

# Lucy Saxon

Dressed for success... The Brit fantasy author bringing steampunk to YA readers

• WORDS BY JONATHAN WRIGHT • PORTRAIT BY WILLIAM IRELAND

**W**hen she was just 12 years old, Lucy Saxon was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome. Forced to stay off school by a condition that often left her physically exhausted, the trajectory of her life changed. "It was basically entertain myself by writing and reading, or watch far too much daytime television," she remembers. "There's only so much *Supermarket Sweep* you can watch."

Not that Saxon, whose debut novel *Take Back The Skies* is a steampunk adventure aimed squarely at the young adult market, instantly saw herself as a novelist. "I wasn't really even thinking about writing books," she says. "It was just short stories, things like that."

A year or so later, a friend told Saxon about NaNoWriMo, National Novel-Writing Month, an online challenge to write 50,000 words in the month of November. "I signed up and have done it every year since," she says.

As part of the challenge, the then 16-year-old Saxon wrote the first draft of *Take Back The Skies*. It was a leap forward from her previous efforts. "It was the first thing that I'd finished and thought, 'Yeah, I can actually do something with this, I'm proud of this.' Before, I'd finish something, and hate it and never look at it again."

But what to do next? Someone her father knew through work put her in touch with a literary agent, Maggie Pearlstine. "I was told she didn't do children's fiction and she wasn't accepting new authors, but she was happy to read my manuscript and give me some honest feedback," she says, "and maybe point me in the right direction of somebody who would be able to help."

Saxon, at best, expected an encouraging email, but instead Pearlstine offered to represent her. "[It] was

insane," she says, still slightly boggled by what happened.

In truth, it's easy to see what drew Pearlstine to the text. *Take Back The Skies* has airships, a wicked father, a conspiracy, strange mechanical devices and a touching will-they-won't-they romance between its leads, Cat, a headstrong rich girl who runs away from a gilded life, and a resourceful, charming, red-haired street urchin, Fox.

Cat, Saxon says, revealed herself through the writing process. "I tend to find in writing that a lot of my characters can get quite forceful when I'm trying to create them," she says. "It's almost like they are fully formed and I'm just trying to figure out what they are."

The plan is for a sequence of six novels, but don't expect a conventional sequel to *Take Back The Skies*.

Instead, the books will jump around in time and place, but give readers "the view of [Saxon's fictional world] as a whole and how it works together".

It's appropriate this fictional world will be revealed by Bloomsbury, the publishers of JK Rowling. Having early on

developed an interest in science fiction and fantasy thanks to her mother being a fan of *Star Trek: TNG* and *Doctor Who* (Saxon: "Best way to raise a child"), Saxon grew up with *Harry Potter*. "It's a world set within our own world," she says as she tries to work out why the boy wizard has such an appeal. "Obviously I'm far too old to get my Hogwarts letter, but at the time there was that thought that on my 11th birthday, maybe this is going to be it."

If the letter never came, Saxon has at least been able to place herself in other writers' fictional worlds through cosplay. So how did she become interested in dressing up as Captain America and, for the photoshoot that accompanies this article, Celaena Sardothien from Sarah J Maas' *Throne Of Glass* novels?

"I went to a *Torchwood* convention when I was 14 and met some people I knew online, and they were all cosplayers," she says. "I hung out with them and they were in cosplay the entire weekend. I felt a bit left out and it just looked really fun." From here, it was a short step to using a sewing machine. It's a great ice-breaker, she adds, to be able to go up to fellow cosplayers and ask them about their costumes.

Aside from cosplay, reading and writing, she lists her other interests as gaming and the internet. So she's pretty much a geek then? Well yes, but, without wishing to read too much into *Take Back The Skies*, there's a sense in Cat of a character longing to escape, a trait that may be partly born of Saxon's own experiences. Prior to her illness, she used to play – deep breath now – tennis, football, rounders, netball and hockey.

So if her SF gene came from her mother, from where did the interest in kicking, catching and running stem? Her father, it turns

out, is chief executive of Sheffield Wednesday. "I miss sports quite a lot," she says. "I know it's a stereotype for geeks and nerds not to be into sports, but I really like sports. And the fact that I can't do a lot of the sports that I used to play really frustrates me."

Still, the fact she's a published author in her teens is certainly a consolation, if a little overwhelming at times. "If I think about it too much, it just gets really crazy, and I'm like: 'How did this end up being my life?'" she says. "So I try not to think about things too much and just to take things as they come." **SFX**

**"My characters can get quite forceful when I'm trying to create them"**

## BIODATA

- **OCCUPATION:** Novelist
- **BORN:** 1995
- **FROM:** Chichester, Hertfordshire
- **GREATEST HITS:** *Take Back The Skies* is Saxon's debut novel.
- **RANDOM FACT:** Saxon is a perfectionist. "You have to have some level of perfectionism to get involved in cosplay because half of it is about getting it to look as accurate as possible to the original material."



*Take Back The Skies* will be published on Thursday 5 June.





## Say Her Name

Careful with your drink orders...

★★★★★

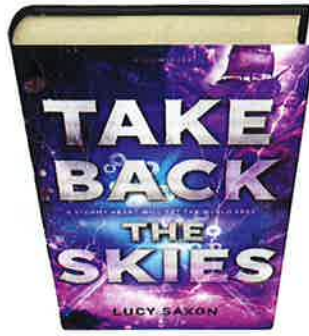
**Release Date:** 5 June  
287 pages | £6.99 (paperback)/£4.99 (ebook)  
Author: James Dawson  
Publisher: Hot Key Books

**EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT'S** supposed to happen when you stand in front of a mirror and say "Bloody Mary" five times. Everyone, including the teens of *Say Her Name*. But they're still sceptical (or daft) enough to try it anyway.

With a five-day deadline hanging over their heads, they set about trying to solve the mystery using skills they've learned from horror movies, but despite blithely dropping references to movies like *Halloween* and *Paranormal Activity*, they all seem to have missed the one film that would've really helped them out: *Ring*.

Yup, this is basically a J-horror movie turned into a YA romance, complete with a creaky, soggy dead girl. It's creepy enough to keep you reading, but there's nothing original here. **Sarah Dobbs**

**?** The cover for *Say Her Name* is the work of film poster designer Andy Nicholou (28 Days Later, Shaun Of The Dead).



## Take Back The Skies

Charming steampunk adventure

★★★★★

**Release Date:** 5 June  
384 pages | £12.99 (hardback)/£7.99 (paperback)  
Author: Lucy Saxon  
Publisher: Bloomsbury

**THIS ABSOLUTELY** cracking debut novel from Lucy Saxon – the first in a series, although it's also quite self-contained – is a delicious cocktail incorporating steampunk, *His Dark Materials* and George Orwell.

Cat Hunter, teenage daughter of a nasty government official, runs away from home and stows away on a skyship, making new friends among the crew and hatching a plan to bring down the government.

Occasionally let down by repetition (characters are too often described as "the older man" or "the dark-haired man"), *Take Back The Skies* is for the most part a delightful read, with a heroine who truly feels alive. About as good a YA adventure as you'll see all year. **Jayne Nelson**

**?** Lucy took her pen name from the Master's wife in *Doctor Who*; her real surname is Aldridge.



## Cuckoo Song

Twisted sister

★★★★★

**Release Date:** OUT NOW!  
410 pages | £7.99 (paperback)/£4.31 (ebook)  
Author: Frances Hardinge  
Publisher: Pan Macmillan

**IT'S A SHAME THE TITLE** hints so strongly at what exactly is going on in this 1920s-set story, because it spoils the gradual, beautifully written revelation of the main character's identity.

Eleven-year-old Triss nearly drowns, and starts behaving in a very odd fashion, eating strange items and noticing that hairs in her brush turn into leaves. Meanwhile her horrible little sister, Penelope, seems determined to get her in trouble.

Slowly Triss realises that not only is she not who she thinks she is, but that her father and mother have secrets of their own, and she has only a limited amount of time in which to fix things. Supernatural elements are introduced slowly, resulting in a charming, yet unsettling, fairytale. **Miriam McDonald**

**?** Hardinge says she was influenced by Nicholas Fisk's *A Rag, A Bone And A Hank Of Hair* – it "shocked her senseless".



## The Sword Of Kuromori

YA fiction turns Japanese

★★★☆☆

**Release Date:** OUT NOW!  
330 pages | £6.99 (paperback)/£4.01 (ebook)  
Author: Jason Rohan  
Publisher: Egmont

**THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED** to cater to kids with a taste for Japanese culture and legends. In the present day, a sullen teenage boy (with both British and American connections – smart marketing!) comes to Japan. He finds himself in a hotbed of gods and monsters, as he's charged with preventing an imminent cataclysm.

The plot and heroes are mechanical, and the descriptions have the flatness of Wikipedia entries. The often ridiculous action scenes work less well in print than if they'd been pictured in a manga. On the upside, a couple of the non-human characters (a water demon and a helpful "tanuki") are fresher, and the sheer number of battles may appeal to some young readers. **Andrew Osmond**

**?** The fox-like tanuki are real animals, but also the subject of much folklore – in the anime *Pom Poko*, they're shape-shifters.

## REISSUES

### THE CYBERIAD

**Release Date:** 5 June  
£9.99 | Author: Stanislaw Lem  
Publisher: Penguin



This collection of absurdist "Fables for the Cybernetic Age" was first published in 1965. They follow two robotic engineers capable of creating incredible devices – like a machine that can make anything beginning with "N" – as they travel around, helping those in need. Simultaneously hilarious and philosophical, it may remind you of both Douglas Adams and Lewis Carroll.

### DARK ENTRIES

**Release Date:** 5 June  
£7.99 | Author: Robert Aickman  
Publisher: Faber & Faber



Neil Gaiman, Reece Shearsmith and Peter Straub are amongst the admirers of cult author Robert Aickman. Faber is celebrating the centenary of his birth by reissuing six of his books, including this 1964 collection of six disquieting "strange stories". Subtle, elegant and puzzling (sometimes to the degree where you may be left totally baffled), they include the eerie zombie tale "Ringing The Changes".

### THE LONG WAR

★★★★★  
**Release Date:** 5 June  
£7.99 | Authors: Terry Pratchett, Stephen Baxter  
Publisher: Corgi



The second in the *Long Earth* series. Humans have discovered an ability to "step" into parallel Earths. Now, with colonies established on thousands of worlds, life has been thrown into chaos. **We said:** "Baxter and Pratchett are clearly enjoying their quantum playground; their playfulness infuses every passage."

### NEPTUNE'S BROOD

★★★★★  
**Release Date:** 1 June  
£8.99 | Author: Charles Stross  
Publisher: Orbit



In this off-the-wall space-opera (a loose follow-up to 2008's *Saturn's Children*), a scholar whose sister's gone missing tangles with assassins and pirates as she follows the clues deep into the oceans of a watery world. **We said:** "A riotously entertaining romp... virtually every page is crammed to bursting with incredible concepts."

### THE THOUSAND NAMES

★★★★★  
**Release Date:** 5 June  
£8.99 | Author: Django Wexler  
Publisher: Del Rey



Book one of *The Shadow Campaigns*. Set in a desert land akin to Egypt, it sees tribesmen, army and followers of a new religion allying to drive out colonial invaders. Muskets and cannons lend matters an 18th/19th century feel. **We said:** "There's a great deal of fighting (well written); if you don't like battles, this is not for you."

# book club

# #READITANDTWEET

Cool new reads from awesome lit ladies

Actress

Bella

Thorne's

pick:

*Stolen* by Lucy Christopher

"I love this book. It's about a girl who goes off to get a cup of coffee, then gets drugged and kidnapped by a stalker. But it's all because he's in love with her rather than wants to harm her. A very interesting read."



On the Company staffer bookshelf:

*The Girl Who Was Saturday Night* by Heather O'Neill

I loved this coming-of-age story of Noushcka, a girl living in Quebec trying to deal with heartbreak, a destructive twin brother and her family falling apart. I loved how strong Noushcka is - totally inspiring. And a stunning read!

@carlene\_writer



*The True and Splendid History of the Harristown Sisters* by Michelle Lovric

This is the riotous and true (!) tale of seven 19th-century sisters, who, with the help of their luscious long red locks, rose out of poverty in rural Ireland to become famous performers.

Hooked from page one!

@alexksia



*Elizabeth is Missing* by Emma Healey

Elderly Maud has dementia. She gets muddled daily, but she's sure of one thing - her best friend is missing. Her family dismisses her rantings as madness, but could Maud be right? A funny, heartbreaking and unforgettable debut novel.

@gemfatale



Twittersphere

Picks:

@thelifeofmaisie

*Before I go To Sleep* by S.J.Watson. I can't put

it down - everyone needs to read this!

@MsJimmyC

*The Scarlet Pimpernel*

by Baroness Orczy is

an oldie but a goodie.

It's clever, witty and a fun read!

@simplytallulah

*Divergent* by Veronica

Roth. It's the best book

I've read this year - an

amazing read.

@Filthy\_Paws

*Living*

*Dolls - The*

*Return of*

*Sexism* by

Natasha

Walter. It's

brilliant,

every women

should read it!

@doodleheart

*It Felt Like a Kiss* by

Sarra Manning. She

creates the coolest,

most kickass heroines

- funny, witty,

awesome.



*Take Back the Skies* by Lucy Saxon

Catherine runs away from her privileged life on the island of Anglya, changes her name and stows away on the skyship *Stormdancer* - where her secrets threaten to unravel. A fab fantasy debut from an exciting young author. @holly\_rains

**Tell us which books you're hooked on using #ReadItAndTweet!**