

The BiblioFiles: Kaye Umansky

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. My guest is Kaye Umansky, author of the fantastic Solomon Snow series. The first book, *The Silver Spoon of Solomon Snow*, opens with the infant Solomon Snow being left on the doorstep of a tumbledown cottage on a lonely moor, just outside the town of Boring.

The only clue to his past is a silver spoon with the initials V.I.P. carved into it. Ten years later, Solly discovers his mysterious past, and sets out to find his true parents. He is joined by Prudence Pridy, a nosy, irritable know-it-all who manages to rub everyone the wrong way; the Infant Prodigy, perhaps one of the finest and most entertaining brats in literary history; and Mr. Skippy, the most useless pet in the world, period.

In the second book in the series, *Solomon Snow and the Stolen Jewel*, the gang once again reunites for adventure. Prudence's father is arrested for poaching-- yes, again-- and they must rescue him. Their path quickly get tangled with those a Shorty, the villainous dwarf, the nefarious Dr. Calamari, Gross the servant, and the Firestone of Toj, a ruby with a hefty curse.

The Solomon Snow books are absolutely hilarious from start to finish. Set in Victorian England, they are written in a clever, old-fashioned, tongue-in-cheek way, with witty dialogue, interesting twists, and plenty of exquisite temper tantrums. Kaye Umansky joins us from London, England. Ms. Umansky, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

KAYE UMANSKY: Well, thank you very much, Dana.

DR. DANA: You've been writing children's books for over 15 years. Before that you worked in a laundry, you picked carnations at a greenhouse, you sung in a soul band, and taught primary school. How did you decide to be a writer?

KAYE UMANSKY: Well, you know, it wasn't something that I decided to do. It's just something that I've always, always done. I think, from the minute that I picked up a pencil, I wanted to write stories-- I think, probably, because I was born in 1946, and when you're a child of the '50s, you don't get an awful lot of presents, or toys. There was no electronic equipment around in my day, so I was a massive reader.

And I think that's what makes you into a writer, really. If you love to read, then you want to have a go at it yourself. So, I've always done it as a hobby, and never really thought about getting properly published until I was nearly 40 years old.

DR. DANA: Wow. And you decided on children's books. Exclusively?

KAYE UMANSKY: Yeah. I think I write for the inner child. I've never, ever wanted to write for adults. I just like kids' books. I love reading adult books, but I love writing for children.

DR. DANA: So, of the Solomon Snow books, you say, "A while ago, I went on a re-read Charles Dickens binge. Inspired, I cried, 'I could do that!' I couldn't. What came out was Solomon Snow."

KAYE UMANSKY: I couldn't write like Dickens, much as I would've loved to. I am a big Dickens fan. I think, really, I wanted to write Solomon Snow set in a Dickensian sort of era, because I always like to write about an alternative world.

Generally, I write fantasy, so a lot of my books are about magic, creepy woods, and things like that. Vampires and goblins and witches. I thought I'd like to try something a little bit different, but I didn't want to write it set in contemporary England. So, by removing it and setting it back a hundred years or so, that seemed to do the trick.

DR. DANA: There are three main characters in this book: Solomon Snow, Prudence Pridy, and little Rosabella, also called the Infant Prodigy.

KAYE UMANSKY: Yeah.

DR. DANA: I would love to hear how you developed each of these characters. Can we start with Solly?

KAYE UMANSKY: Well, Solly, I think, is a kind of an everyman. He's like you would want your own son to be, or your brother to be. He's a really nice kid, I think, and he kind of represents just ordinary children everywhere. He's always very good-natured, and very helpful, and he's just rather sweet, I think.

Prudence, on the other hand, is-- well, she's a bit sparky, isn't she? I think, probably, because she's a bit frustrated. She likes to live in the stories that she writes, but in those days, girls weren't considered to be right for writing. Most literature was written by men. And also, she's a poacher's daughter, so she's not really in a very good position to be getting a book published and heard and out there.

So I think that's probably what makes her a bit cross. And having lots of annoying sisters and a very annoying little brother as well doesn't help. Also, of course, she's very poor, so all those things combine to make her the rather bad-tempered thing that she is.

Whereas, little Rosabella-- I have a feeling that, in my brain, I still remember Violet Elizabeth, from the William books, which were written by Richmal Crompton, and which I loved as a child-- a dreadful, spoiled, awful child, but hilariously funny. And I think the Infant Prodigy is a development directly from Violet Elizabeth.

DR. DANA: Oh, really?

KAYE UMANSKY: Yeah, I think so. But she sings. Violet Elizabeth doesn't sing, but she lisps, and she tries to get her own way, and she manipulates adults by being cute and sweet and pretty, and she's a rather selfish little thing. But she's very useful, as well. She has all sorts of little things about her that help the plot on. Together, the three of them seem to gel quite well, I think.

DR. DANA: I'm curious about the title *The Infant Prodigy*. Where did it come from?

KAYE UMANSKY: Well, in Dickens, there was a wonderful circus child called *The Phenomenon*. It was in *Hard Times*, I think, although I've have to go back and make absolutely sure about that. But I thought *The Phenomenon* was a fantastic name to call a child, so I wanted something that sounded a little bit like that. So *The Prodigy* was the nearest that I could get.

DR. DANA: She has almost supernatural powers of persuasion, either through tantrums, or being really syrupy-sweet-cute.

KAYE UMANSKY: I know. Sweet and cute, and rather sickly, I think. I don't think I'd like her too much if I met her in real life, although she does make me laugh.

DR. DANA: Also, I don't know if this was intentional, but I noticed in Dickens' books-- and this is one gripe I had, reading Dickens in high school-- is that the main characters-- the boys, the heroes-- the boys were always so polite, and rather wimpy.

KAYE UMANSKY: Oh, no. I know. Do you think they were always polite in those days? I'm not so sure about it.

DR. DANA: Well, Oliver--

KAYE UMANSKY: No, really, I love Dickens. I think his characters are absolutely amazing. But the whole ethos of it is just great. You can really smell the air, and feel what it must have been like to be around during those times. But the women are not good. Some of the older women are good, because they're funny characters, but the young heroines are always rather sappy, and that's one criticism I would have with him.

DR. DANA: And Oliver was just so polite, and always crying. I was like, come on, Oliver!

KAYE UMANSKY: He was sewn out of cloth, wasn't he? He was so well-spoken. I just feel that if he'd been stuck in this orphanage for all that time, he'd probably be speaking quite rough-like with all the rest of them, but no, Oliver speaks really politely.

DR. DANA: And so, Solly, actually-- when he's calculating that maybe his parents aren't his parents, one of the things that he comes up with is, well, I'm very polite. That must mean I'm in the upper class. Like Oliver, you know? He still speaks well.

KAYE UMANSKY: I always imagine Solly as having Devonshire accent, because I come from Devon originally, which is in the West Country, in England. And we're very rural down there. [DEVONSHIRE ACCENT] And we all talk like that. It's an accent that goes like that.

I always imagined that the characters in Solly have got a West Country accent.

DR. DANA: Can you also tell us about Mr. Skippy?

KAYE UMANSKY: Oh, Mr. Skippy. What a dreadfully boring animal he is. You know, I don't really know where he came from, I have to say. He just does nothing. In both books, he just sort of sits and stares into the air. That's what he does. He's totally useless.

He's not like Lassie, or one of those wonderful animals that comes racing along, helping and getting children rescued, and actually adding anything to the plot. Mr. Skippy just sits there like a great big bag of fur, and does absolutely nothing the entire two books.

DR. DANA: We should add here, for kids who haven't read the book yet, that Mr. Skippy is a rabbit that Rosabella rescues. Actually she doesn't even rescue him. He's left behind off of a butcher cart.

KAYE UMANSKY: Well, yes. He's in a crate, isn't he? I think a butcher is loading a load of meat onto his wagon, and the crate gets left behind. Whether or not he's coming back for it, I don't know. But Rosabella falls in love with him, and rescues him, much to Prudence and Solly's disgust, because they could do without having this rabbit dragged along on all their adventures. But, sadly, they are stuck with him.

DR. DANA: In the first book, *The Silver Spoon of Solomon Snow*, the gang gets caught up with a villainous woman who calls herself Nanny. Basically, she holds kids captive in her overly warm nursery, feeds them sugary, heavy meals, forces them into frilly dresses, sailor suits, and terrorizes them with all the comforts of childhood. What inspired this character?

KAYE UMANSKY: Yeah, what a nasty piece of work she is. The Baby Farmer. In fact, there were women that actually did that kind of thing, back in the 1800s. There were actually people that would take children off the streets, scrub them up, and then sell them on to the highest bidder-- people that didn't have children, or wanted, maybe, a serving maid, or something like that. So children were kidnapped and sold on. And that is what Nanny is planning to do with our heroes, but luckily, they do get rescued.

DR. DANA: I had no idea that there were people doing that-- farming children.

KAYE UMANSKY: There were.

DR. DANA: Really?

KAYE UMANSKY: Shocking, isn't it?

DR. DANA: It is surprising, and I didn't make the connection in the book that Nanny was doing that.

KAYE UMANSKY: Yep.

DR. DANA: I thought she was just weird.

KAYE UMANSKY: Nope, she was a baby farmer. And that's what they did. They would steal babies and small children and sell them on to the highest bidder. It actually did really happen. Nanny is all lovely and sweet initially, but when the children stand up to her and try to escape, then she changes, and we really see her dark side.

Actually, when they get rescued, that was one of the best bits I enjoyed in the book, because I had to do a lot of research. They get rescued by escaping up a chimney. And that was interesting, because I had to find out how chimney sweeps actually climbed chimneys, and there's not an awful lot available telling you about that. So I went on the Internet, and finally found a piece that actually described how they did it. And it's pretty horrible up that chimney, I'm telling you. They didn't have a good time.

DR. DANA: Yeah. And they used to light fires under you if you weren't moving fast enough.

KAYE UMANSKY: They did. I mean, if children got stuck up these big chimneys, the sweep would often light a fire down below, to give them that extra fear factor to enable them to scramble up. Because they would often get lost in these long, nasty, black corridors and they'd have to turn around bends, and it just sounds absolutely monstrous. Thank goodness we don't send children up chimneys any more.

DR. DANA: The sequel to the first book is called Solomon Snow and the Stolen Jewel. Did you know, when you were writing the first book, that you would write another book?

KAYE UMANSKY: No, I didn't have a clue. I didn't know how well Solomon Snow would do, and for the second book, I thought, shall I carry on with the same quest for him finding his parents, or should I do something completely different? And I thought, I think I'll do something completely different for that one, because I had this idea of Dr. Calamari, who is the baddie, in his dark tower, planning to steal this wonderful jewel. And I really wanted to include him.

I thought, if I'm going to do that, then let's not get confused with the plot of the first book. Let's keep it completely different. So hopefully, it's a standalone, and you don't have to read one before reading the other.

DR. DANA: In the second book, the gang sets out to rescue Prudence's father, but they get caught up in a botched jewel heist that involves Dr. Calamari, his slow-witted servant, Gross, a shifty dwarf named Shorty-- so you have this daring rescue mission the kids are on, alongside a cursed jewel heist. So, where did the particular plot come from? It seems so original.

KAYE UMANSKY: I am not a great one at sorting out a plot before I begin a story. In some ways, that's quite exciting, because I'm telling myself it as I go along, and I'm never quite sure which direction it's going to take. I have a sort of vague idea of the overall course that the plot's going to take, but the details and all the sorts of tiny things that happen along the way, I just don't know until I actually get there. So I write it as I go along.

And I just had an idea. It would be nice if the plot involved a stolen Egyptian jewel, because in Victorian times, Egyptian displays were terribly popular. Adventurers would come back-- usually sort of very monied, wealthy men would set off, and then discover amazing things on the other side of the world-- and bring them back for ordinary people to go and see, in various museums and things.

And I thought, oh, that would be a really nice idea, to have an Egyptian slant to the story, with this mummy and things. So that's where I started from, really, just with the idea that it would be really good to have a beautiful jewel found with a long-dead mummy, and for it to be stolen, and the kids to get involved in the whole business of the stealing of the jewel.

DR. DANA: And Dr. Calamari-- I love him.

KAYE UMANSKY: Yeah. Dr. Calamari-- what a hideous person he is! I liked him because it was fun. When I got to his bits, I wrote those in the first person, so he's writing his journal. So we, the readers, are finding out his thought processes as the book goes along, which makes a nice change, I think. From writing in the third person, which is what I do when I'm with the kids.

DR. DANA: I'm wondering if you would be willing to read a passage from the second book?

KAYE UMANSKY: Oh, I'd love to.

DR. DANA: I love this passage, because it illustrates, in a very clever, secondhand way, the magnitude of the Infant Prodigy's temper tantrums.

KAYE UMANSKY: Right. OK. Well, I'll read a little bit. And where we're joining Gross, which is Dr. Calamari's rather stupid, very large servant, and Shorty, who is a rather nasty dwarf. And they are in pursuit of the Infant Prodigy, because they believe that she has got the stolen jewel tucked inside a toy rabbit that she's got with her.

DR. DANA: Let me just add one thing here. She found the bunny that Shorty had taken from her and, in taking it back from him, completely trashed his circus caravan.

KAYE UMANSKY: Absolutely.

DR. DANA: So, she shattered windows, she broke things, she poured green paint, which is--

KAYE UMANSKY: She did some really, really bad vandalism on his caravan, because she was in a very, very bad mood.

DR. DANA: Right. So, okay. Here we go.

KAYE UMANSKY: Okay, here we go.

"Two figures-- one big and hulking, one small and sullen-looking-- came limping tiredly along the winding country lane.

Gross and Shorty were hot on the Prodigy's trail.

Well, not exactly hot. They were quite cold, actually, despite having walked all night.

At first the trailing had been easy. There had been a full moon and a sky full of stars. Plus, they had a lantern, borrowed from the caravan, which miraculously had survived the Prodigy's onslaught. Conveniently, she had stepped in the green paint she had thrown about in such copious amounts. Her small footsteps showed up clearly in the silvery light, leading off down the lane, heading south.

Gross had set off eagerly, moving with huge strides, head lowered to the ground, with the reluctant Shorty dragging along behind. After a while, the Prodigy's painty footsteps had faded to nothing, but even so there were clear signs of furious, indignant passage. When she was in one of her tantrums, her habit was to lash out with her parasol. She had left a miniature storm in her wake. The rutted lane was littered with scattered twigs and decapitated flower heads. Whenever the road divided, you just had to be look for whacked hedges and trees with chunks taken out. She couldn't have blazed a clearer trail if she had used a chain saw.

But, as the night wore on, her temper had evidently worn off. Either that, or she had gotten tired. There were now no signs of attacks on the blameless hedges. The road ahead lay empty and barren of clues.

That didn't stop Gross, though. He kept going south, with relentless, shuffling determination, and Shorty had no option but to keep going too. There had been no attempts at conversation. They both needed all their breath for walking.

And now a new day had dawned, and still they were walking.

'Can we stop for a minute?' begged Shorty, staggering to a halt.

He was having a horrible time. His hot, scratchy clown clothes were picking up hundreds of burrs. His bare feet were killing him. He was covered in road dust, which stuck to the greasepaint, which he hadn't even had time to remove. During the long night, annoying things had kept happening to him. Branches would swing back in his face. A cow had leaned over a fence and spat cud all over his trousers.

All this after hiding in a coffin, stealing a jewel, escaping from the museum, coming home, getting in a fight, dressing up as a clown, doing an unpopular performance, coming back to find

his caravan trashed, then being half strangled by a gorilla with a mission. What life threw at you sometimes."

DR. DANA: Kaye, that was great. I'm just going to ask you to read the rest of the book to us.

I have a question about your website. Typically, author's websites just have a short bio on the author, and the rest is given over to their books. But your website is hilariously extensive, with pictures of your family, your cats, you at different stages of your life. There's even a section devoted to "My Bad Habits." Do you mind if I read?

KAYE UMANSKY: I haven't written them all down there. That would make the website much too big.

DR. DANA: Do you mind if I read what you've written for "My Bad Habits?"

KAYE UMANSKY: No. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: OK, here we go.

"I can be lazy. I don't do enough exercise. I try and get out of cooking. I get grumpy when books aren't going well. I listen in on private conversations, and sometimes steal them for my books. I bite my nails. If I'm enjoying what I'm writing, sometimes I forget to brush my hair. I buy too many shoes. My husband empties the rubbish and clears up the cat's fur balls, and I just sit and watch Judge Judy. If my husband--"

KAYE UMANSKY: I'm a big fan of Judge Judy. Everything is true, and I could add another twenty, but I won't, because it makes me come across as too awful.

DR. DANA: It says, "If my husband gets up in the morning and steps in a cold fur ball, I laugh."

KAYE UMANSKY: I do. [LAUGHTER] Wouldn't you?

DR. DANA: And it finishes up with, "I am unsympathetic when other people are ill, but demand attention and moan a lot when it's me."

KAYE UMANSKY: Oh, God. [LAUGHTER] Yes, it's all true. It's true, it's all true. I'm so sorry. Perhaps I ought to do another bit with all nice things about me. That would be a lot shorter, though.

DR. DANA: Yes, I think you should. I definitely think you should.

KAYE UMANSKY: Oh, dear. Made me laugh.

DR. DANA: Well, do you have any other books coming to the States?

KAYE UMANSKY: Well, I don't know. I'm hoping so. I've got one out in the States, which has been doing quite nicely. I think it's called Clover Twig and the Incredible Flying Cottage. The follow-up is coming out in the UK next March. It's called Clover Twig and the Perilous Path. So I'm hoping that, just maybe, it might come out in the States as well, which would be absolutely wonderful. I would love that.

DR. DANA: I'm actually halfway through the first Clover Twig book, and--

KAYE UMANSKY: Oh, are you?

DR. DANA: I am. I think it's brilliant.

KAYE UMANSKY: Are you enjoying it? I'm so pleased. I enjoyed Clover Twig. She's another sort of sensible girl-- very, very different from Prudence Pridy. She's really got her feet on the ground. And this time, it's the boy who's a little bit silly, in the Clover Twig books. He's called Wilf. So I'm rather fond of him, as well.

DR. DANA: Well. Kaye Umansky, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles.

KAYE UMANSKY: Oh, I had so much fun. I really have. It's been absolutely lovely. Thank you so much for inviting me. And I do hope that if any of your readers do get hold of any of my books, they really enjoy them.

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