

A conversation with children's librarian and debut novelist

Sara K Joiner



Texas children's librarian Sara K Joiner presents her debut novel, *AFTER THE ASHES*, a riveting coming-of-age survival story set against the eruption of the mighty volcano Krakatau in 1883. Sara discusses her research for the novel, as well as what she hopes readers will learn from this dramatic story.

Sara, *AFTER THE ASHES* is your first novel. Tell us about it.

My novel is about Katrien, a young teen who wants nothing more than to explore the jungles of Java and prove Darwin's theory of natural selection. Her aunt wants her to be more like her classmate Brigitta, but Katrien detests the girl. When the volcano Krakatau erupts, causing multiple tsunamis, the only person who will escape with Katrien into the jungle is Brigitta.

Where did you get your inspiration for this story?

I was reading the children's book *The Day the World Exploded* by Simon Winchester, and this vague image of a girl popped into my head. She was researching the flora and fauna on Java, and I thought her story would be interesting. Then I realized I would have to learn about the flora and fauna on Java!

***AFTER THE ASHES* is a fictionalized account of the true story of the eruption of the volcano Krakatau in 1883. Tell us about your research process for this book.**

I used Winchester's book for adults, *Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded*, as my guiding light and determining factor for any contradictory information in the books I read about the eruption. I read about plants and animals in Java, Dutch colonialism in the East Indies, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, traditional Indonesian medicine, and Dutch and Indonesian customs and idioms. I also used Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.

During your research, what did you find most surprising or interesting?

The fact that the sound of the blast could be heard 3,000 miles away was startling, and some of the more gruesome elements about bodies filling the Sunda Strait were horrifyingly sad. Otherwise, I discovered and loved the Dutch idiom "It's raining carrots"

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for when we would say “It’s raining cats and dogs.” I love this, and it can often “rain carrots” where I live!

The central character, Katrien, is considered to be self-righteous and prickly by the other girls her own age. What do you hope this book can teach young readers about the importance of being open-minded and accepting of others?

Katrien learns, in the most horrific of ways, that her attitude has hurt others . . . but not in the way readers will expect. I think it’s important for people to accept others for who they are—whether they be prickly and self-righteous, or friendly and self-deprecating. And I think readers will see that Katrien’s self-righteousness was both a help and a hindrance to her. I hope that readers will see that sometimes it’s necessary to be more rigid in an opinion than others might want you to be, and that you should be willing to change your mind about people.

If you could go back and experience one great moment in history, what would you choose and why?

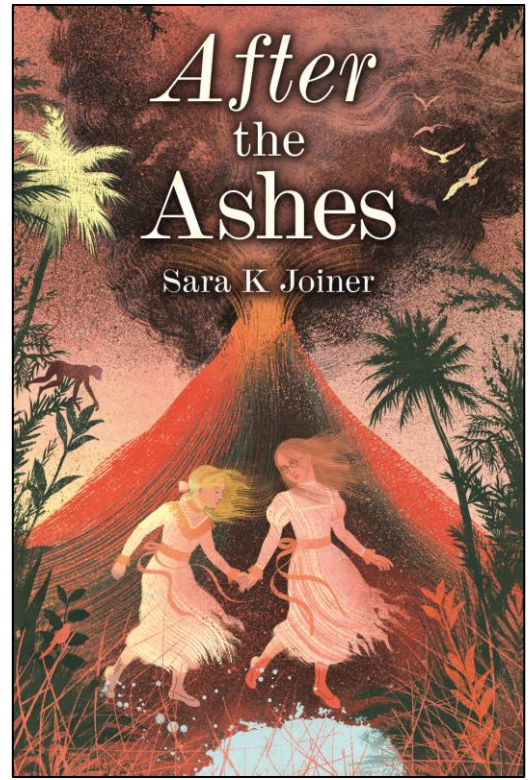
This is a hard one because I love history. As a woman, I would say going back to be among that first group of women to cast their ballots in 1920 would be something to see. I think about all their long, hard work whenever I vote—and seeing the joy, pride and sense of accomplishment on their faces on the day they first voted . . . can you imagine that?

When did you know you wanted to become an author?

I think it’s something I’ve vaguely known forever, but I can honestly say I was probably about nine years old. I even wrote that I wanted to write books in *My Book About Me* by Dr. Seuss (and me!). But I’ve only been working toward publication as a real goal since 2006.

If you could give any advice to young authors, what would it be?

Read, read, read! You cannot learn about writing any other way. Grammar, spelling and punctuation can be learned in school, but crafting a good sentence? You can only discover that by reading.



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