

The BookBrunch Interview: Malin Persson Giolito, author of Quicksand

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As the 2017 London Book Fair comes to a close, I talk with the author of last year's big deal: Malin Persson Giolito, author of Quicksand. The novel sold to Simon & Schuster in the UK and 'stole the show' by going on to sell in 14 other territories over the three days of the Fair alone. One year on, Giolito discusses the success that buzz has translated into and what makes Quicksand so special.



Giolito started writing novels when she was fired from the law firm where she had worked for ten years, while she was expecting her third child, just before Christmas. She laughs now, but she says she certainly wasn't laughing at the time. "You know how on New Year's Eve, you always stand and think, 'This year's going to be different, I'm going to do this or that.' Well, I was seven months pregnant, so I was standing there completely sober, with a huge belly, and I wanted to pee. I was just not very happy. I'd been standing there every single New Year's Eve since I'd become an adult, saying this was the year I was going to write my novel. Now, I had the time and the money - because financially it's actually not the worst situation being fired from a law firm in Sweden - and I had something to write about."

This gave rise to Giolito's first novel, *Dubbla Slag*, published in 2008, which is "strangely enough" about a lawyer who gets fired from the biggest law firm in the Nordic region, who's expecting her third child. "Every single lawyer in Sweden bought a copy," says Giolito. "In Swedish terms, I wouldn't say it was a huge success, but it did well enough."

Following the publication, Giolito found a new job at the EU Commission but, as each of her three next books sold a little more she gave up her post at the Commission to write full time. It's been a year and a half since then, and during that time she was not always certain she could continue, so when the UK deal was signed with Simon & Schuster, Malin knew it was the start of new life. "I went from not knowing if I could continue to be a full time writer to knowing that I could."



Her agent, Astri von Arbin Ahlander at the Ahlander Agency, and Swedish publisher, Wahlström & Widstrand, both had high expectations, but they didn't talk until the deals were done. "I love that about people," comments Gioloto, "when they don't get your hopes up unnecessarily."

The manuscripts went out to editors in other territories two weeks before the Fair, and the Friday beforehand, Gioloto's Swedish editor called her to read out one of the scouts' glowing letters. It was, the editor said, going to be huge. "I just hoped she was right!" Gioloto laughs. "And she was. It was a dream come true."

When the deals broke at London Book Fair, involving multiple bids across multiple territories, *Quicksand* hadn't even been released in Sweden yet. "It was unreal," remembers Gioloto. "It was a life-changing week for me."

It's not just the trade that has gone wild for *Quicksand*, however, since publication, the critics and the public have loved it too. "It's been almost embarrassing, because the world has had the worst year - it's been one thing after another - and my year has been the best year ever! Every time when there has been a new rave review, I think, 'Ok, now it's finished and you have to reboot and get back to normal life.' I still haven't gotten back to normal life!"

In fact, Gioloto was about to leave for a book tour in the US when we spoke. "My mum tells me I shouldn't talk like this about myself, but it's just what's happening. I'm just savouring it because it's never going to happen again!" She laughs.

Taking good care of *Quicksand*

Her own theory on the book's success is modest. "Obviously you always want to believe that if a book sells really well it's because it's so fantastically brilliant, and that it's all my doing as a writer! But I do think that even good books need to be well taken care of."

Quicksand, Gioloto says, was very well taken care of, partly as a result of her decision to change editors and agents between her last book, *Bortom Varje Rimligt Tvivel* (2012), and this one. "My old agent and old editor have been very good to me and up to a certain point I was very happy with them. But to a certain extent it's like a relationship - you just need to find your true match - and I didn't feel as if my old editor was the perfect match for me. This other editor really wanted to work with me, and it was a good time to give them a try. It's difficult, because as a writer you're so involved, you don't know if your perception of your own genealogy and talent is correct. Every writer would say that if there was any justice in the world, they would be the bestselling writer. Many writers feel misunderstood to a certain extent, so changing editors doesn't say anything about the editors, it just says that the writers are all very egoistic and self-absorbed!"

"When it comes to agents, I've been a bit of a slut, I must say. I've tried every agent in Sweden that has been willing to try me on! So when Astri said that she wanted to work with this book, no one was happier than me."

The move marked a new beginning for Gioloto, one that turned out to be very successful. "Sometimes the gut feeling about finding a new relationship works, but it doesn't mean that your ex is a bad person."

Gioloto also put a lot of effort into the book as a writer. "Obviously the three books I had already written taught me a lot: I wouldn't have been able to write *Quicksand* as my first book, because I wasn't that good. I



wasn't that good when I started writing this novel, either, it took me four years to get to that level and I had to let myself take that time. Hard work is not very sexy but what's made it successful is hard work from everyone involved."

She wrote in relative secrecy - not even her editor saw her manuscript - she shared her work only with a "very famous" Swedish crime-writer friend. "I wanted to try this as a clear slate. If I had been religious, this is the time when I would have praised the Lord."

Tackling a difficult story

Quicksand follows the story of Maya, a teenage girl accused of a school shooting, as she faces her trial. "You don't have many novels about school shootings," observes Giolito, "still less popular novels about school shootings. I know that when I talked about the book four or five years ago when I started writing it, and I told people I was writing a story about a school shooting, everyone looked at me as if, 'Well, who's going to read that?' But I knew deep down that it was not a story about a school shooting as much as it is a story about Maya and the society that we live in. But it was tricky because it's a subject that you can't use for entertainment purposes. You don't do that... We have to just deal with the crime as it is, it's not a 'what-would-we-have-done' or 'what-would-we-do-to-avoid-it' situation. You just get the school shooting, then the story comes around that."

It's classically dark for Giolito's novels. "Before starting, I always think that this time I'm going to write something fun and light. Something that my Mum will like! But my books are always very dark and there are always kids suffering. I don't know. I don't go to therapy, I think that I had a very happy childhood and I do like my parents, so I don't know where this comes from!"

A school shooting in particular is a subject Giolito has wanted to write about for some years. "I think that one of the reasons is that this is one of the things that scares me the most. It's not scary in the spooky way. The scariest things for me are the things I don't understand, and violence amongst kids is always much harder to get your head around. I wanted to write about this whole high school experience in between being adult and being a child. Being left alone in no man's land so to speak."

Despite the darkness, however, Giolito thinks that *Quicksand* is still "a hopeful novel," much of which is down to the central character, Maya. "I have hopes in Maya," she says. Being locked up for nine months and having experienced serious trauma when the book starts, Maya is more angry than the average teenager. "Her complete revolution against everything that she's lived is also quite funny at times, but she puts her very angry, desperate, unhappy finger on things that maybe if you're a better place you wouldn't think. To me, she was a relief. You know how when you have a dark film, you use comic relief, well she's been my writer's relief in a sense because she's so honest and angry and sad."

Giolito isn't sure the degree to which you can be intentional in writing, but she does think she's managed to create a character that resonates. "I do think she came during this time when we can all relate to the feeling of having lost control, not perhaps over your own life the way that Maya does, but to have lost control over what is happening in the world. We have it up in our faces, one catastrophe after another and what can you do? You can't even control when the electricity people come to check your gas meter! The feeling is Marine Le Pen, or Syria, or Trump, or climate change. She's a voice for that hopelessness. She's hopelessness personified and maybe that is something."



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