

The BiblioFiles: Kevin Sands

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

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Kevin Sands, author of *The Blackthorn Key Adventures*, a series that begins with *The Blackthorn Key* and follows with its sequel, *Mark of the Plague*. The third book, *The Assassin's Curse* was released this month.

London, 1665. 14-year-old Christopher Rowe is an orphan who, against all odds, has become apprenticed to an apothecary named Benedict Blackthorn. Master Benedict is an honest man, extremely knowledgeable about his trade, and most importantly, has great affection for Christopher. But there are rumors of a cult in the city, and when Master Benedict is murdered under mysterious circumstances, Christopher and his friend Tom decide to find out who-- or what-- killed him. The answer, as it turns out, is nothing Christopher could have ever expected.

In the second book, *Mark of the Plague*, Christopher and Tom again find themselves searching for hidden answers in London amidst a massive outbreak of the plague. Nothing is quite what it seems, and Christopher's fast mind, apothecary skills, and code breaking abilities are put to a strenuous test.

The third and most recent book, *The Assassin's Curse*, follows Christopher, Tom, and their friend Sally as they journey to Paris to uncover the culprits behind multiple assassination attempts on the royal family. The more they investigate, however, the more they become involved in the search for a centuries-old treasure that people are definitely willing to kill for.

Imagine fast-paced, high stakes detective stories set in the 17th century, and you have *The Blackthorn Key Adventures*. The books are absolutely fantastic, with lots of action, mystery, puzzles, and thanks to Christopher's profession as an apothecary, lots of things going boom. Sands effortlessly brings the 1600s to life for his readers with deft, historical touches. The books are also incredibly funny, too, I especially appreciate the banter between Christopher and Tom as Christopher unveils his latest-- and most likely dangerous-- plan. Give yourself plenty of time when you embark on these books, because you will not be able to put them down until you've turned the final page.

Kevin Sands, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

KEVIN SANDS: Thank you, thanks for having me.

DR. DANA: The first book has a warning on both the inside and the back. Here's the quote-- "The recipes and remedies in this book were used by real apothecaries. There is a reason why we don't see them anymore. Some are devious, some are dangerous, and a few are just plain deadly.

So as they say: Don't try this at home. Seriously." So this warning just begs the question-- did you try any of them?

KEVIN SANDS: [CHUCKLES] Well, I have to confess, there was one that I did actually try, though. I tried it quite some time ago. At some point in *The Blackthorn Key*, Christopher makes a-- what's essentially a smoke bomb to get himself out of trouble. And when I was younger-- just about Christopher's age, actually-- me and a friend of mine did in fact make that smoke bomb. We made it in his parent's kitchen. And of course, we knew enough not to set it off there, so we went to his garage, which wasn't probably the smartest thing to do, and he had this giant Dalmatian which he had to put in the backyard.

Anyway, we set it off in the garage and it does exactly what it says on the tin, it makes a lot of smoke-- too much. So we had to open up the garage door and we took those big garbage can lids and we were waving the smoke out through that before his parents came home. So yeah, that was sort of my one experience with the things that I had actually made. The others would just have been too mad to make, I think, so I just relied on the experience of others for those.

DR. DANA: I imagine you did quite a lot of research for these books. 17th century history, apothecary remedies, the plague, Knights Templar, puzzles, pigeons-- tell us about your research process.

KEVIN SANDS: Yeah. Each book actually does take a lot of research-- about five weeks I'd say of full-time research, and most of it is going in and out of the various libraries, the public libraries and sometimes even the university libraries to find some of the more esoteric facts about the time. And so it was kind of like, you know, when I first started, I didn't know-- did I want to make it historical or fantasy? And when I finally decided absolutely historical, I really dived down to the research. So it's really just going to a lot of sources. Sometimes you go to the primary sources and sometimes you go to other sources and just learning as much as you can about it.

And I find that that's actually not just interesting-- because I like that sort of stuff-- but it actually helps me plot the stories. For example, you know, I learned about the Apothecaries Guild, which still exists today in London, in fact. When I was in London last year, I got the chance to visit it. And so I started to think, oh, well then, what could happen actually at Apothecaries Hall? And so as I'm doing the research, I find that I'm actually plotting at the same time, because I'll come up with all these great ideas of how to implement that. And so it kind of in those five weeks almost do double duty, so by the time you're done with the research, you say, OK, I know what I need to know to write the story, you're probably about 80% to 90% of the way to getting the story itself, and then it's just another week or two to finish off the fine details of plotting it before I get into the process of actually writing it.

DR. DANA: Give us one unbelievably weird fact you learned about 17th century apothecaries.

KEVIN SANDS: Well, just-- I mean, the stuff that they used honestly was the craziest stuff in the world. I mean-- you know, mercury of course, was a huge medicinal-- something that they used for medicine a lot, which, of course, we know now is incredibly toxic, but things like, you

know-- you would pluck a pigeon and you would strap a pigeon to your body, and that pigeon would draw whatever disease you have in your body. So that was something-- you know, and they would tie it to the queen's feet and it's-- I mean, these things are just absolutely crazy. And of course, it comes from the fact that they just had no idea of anything really to do with medicine at the time. So they had a few things that did work, but most of it honestly was utterly nuts.

DR. DANA: Master Benedict dies in the first book, but his voice continues to guide Christopher throughout all of the books. Often he comes when Christopher's panicked, having hard time with a puzzle, or in great danger. Can you tell us a little more about the character of Master Benedict and how his character changes despite being deceased over the course of the first three books?

KEVIN SANDS: Well, when I created the character of Master Benedict, I knew right away that he was going to die. And so rather than having him die, you know, right away in the first chapter or something like that, I wanted to give the reader a sense of the relationship between them and to show that Master Benedict was a stern and very fairly serious fellow, but he really did have a deep and abiding love for Christopher. So when Master Benedict dies, I felt like this really gives an impetus for Christopher to go on and try and solve what's happening in the story.

And of course, Master Benedict really has been, up until this point, the most important person in Christopher's life. And so when Christopher thinks about him, I wanted to kind of give the impression that, you know, he would sort of imagine a dialogue where he feels that he's having this dialogue with Master Benedict, and in fact, he genuinely feels like he's having this dialogue because he feels that Master Benedict is watching over him, which in fact Master Benedict leaves him something in later books that tells us that that in fact is the case.

And so I thought it was-- you know, from a storytelling perspective, I thought that would be really kind of an interesting thing to watch, an interesting way of Christopher sort of having an internal dialogue. And then through this, we start to get more of that sense of love that Master Benedict has for Christopher and that Christopher has for him, and how much Master Benedict has taught Christopher, because it's kind of-- you know, even when we think of ourselves, when we think of the people who have been important to us-- teachers, mentors, librarians, parents, whoever it's going to be-- friends, we often imagine ourselves having those sorts of dialogues and thinking, well, what would they say and what will they do and what did they teach us? And I still, you know, I still remember things that people told me decades ago. And so that, I thought, was a great way kind of to let Master Benedict continue to live through the books and to have that important presence that he has in Christopher's life.

DR. DANA: On the opposite end of the father figure spectrum for Christopher is Lord Ashcombe. So far he's proved to be a good guy, but he's really, really scary. [LAUGHS]

KEVIN SANDS: Well, I'm glad you say that, because that's exactly how he's supposed to be. He is quite scary. I mean, he's the sort of very, very stern fellow that brooks no nonsense. But again, that was sort of the kind of thing I wanted to have. He's sort of got this dual nature, where deep down he's a genuinely good person and he just-- he cares very much, he just doesn't have any patience for that nonsense, and he absolutely will not allow anybody to threaten his King, or as we see in the books themselves regarding Christopher-- and we'll see some more in the later

books as well-- really to threaten anybody that he loves and he cares for. So Lord Ashcombe is actually one of the most fun characters to write for, I love having him around.

DR. DANA: He keeps on losing pieces of himself literally through the books as well.
[LAUGHS]

KEVIN SANDS: Yes. Well, that's a reflection also I think-- and it was actually something that was important to me when writing these books, to understand that this is really a very dangerous and in many ways, a very brutal time, and, you know, a different kind of mentality. You know, because a lot of times, the characters will undergo-- it's almost-- you think of it like superhero violence, where, you know, you get knocked around but nobody actually really gets hurt. But in these books, you're dealing with people who are, you know, lots of murderers and lots of terrible people, and it didn't seem realistic to me to just-- you know, everyone gets out unscathed.

So everyone who kind of fights has something happen to them at some point in time, and Lord Ashcombe being on the front lines, he's taken the brunt of it, poor fellow.

DR. DANA: In the intro, I mention that these are like detective stories set in the 1600s. They're fast-paced and they often involve dangerous situations and narrow escapes. Christopher has to keep his wits about him but also react very quickly. Would you be willing to read a passage that illustrates this?

KEVIN SANDS: Sure, absolutely.

DR. DANA: This passage is from the first book, *The Blackthorn Key*. At this point in the story, Christopher has begun to piece together the motive behind Master Benedict's murder. He finds himself trapped in an office in the Apothecary's Great Hall. Three apprentices with nasty intentions are coming after him. Christopher manages to escape a locked room, but now he has to escape the Hall. When this scene starts, he's dashed down the stairs and into the building's laboratory.

KEVIN SANDS: I crammed the paper back under the sash and hunted desperately for a weapon. Here, at least, I had better choices than I had in Oswyn's office. A heated plate of iron, say, cooking on the fire. Or a poker to use as a spear or a club.

I shook my head at my foolishness. I wasn't King Arthur. I wouldn't be slaying any giants today. The Elephant alone could crush me just by thinking about it. And even if I got past him and Martin, Wat was still guarded the exit with his knife. I'd never get out of here in a straight-up fight.

What I needed was a distraction, like the last time I'd run away from Wat. Well, this was a laboratory. And if there was one thing I *could* do, it was make distractions.

I ran to the storeroom at the far side of the cook room. It was so stuffed with ingredients, I could barely get inside. I'd never seen such a selection. Five-, ten-, twenty-gallon glass jugs held a

dizzying rainbow of liquids. The ceramic jars were so big, they looked like they were built for whales.

The first thing I needed to do was buy some time. I found two ingredients: sugar and saltpeter. Together, they were the best distraction makers in the world.

I dragged the jars into the cook room, ceramic scraping along the stone, ignoring the howling pain in my back. My plan would work better if I could melt the ingredients first, but I didn't have the time. So I just tipped both jars over near the doorway that led back to the prep room and tossed their spilled contents together with my fingers.

Voices carried from the central chamber.

"He broke my tooth," Martin whined.

"Quiet," the Elephant said.

"I'm going to kill the little worm."

"You're not going to touch him. Now shut up and let me listen."

I crept to the nearest oven and used a set of tongs to grab a glowing coal.

"Games are over, Christopher," the Elephant said. "Come on out."

Footsteps came close to the doorway, moving cautiously.

I dropped the coal in a heap of white on the floor.

There was a hiss.

"What's that?" Martin said.

Then the powder burst into flame. Smoke poured from the mound as a rose-red wall of fire erupted, keening like a banshee.

"Back!" the Elephant shouted from the other room. "Get back!"

I fell to the stone and scrambled away, just as scared as the others. I'd never mixed so much sugar and saltpeter before. The inferno spattered hot caramel drips at my shoes until the grains were spent, leaving a charred splotch on the flagstones. Smoke filled the room, a fog of white. I could barely see inches in front of my face.

"God's breath. He set the Hall on fire," Martin said.

"Christopher!" the Elephant called. "Get out of there! You'll kill yourself."

He wasn't half wrong. The smoke was what I'd wanted; the haze would hide me, and keep the others out for a minute or two. But the cloud billowed everywhere, stinging my eyes and choking my lungs. I ran back to the storeroom, hacking and heaving, gasping for air. I grabbed the spare apron and tied it around my face, covering my nose and mouth, hoping it might filter some of the smoke. It helped a little, but I couldn't stay in here much longer.

Still, I bought myself a bit more time to work. I'd have loved to make another cannon, but I'd burned up all the saltpeter, I couldn't mix gunpowder anymore. I needed something else.

The smoke was so thick, and my eyes watered so badly, I could barely read the labels on the jars. But there, among the other white powders, with natron. And there, on the other side in a twenty-gallon glass jug, was vinegar.

I grabbed another of the apprentice's aprons from one of the pegs and dumped the natron into it, twisting it at the top to form a heavy pouch. Then I overturned the jug and let half the vinegar inside glug out onto the floor. It splashed everywhere, soaking my shoes, drawing up into a row of burlap sacks of wheat by the door, staining them maroon. *If I survive this*, I thought, *there won't be a master in the Guild who won't have me flogged.*

The sour scent of vinegar mixed with the smoke had made me cough even worse. I squeezed a pouch of natron into the wide, open mouth of the jug. Then I pressed the giant stopper back in so it trapped the top of the apron in the neck of the bottle. A stomp from my shoe drove the cork deep enough to hold.

It took a second for the remaining vinegar in the jar to start soaking through the canvas. The liquid started to fizz.

"Christopher." The Elephant called out, still waiting for me by the doorway in the central chamber. "You can't get away. Come on out, now. We just need some information. We won't hurt you if you tell us what we want to know."

Did I really look that dumb? He was right, though. It was time to come out. The jug wouldn't hold forever; the cork stopper was already straining against the glass. And the smoke was making me dizzy.

I hefted the jug, sending another scream down my back. Now, one more weapon, that's all I needed. I found it through the fog in a small pot with a long handle, bubbling on the stove with sticky brown goo that smelled like Satan eating beans. I pulled the pot from the fire. The iron bottom scraped across the grill with a metallic screech.

"Christopher," the Elephant said.

The weight of the pot set my whole arm wobbling, bringing new cries for my wounds. I crept to the doorway that led back to the central chamber, the jug with natron and vinegar still weighing down my other hand. It was gray everywhere. I couldn't see them. I needed to see them.

I coughed. "You promise you won't hurt me?"

"Absolutely," the Elephant said.

There.

I threw the steaming goop toward his voice. I heard it splash on stiff linen. He screamed.

I bolted from the door, jug in one hand, the now-empty iron pot in the other. The smoke was thin enough here to see the goop had hit the Elephant square on. He was soaked, a nasty brown starburst on his chest and neck. He trumpeted, arms flailing, trying to pull his clothes from his scalded skin. Martin, his mangled lip and cheek covered in blood, backed away from his comrade in fright.

He spotted me coming from the smoke, but too late. I swung the pot at his head. It clanged against his skull hard enough to wrench from my hand, bouncing across the floor, ringing over the stone. Martin crumpled like a sack of meal.

That's for Master Benedict, I thought.

I ran out through the prep room back to the courtyard. I carried the glass jug in both hands, now, all my muscles joining my back and howling against its weight. The vinegar inside had already turned into a bubbly pink foam. The cork squeezed upward in the neck.

Wat was waiting. He drew his knife, that long, curved, wicked blade.

But I didn't intend to fight him. Halfway across the courtyard, with the last of my strength, I hurled the jug toward where he stood. Wat watched it fly through the air, surprised. It was a clumsy thing, easily sidestepped. He did, just like I'd hoped.

I dived, skidding across the stone to slam into the back of the well, putting it between me and Wat. The jug hit the ground.

It exploded. The glass shattered with an earsplitting bang, sounding like the biggest cannon in the world. The fearsome pressure from the mixture of vinegar and natron blew shards so far, they plinked off windows on the third floor, pitting the courtyard brick like a thousand Saracen arrows.

Chips of glass, flecked with pink foam, rained down beside me, where I lay protected from the blast behind the cover of the well. I stuck my head over the rim to see what had happened.

Wat writhed on the ground still gripping his knife, the blade scratching against the stone. His right side, from boots to hair, was plastered with red. I didn't know if it was vinegar or blood. I didn't stay to find out. I sprinted past him, flung open the door to the Hall, and fled into the street. After what I'd just done to the place, I knew I'd never get to return.

DR. DANA: What's the most difficult thing about writing a scene like this?

KEVIN SANDS: Well, you always have to consider it on two levels, an action scene. There's sort of the main goal-- what does the character want to get? So it's kind of like, where are you getting? You're going from A to Z. Really, what an action scene needs to be is not one big piece of action, but rather a few miniature actions. So it's kind of like, to get from A to Z, first you go from A to B, then from B to C, then from C to D, and so on.

So it's like in the passage we'd heard, it's kind of like, OK, first he's trapped. So what is he going to do? His immediate problem isn't now just getting out of the Hall, which he needs to do, he needs to escape entirely. He's trapped inside a particular room for which there is no exit, so he needs a solution. So what is that solution? He makes himself a smoke bomb and fills the whole place with smoke so nobody can see him.

So that kind of solves the immediate problem, but now it's caused a new problem-- he can't stay there, it'll choke him. So what's he got to do? He's got to go find a new weapon to make. So he's got to-- he makes the weapon with the natron and the vinegar. OK, that problem is solved, except now, how's he going to get out of this room? And so he's got to do something else. And then again and again.

And so an action scene, then, a long action scene really is just sort of a bunch of mini little action snippets that are joined together to get you from there. And so the hardest thing essentially is finding an interesting sequence of doing that, first of all in a way that's going to make sense-- the reader's never going to think, well, gosh, that's unbelievable-- but also in a way that's interesting. You know, you never want to be doing the same thing over and over and over again. So I find that to be the most challenging.

DR. DANA: When others read books, they often put pieces of themselves in the characters. If this is true for you, what parts of you are in Christopher, Tom, and Sally?

KEVIN SANDS: It's actually not true for me as far as I know. To some extent, of course, the book is-- it comes from me, it comes from my imagination, so it's got to have pieces of me in there. And so I suppose the biggest thing that I could say is Christopher's curiosity. I have that sort of same curiosity, I just-- I just like to know things. On the other hand, the caution that Tom has, that's sort of mine, I'm not nearly so reckless as Christopher is.

But in general, I kind of tried to stay away from putting both myself and people I know in books for two reasons. First, I don't want to get-- if it's someone else, I don't want to get sued. People don't like it when you put them in, because they're like, I'm not like that, and you're like, yeah you are. So people generally don't like that. They like it sometimes when it's their name, but not necessarily their traits. But also, I find that if you start trying to shape a character too much, either of yourself or for someone else, then you're not thinking about what really needs to happen for the story, you start thinking, well, that person wouldn't do that. But that's not the point. What does the story need to happen?

And actually, that's kind of a big piece of advice for especially aspiring writers, I find, because a lot of writers, especially their first couple of manuscripts, maybe-- the first manuscript especially-- they kind of put themselves as their main character, and you can tell. You can always tell. Because the character is just a little bit too good, their flaws are often not really flaws, and everything just kind of works out for them. So it's-- that's what happens, right? Well, it's me, and I want-- and I'm a hero, naturally, and it's like, I don't want anything bad to happen to me.

But your job is to create characters who are of course interesting, and flaws make a character interesting. You know, part of Christopher's fun is that he's reckless sometimes and he doesn't really think necessarily in advance of what he should do. It's often an amusing trait and a fun trait-- although not for poor Tom, I guess, who has to go along with him-- but you know, it's a bit of a flaw and you want them to have that. And of course, as a writer, your job is to take these characters whom you love, you genuinely do-- I love Christopher, I love Tom, I love Sally, all of them, but my job is to take them and make the worst things in the world happen to them. Because that's where the drama comes from. And so you kind of have to have that, I'm really sorry, guys, but this is going to hurt a little bit. And so those are the two main reasons why I avoid putting real people in real things-- including myself-- in books.

DR. DANA: Please tell me you had a pigeon like Bridget when you were a kid.

KEVIN SANDS: Never. Never. I've never had a bird. I had a dog, but I never had a bird. And actually, when I originally started, I thought, you know what? I'm going to give him an animal, because it's a good way to see him caring for something and taking this sort of responsibility that he would have, and it's also kind of fun sometimes just to have an animal character. And I originally thought maybe a dog or a cat or something like that, but then I realized, again, it served the needs of the story. What do I need? I need an animal that could kind of go anywhere. And so, you know, as a pigeon, Bridget can fly. And so I said, OK, so we'll make her a pigeon.

And then it became the real challenge, of course, because, you know, she's a pigeon. So writing a character of a pigeon isn't the easiest thing in the world. So one of the things that delights me the most sometimes when I hear from my readers and stuff, they'll say my favorite character is Bridget. And it's just like, thank you for saying that, because I had to work really hard to get a pigeon and make her into a real character.

DR. DANA: The third book ends with a tremendous cliffhanger. Can you give us a hint about what's to come? Anything?

KEVIN SANDS: OK, I'll say this-- Christopher sort of gains a nemesis. And that nemesis will be played out in various fashions over several books to come. In fact, I'm working right now on Blackthorne Key number four. And no spoilers, but I will say it actually doesn't really involve that nemesis at all. Instead, we're going to start to learn piece by piece, book by book a little bit more about this nemesis. And then eventually, of course, there will be sort of a showdown, and we'll get to that point, but it's going to be something that's going to be hanging over Christopher's head for quite some time before it gets resolved.

DR. DANA: Kevin Sands, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

KEVIN SANDS: Thank you for having me. It was a lot of fun.

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