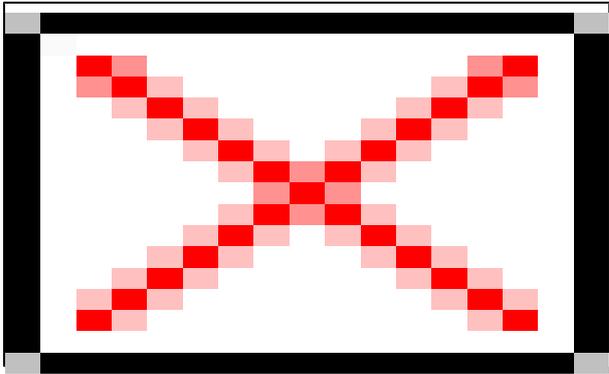
*Known to millions for her extensive television work, in particular her years presenting **Blue Peter**, Konnie Huq is as vivacious, funny, sharp and entertaining as the protagonist in her new children's book, **Cookie and the Most Annoying Boy in the World** which, as anyone who reads it will know, is quite a statement. **Andrea Reece** of **Books for Keeps** met Konnie to talk about her move into writing for children and her ambitions for Cookie.*



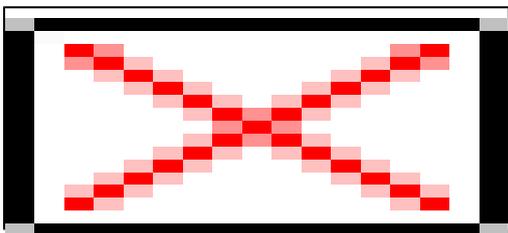
Konnie Huq's CV is seriously impressive: she's been presenting TV programmes since the age of 16, was the longest serving member of the **Blue Peter** team (presenting for longer than anyone including Valerie Singleton), has a degree in Economics from Cambridge and is an ambassador for the **Prince's Trust** and the **British Asian Trust**. Hardly surprising then to find that she has huge amounts of energy, an ability to talk and think ten to the dozen, as well as a passion to enthuse and inspire children. After her experience on children's TV, the first question should really be not why write a book for children now, but what took you so long: 'Ever since leaving **Blue Peter** (2008) I've been asked, 'Are you thinking about writing a children's book?' It always seemed like a natural progression, but back then, though I think Ricky Gervais had written a children's book, it wasn't really the norm to switch, whereas now everyone seems to do everything, and have products and makeup ranges. I don't go in for that, but I had always had this character, called Cookie in me. I grew up in a Bangladeshi community, and there were always little cousins running around - not necessarily actual family members, everyone's an Auntie, an Uncle - and I would often find myself babysitting while the grown-ups were chatting. I used to tell these stories about this character called Cookie to my little cousins.?



Her book describes the adventures of Cookie, as recounted in a breathless, stream of consciousness first person chronicle. Cookie is clever, impulsive, funny, not always aware of her own faults, and sure to be a real favourite with readers. **Cookie and the Most Annoying Boy in the World** is mostly about her ambitions to own a cat and win a place on the school's team for TV quiz show *Brainbusters*, though there's also a delightful rivalry that turns to friendship with new boy at school and neighbour Jake. The book is distinguished by Cookie's wonderfully candid straight-to-camera narrative, which is interspersed with ramblings on any number of only lightly connected subjects.

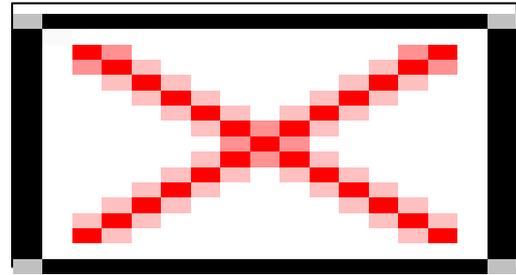


Huq's own illustrations punctuate the story and open up Cookie's world. How and why did she come to be responsible for words and pictures, instead of ? in usual TV celebrity-style ? turning to a big-name illustrator? Though she has another quite different book scheduled for the autumn (a collection of subversive fairy tales including *Trumpelstiltskin*, about ?a power obsessed, mad orange man who is hungry for money?) which has an illustrator, she always knew that she wanted to illustrate **Cookie** herself, and the process really helped her to tell Cookie's story: ?Because the story comes from Cookie's head, we hear everything that's going through her mind, not just what's relevant to the plot, and often it was a lot easier to put those head thoughts of hers in an illustration. She goes off on so many tangents, which is how my brain works, and it just worked for me to do the illustrations.? She's quick to point out that she's ?not Axel Scheffler? but the illustrations are clearly integral to her storytelling: ?It's like with TV and film - I always thought the conceit of having someone who can turn to camera like in **Ferris Bueller's Day Off** or **Fleabag** can help so much. It means that you can gloss over so many things, you don't need to film that scene, you can explain it away in two sentences, it's an easy shortcut; and in a way this [the illustrations] is an easy shortcut because I can go into all of Cookie's flights of fancy without having to write them, they work visually.?



She talks enthusiastically about contemporary children's literature ? years of involvement in the **Blue Peter Book Awards** have given her a very good knowledge of books and authors, and she is now reading with her two young sons,

but is clear that her own childhood memories have played a big part in the **Cookie** stories. Her Bangladeshi parents had an Indian restaurant in Soho and 'Every little thing is based on something: going to the cash and carry, stocking up the restaurant, the snacks bag ....' She's commented on the fact that growing up she was 'the small brown girl in the big white suburb', how important was it that she is representing a BAME experience? Cookie is from Bangladesh, and it's definitely important, but Konnie is keen to make clear that's not the whole point of the story: 'It's like now we probably don't think twice if there's a female voice on the radio, compared to when I was growing up, when people objected to it, because it's become the norm. And so now you won't think twice about buying a book about a brown person, it will just be like buying a book about someone with curly hair, it's just a characteristic.'



She is keen on encouraging a love of science and has a determination to make science cool. Cookie loves knowing things, and a pivotal scene in the book involves a lemonade fountain - there are even instructions for readers on how to create their own. 'We live in a society that's driven by material things, and in this book, I'm trying to redress that to make the science-y thing the cool thing. My parents came from a society where being in a science profession was revered, not 'being on telly', completely the antithesis of society here. During my **Blue Peter** years so many times I said to kids, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' and they'd say 'Oh I want to be famous?', and if you said, 'What do you want to be famous for?', there was no answer. So that was the thinking behind it. But I want to slip in the learning in a stealthy way, I always thought when I was growing up, that the books that were fed to me as education weren't necessarily appealing; the best form of education is entertaining education.'

**Cookie** is most definitely entertaining education, and there is a second and third book in the pipeline, each of them 'astonishingly and impressively - written on her phone: 'Because as a mum it really works for me. The minute I pull out a laptop the boys are over trying to get on YouTube or something. I write in chunks of 500 words at a time, and I can be waiting at the doctor's surgery for example, rereading through the last chunk, tweaking and retweaking.' It's a great image to take away and it was a pleasure to talk to Konnie about her inspiring, fresh and very funny series.

**Andrea Reece** is managing editor of **Books for Keeps**.

[Cookie and the Most Annoying Boy in the World](#) [3] is published by Piccadilly Press, 978-1848128828, £10.99 hbk.

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