

Interview with Sarah Natale by Kellan Publishing (March 17, 2015):

Kellan: What is the title and genre of your book that is GOING TO BE PUBLISHED with Kellan?

Sarah: *The Kiss of Death*, a historical fiction novelette

Kellan: Briefly tell us a little about yourself; where you were born, where you live, work, hobbies, married, children etc.

Sarah: I am from the suburbs of Chicago and am currently pursuing a double major in Creative Writing and Public Relations at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Writing is first and foremost my passion. Among my hobbies are reading, writing, figure skating, playing piano, and playing tennis.

Kellan: Do you have a nickname? If so, what is it and how did you get it?

Sarah: I have been called an L.A. Gal (Language Arts Girl) on several occasions due to my love of the craft. But my personal favorite is the Princess of Christmas – my name, Sarah Natale, literally translated means just that. Sarah means Princess in Hebrew, and Natale is the Italian word for Christmas. I love my name because it is unique; I bet not many people can say that their middle name is a holiday in another language!

Kellan: What or who inspired you to write?

Sarah: That's a toughie. It was less one inspiration and more a combination of elements over time. I would spend all my time as a young child fascinated by books. I analyzed every detail, from the plot to the format and author's style, to the back cover "teaser" and author himself. And each and every time, I was struck with wonder at how someone, *anyone* could come up with these brilliant ideas and sustain a vision so clearly throughout the interminable amount of time it must have taken to write down those intense flashes of creativity. Even then, I knew that writing was a lengthy, grueling process. Typing the 125,000 words required of a 500-page novel (the standard word count per page is 250) would take a ton of time alone, and that is just if one was typing random gibberish. Typing 125,000 words and having them *mean* something, and to arrange them in such a way that they craft a gorgeous novel, that is quite a feat indeed. This takes more than a single stroke of inspiration. These people are nothing less than brilliant. I was intrigued; I immediately wanted in. I wanted a piece of that life, which invoked such a passion in me. The fact that it is so challenging and that there is no guarantee only added to my desire to pursue and succeed. If I wanted a, not necessarily easier, but straightforward career, I could just choose something like mathematics or the sciences. But those ceased to invoke a passion in me the same way that writing did. I had always favored the creative arts, and the creative arts were where I would remain.

Kellan: What is your favorite genre to write in, or do you have one?

Sarah: This novelette is a historical fiction, but just as I read multiple genres, I am not limited to writing in just one. The majority of my writing is in realistic fiction, which is my preferred genre. However, I plan to dabble in fantasy writing in the future.

Kellan: What is your favorite book(s) and why?

Sarah: This is another tough question. I suppose it depends on the time period in my life. I grew up obsessed with the Sweet Valley Twins, a spin-off series of Sweet Valley High by Francine Pascal. Pascal has several other spin-offs following the lives and escapades of blonde, blue-eyed identical twins Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield of Sweet Valley, California who are as different as night and day. With somewhere near 100 books per series, she has created a large “World of Sweet Valley.” To this day, Sweet Valley Twins remains my favorite of all of them. I was fascinated by the serial aspect of how one book would lead you into the conflict of the next and entice you to read on in order to discover how the twins would get themselves out of the latest debacle. The series had an adventure feel to its (mostly) realistic fiction genre. The books were, to put it bluntly, a drama thrill ride.

Though I read other books now, the fictional World of Sweet Valley will always hold a special place in my heart. I become excited to find books to add to my (already large) Sweet Valley collection, as they are now out of print.

More recently, I am a huge fan of Sarah Dessen books for the relatable aspect of teen romances, Harry Potter for J.K. Rowling’s masterstroke of a series (because who doesn’t secretly want to be a wizard?), and my all-time favorites: The Vampire Academy and spin-off series Bloodlines (I have a thing for series, I know).

Kellan: Who is your favorite author(s) and why?

Sarah: Richelle Mead, author of Vampire Academy and Bloodlines. I was intrigued by her fresh perspective on the saturated vampire genre and hooked by the second page of the first book of the series. What kept me interested was her seamless combination of a witty, flawless writing style and ingenious plot. She is truly a master storyteller. After reading any one of her novels, I would find myself pondering endlessly over how she came up with the complicated overarching plot, complete with numerous sub-plots and character personalities that were so well-developed they seemed real. And she wove all this together in a beautiful masterpiece, novel after novel, series after series.

Each book was better than the last, but what struck me was how her spin-off series Bloodlines was even better than the first. I loved the characters, the situations the more intense they became, and the way the characters reacted to the situations they were thrown into – I loved all of these things more than in the first series. Vampire Academy ended on a high note for the main characters, but not so much for

some secondary characters. At first this threw me off and left me feeling unraveled and unsatisfied, but I realized later that this was exactly the unsettled conflict that Mead intended to resolve in the spin-off – of course we had to be left hanging!

In *Bloodlines*, Mead chose a few select secondary characters and embellished their lives in the same overarching vampire world setting I had grown to know and love in *Vampire Academy*. The original main characters made cameo appearances, but they were never the main focus. And, sorry all you Dimitri Belikov fans, but I am team Adrian Ivashkov all the way! The romance in the second series is just overall more intriguing, in my opinion, though the forbidden streak is common theme in both.

There is layer after layer of meticulous details and connections at work in these novels, and I can appreciate Mead's attention to these elements as both a reader and an author. As a reader, I thank her for her entertaining, humorous, and oftentimes heart-wrenching storyline. As an author, I admire her flawless writing style, rich character development, and intriguing plot. I've read many great books where I was distracted by writing style or confusing grammar, but that has never been an issue with Mead. Her work is something that I think all authors can model themselves after. I guess every reader has a style in which they prefer to be told a story (and oftentimes this is how they as an author would prefer to write, too), and Mead's work is that for me in a nutshell.

Kellan: Who is your favorite character, out of all of the books you've written? Tell us a little about them and why they are your favorite.

Sarah: Elizabeth Chauncey from *The Kiss of Death*. She is a very strong character as far as what she believes in; she will do whatever it takes to save herself and her family during the horrendous outbreak of plague in her London home. Even when she is uncertain about the torrent of issues cascading around her in religion, social class, and between loved ones, she is able to hold her own and determine her destiny. This is ultimately a period of growth for her amidst a time of strife, and she is a survivor. I admire that trait in a character, as I would admire it in real life as well. In some ways she is like me: she knows what she wants, has a clear plan to get there, and is willing to make sacrifices to do what needs to be done in order to make the best of things.

Kellan: Do you have a special place to write, or a certain routine? Tell us about it.

Sarah: Though simultaneously a morning and night person, I am primarily a night owl, so I often choose to write late at night when the house is quiet and I know that no one will bother me (an important factor to consider before I am in "the zone"). Generally, I can write anywhere, though I prefer a place where I know I can sit for hours uninterrupted. I believe that your surroundings (and how comfortable you are with them) greatly affect the outcome of your writing, and I find I enjoy writing outdoors in nature for just that reason. I don't have as many opportunities to do this, living in the Midwest, but I imagine myself 20 years from now with my laptop sitting outside a lake house and typing away amidst the sandy beaches and crashing waves. The next best thing (and more easily accessible) is writing facing a window. There's something about the openness of looking outside that fosters the writing process versus sitting in a closed-in room.

Kellan: How long have you been writing?

Sarah: Ever since I could hold a pencil. Literally. I was scribbling before I could write and telling stories based on the pictures in the comic book *Archie* before I could read. I thank my parents for fostering in me a love of writing and literature by always providing a never-ending supply of books growing up. The entire bottom shelf of my bookcase is bulging with notebooks filled with my writing and has gotten so large through the years that it is now spilling into the second shelf.

Kellan: What other published works do you have besides with Kellan Publishing?

Sarah: I have had four short stories published in *An Anthology of Short Stories by Young Americans*, a compilation of works by many authors over four consecutive years from ages 8 through 11.

Kellan: Have you ever based a character on a person you know? Tell us about it; who the character is, who it's based on and why you chose that person to make a character.

Sarah: In the few instances that I've done this, I must say that the character stops being based on that person and instead develops a life of its own. The character morphs into something entirely new and completely opposite of what I imagined – so for that reason, I would say that the real life person merely serves as inspiration for that character. The character ends up being so unlike the real life muse that there ceases to be a correlation.

Kellan: What inspires you for your stories?

Sarah: Inspiration is an elusive creature . . . it's hard to describe that moment when a light bulb goes off in your head and suddenly you know what you *need* to be writing about. I would say I get my inspiration from life and the world around me. Many of my stories are inspired by real life occurrences, things people have said, or observations.

Kellan: Okay, tell us about your secret crush (movie star, musician etc). Who is it? When did you become such a fan? Why did you become such a fan? What kind of memorabilia do you have of theirs? Have you ever met them? If so, explain how and what happened.

Sarah: I can't say I have any major celebrity crushes at the moment. But when I was younger I did have a HUGE crush on identical twins Dylan and Cole Sprouse (who were always four glorious years older than me) from *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* and later spin-off *The Suite Life on Deck* (I really do have a thing for spin-offs!). I thought they were really funny and cute, and I loved the clashing characters they

portrayed on the Disney TV shows, similar to the way Elizabeth and Jessica from the Sweet Valley Twins were polar opposites of each other: one very studious and down to earth, the other more of a happy-go-lucky break-all-the-rules partier. The boys had a similar brotherly play off of each other.

Kellan: What do you do to get out of writer's block?

Sarah: Usually reaching a point where the story no longer flows means that I need to step away for a while to take my mind off of it, recharge, and regroup. Whether this be a few hours or a few months, when I come back to it, I almost always have a fresh perspective on the topic and am then able to take the story in a new direction.

However, this is easier said than done, as it is always hard for an author to accept that he or she needs to give the story some space for the time being. But it is unfortunately unavoidable as it comes with the territory. Just like our minds and bodies need to recharge every night through sleep, our creative minds, too, need a rest. This is why I will often take a large break after completing a significant piece of writing or portion of a longer work and focus on other things. Writing is a draining process that takes a lot out of you; I believe these breaks are healthy and all-too necessary for creative success in the field.

Kellan: What do you want to be when you 'grow' up?

Sarah: My goal is simple: to be a famous novelist. I strive to be a *New York Times* best-selling author someday, with countless well-known, popular novels. This is the goal I have envisioned for myself my entire life, a goal that I am pursuing each time I craft another story. I am a lifelong writer.

Kellan: Tell us about *The Kiss of Death*:

Sarah: *The Kiss of Death* is a suspense-filled historical fiction with a hint of romance, which encompasses an outbreak of the bubonic plague in Medieval London in the year 1348. Will you refuse its kiss?

Kellan: What inspired you for this story?

Sarah: I have always had a fascination with the disease that devastated one third of Europe's population. I can trace this interest back to a book report I was assigned in the fourth grade. I wrote the report on historical fiction *Petals in the Ashes* by Mary Hooper that detailed the Great Fire of London in 1666, which, though a horrific event in history, worked wonders in cleansing the city of plague that swept through the year before. This book was actually the sequel to *At the Sign of the Sugared Plum*, which focused more on the initial plague outbreak in 1665 and the lives of two sisters who were managing a sweetmeat shop in London at the time. Though this outbreak occurred a good 300 years

after my story takes place, it served as the spark that lit my interest in plague outbreaks throughout history.

As a tribute to the two stories that inspired my fascination with the plague and ultimately this story (roughly 8 years prior to writing it), I included a small scene in the *The Kiss of Death* where the main character, Elizabeth Chauncey, encounters a sweetmeat shop selling plague preventatives.

Kellan: What was the most difficult part writing this story?

Sarah: It was definitely a challenge infusing research with fiction. This was a very research-heavy project, and I enjoyed the research aspect and learning everything I could on my topic for my own background knowledge, even if I didn't directly integrate it into the story. However, it required a great deal of time and meticulous attention to detail to get everything just right. I initially went through with my outline in hand and let my creativity run its course, leaving blanks, or "holes," in the story wherever I was uncertain about a historical fact or piece of information. The creation of this story occurred in a 1:10 ratio: 3 days to write a first draft, 30 days to revise again and again.

This was a fairly straightforward story to write, thanks to extensive preplanning and a detailed outline to work from. So, unlike most other stories I've written, the actual writing went luxuriously smoothly with the most difficult part occurring mainly in the revision process. Some pieces of information on which I had based entire scenes were very difficult to find. For example, the opening chapter of the book takes place at a morality play that main characters and childhood friends Elizabeth Chauncey and Matthias de Bourgueville are attending. It was hard enough to discover entertainment practices of the 14th century, let alone the name of a play from the era. Discovering the title *The Pride of Life* was one of the last pieces of research I needed to fill "holes" in the story – and only a portion of the words from the play survives! I slaved over this vital detail for weeks.

It was such a gratifying feeling when everything – all the historical facts and details – finally fell into place. And I wouldn't trade the grueling process for anything. The fact that it was a definite challenge only makes the final product that much more rewarding to behold. *The Kiss of Death* is my favorite of all the stories I have written to this day.

Kellan: Do you plan to have any sequels for it? If so, give us a little hint what to expect.

Sarah: As of right now I do not. However, during the revision process I had received several requests to "please write an alternate ending, just for me" as the current one has been known to invoke strong emotions in readers. Don't worry – I will not give away any spoilers; I hope you may have the same opportunity in experiencing the ending as other readers!

If I receive enough imploring requests, I may head back to the drawing board and craft an alternate ending. I will do my best to attend to my readers' desires! Another (and maybe better option) may be to continue the story in a sequel, this time in Matthias's point of view, with a twist at the end, of course. But as of right now I have no plans for expansion.

Kellan: (if not yet published): When do you expect this book to be published?

Sarah: A publication date is not known at this time. As stated in the previous question, the creation of a sequel all depends on reader demand.

Kellan: Why did you choose Kellan Publishing to publish your book(s)?

Sarah: After spending a great deal of time submitting my manuscript to literary agents left and right to no avail, I had finally accepted laying the work to rest on a shelf for the time being. It was then, when I stopped looking, that I stumbled upon a small publisher seeking exactly the type of book I had written: a novelette. And, upon submission, Kelli from Kellan Publishing asked to see more of my work!

It turns out that literary agents are reluctant to accept shorter works such as novellas and novelettes because, in the end, publishing is a business, and these types of works are not very lucrative for them. (Though I don't see why not – in this day and age, attention spans are shorter, and readers are more apt to desire shorter reading material in the eBook genre.) In other words, just because it doesn't appeal to the literary agents doesn't mean that the writing is subpar or unpublishable. In fact, I don't think my work even made it past the query letter because, sadly, length trumped any evaluation of its literary merit.

I am so thankful to Kellan Publishing for giving authors of shorter works such as myself the opportunity to have our voices heard. Words have the ability to leave a huge impact on readers, no matter the length of prose. This publishing company is something unique that is not heard about every day – it took me a long time to discover someone actively *seeking* novelettes. Being offered a contract by Kellan Publishing was a dream come true, and ultimately the start of my career.

Kellan: What is your biggest pet peeve when reading a book and why?

Sarah: Writing style!!!!!! Authors, please learn how to “grammar”!

Yet, unfortunately, poorly written books still make the bestseller list every day. The best way I can think to describe this problem is through a music analogy. If a song has a catchy beat but cheesy lyrics, most people can and will still listen to the song. But if the background music is bad, it doesn't matter how amazing the lyrics are; the song is hard to stomach and no one will listen to it. Of course, the ideal song is a balance of both, but this doesn't always happen. I feel that way about books, too, only this time in terms of plot and writing style. It doesn't matter how well-written the book is; if I'm not hooked by the plot, it's hard to hold my interest. But if the plot has my attention, I can grit my teeth and bear poor writing.

Still, it irks me nonetheless when books are written in a sloppy, confusing style. (Again, thank you, Richelle Mead, for being a great example of flawless prose!)

Kellan: Would you like to make any shout outs to your fans, readers or family?

Sarah: First, I wouldn't even have written this story if it wasn't an assignment in my senior Creative Writing class. Thank you, Mr. Thiel, for giving me the tools I needed to craft a story worthy of publication, and then giving me the space to create. (Also for letting me exceed the minimum page count by several pages!) I am especially thankful that you required an outline, because though I was initially against plotting out my entire story before writing it, it made a world of difference. The writing process was that much easier.

Next, the two people who deserve this most: my mom and dad. I am indebted to you for your years of encouragement and faith in my writing career, especially when others tried to shoot me down and tell me I would never make it. You believe in me unfailingly, and I owe much of my motivation and drive to pursue my goals to you: the ones who inspired in me such passion. Because of your support, I have always had a clear vision for my future, and this is the natural result.

Finally, to all my fans: these stories are for you! You are the fruits of my labor. You are the reason I write. I hope that I can continue to craft stories that intrigue and entertain you – stories that make you laugh and make you cry, stories that elicit strong emotional and thoughtful reader responses. Thank you for your support!