

Challenging Ageism with Wit

Bridport author **Ros Huxley** talks to **Fergus Byrne** about her debut novel *Kendal Acts Up*

As a reader of short stories for the Bridport Prize, Ros Huxley, whose debut novel *Kendal Acts Up* comes out in August, has given her time to a vast number of words over the years. With every new Prize, she would read many of the stories before recommending a short list for the final judging. The process was fascinating, introducing her to a wide range of writing styles and abilities, and although she cites the ‘cliché’ that she had ‘always wanted to write’, it became the inspiration away from copywriting, press releases and journalism to an MA in creative writing.

‘One day,’ she says, ‘I just sat up in bed and thought “I could do this.”’ So she did. Her conviction inspired her to seek out a creative writing group, and after a serendipitous lunch with a friend, she found one. Despite having quite stringent entry requirements, the group welcomed her, and it became the genesis of *Kendal Acts Up*.

Based on the adventures of Kendal Tudge, a single Londoner in her forties who inherits her Uncle Clem’s flat in a retirement home on the Jurassic Coast, the book is a warm and humorous story that explores some of the hidden prejudices and stereotypes faced by those labelled as ‘elderly.’

Her story weaves together a host of characters, including Gary the handsome warden and various residents of Jurassic Court, as Kendal learns the ways of the countryside in a seaside area remarkably similar to West Bay and Bridport.

The core idea for Kendal’s adventures came from personal experience. While her father was in a care home, Ros often found herself relaxing there after long workdays. If he was sleeping when she arrived, she would lie on the bed looking out the window. ‘I thought “God, I could live here,”’ she says. ‘There’s no hassle. Everything done for you. No stuff that needs to be fixed, cleaned, or maintained.’ Her father’s amused response was that she wasn’t old enough. This sparked an intriguing thought: ‘What if somebody pretended to be older than they are, just to live in a retirement home?’

Kendal Tudge decides to attempt that very pretence and moves into Jurassic Court. Despite initial agent feedback questioning the plausibility of 44-year-old Kendal passing for 60, Ros remained convinced. ‘I disagreed with that’ she says. ‘I find it very difficult to

judge people’s age’. She has since encountered real-life individuals attempting similar deceptions, albeit with a shorter age gap. This unique situation became the foundation for Kendal’s adventures.

‘There are significant differences between people in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s’

Fuelled by her main character’s various quandaries and further motivated by her creative writing group, Ros decided to pursue an MA in Creative Writing at Exeter University while continuing her job working for a charity. ‘It was quite hard,’ she admits, also noting the age gap between herself and many younger students. ‘I hadn’t been doing academic studying for 40 years.’ However, a mature perspective proved to be an asset. The head of the course suggested that people who have spent their lives on a career and raising their children often work harder and are more likely to succeed. This observation held true, especially during the pandemic when online learning posed challenges for many of the younger students. The MA course was modular, with each module concentrating on a different aspect of writing. This enabled Ros to incorporate elements of Kendal’s story in her dissertation.

However, as the book and the course progressed, a bold decision faced her. After a lifetime in the creative industries, where thinking outside the box was an advantage, Ros had taken a job working for an international charity with a structure that was completely new to her. She describes it as ‘very much out of my comfort zone’. She found herself in a world of targets, KPIs (key performance indicators), forecasting, training scenarios, and often baffling corporate language. Although she was somewhat of an outsider, she was very successful in the role, but Kendal Tudge was tempting her away to a place where she felt a more natural connection. She elected to resign from the job and, like Kendal, focus on a radical new journey.

Transitioning from short stories to a novel was initially challenging, but she soon identified a pattern. ‘Once I got into a rhythm,’ she says, ‘it becomes so

real that you live it.' She even used a text-to-speech feature to occasionally listen back to her writing, and sometimes heard her husband chuckling as he overheard it from another room. One of Kendal's charming qualities is her quick wit.

Kendal also draws from Ros's observations of the corporate world. 'There aren't that many books that are about the world of work,' she says. Ros had found that, occasionally, if she got irritated in meetings, she would quietly write down what was happening. 'I gathered masses of words and phrases.'

A central theme in *Kendal Acts Up* is the depiction of older people and community dynamics. Ros has a long history of volunteering. One of her earliest voluntary activities was Books on Wheels, where she, with her three-year-old son accompanying her, delivered books to those unable to reach the library. During this period, she started to see that the term 'elderly' was a misnomer. She explains, 'There are significant differences between people in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, yet when we're young, we think anyone over 65 is elderly.' Ros hopes her book will encourage a broader understanding of older generations.

She also champions the idea of intergenerational living, citing examples from Holland and a BBC programme where nursery children interacted with care home residents. 'Their lives are genuinely changed,' she says about the impact of having younger people around.

The novel also explores the significance of community, a force Ros deeply values in her life. 'I'm a huge believer in the power of community, and we have that here, and of course, there are occasions when it's annoying, but most of the time, it's a hugely positive force.'

With *Kendal Acts Up* scheduled for launch in August, Ros Huxley is already considering her upcoming projects. She's working on a series of interconnected short stories about retirement activities as well as a memoir exploring the impact of baby loss on families. An intensely personal project that was inspired by a family tragedy she had previously been unaware of.

Ros's insightful observations of life, from the corporate world to the nuances of ageing, make *Kendal Acts Up* a relatable and engaging read. As Ashley Pharoah, screenwriter of *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes*, says, Kendal Tudge is both chaotic and mesmerising. He likens her to a 'Jurassic Coast Bridget Jones'.

Published by WriteSideLeft on August 1st, Kendal Acts Up will be available at Waterstones, Amazon and all good bookshops. ISBN: 9781068518829. EPUB ISBN: 9781068518836

