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An Interview with Kim Zarins, author of *Sometimes We Tell the Truth*

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Abstract

In this interview conducted by Mohamed Karim Dhouib, author and medievalist Kim Zarins discusses her young adult novel *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* (2016), a contemporary retelling of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The novel reimagines Chaucer's iconic pilgrims as modern teenagers on a bus trip to Washington, D.C. Zarins reflects on the process of adaptation, such as portraying the Pardoner as intersex—while emphasizing the pedagogical value of retellings in making medieval literature more accessible. She advocates for inclusive approaches to teaching and explains how her own novel has inspired student engagement with Chaucer. The conversation also delves into Zarins' interactive classroom strategies that help students form meaningful connections with premodern texts. The interview ultimately reveals how creative adaptations and innovative teaching methods can help contemporary audiences access, discover, and appreciate both the striking differences and surprising similarities between Chaucer's era and today.

This interview was conducted asynchronously via email correspondence. Structured as a question-and-answer exchange, the author refined and edited her responses between September 2024 and April 2025 to ensure clarity and precision.

Mohamed Karim Dhouib: Could you share what drew you to *The Canterbury Tales* and its framing device? Did you have any hesitations about closely linking your novel to Chaucer's?

Kim Zarins: The original concept of a young adult retelling of *The Canterbury Tales* with teens on a bus, actually came from my editor, Michael Strother, who had taken medieval classes as an undergrad, and was looking for a writer to do an adaptation. Michael approached my agent, who then reached out to me, and I wrote a pitch with four sample chapters and an outline, and my pitch was accepted. I lucked out. As to your second question, I had no hesitation linking my novel to Chaucer—it's an adaptation, after all—but I did want the medieval elements to be somewhat hidden, so that a reader might just think I have lots of weird story ideas involving kisses from windows and farts. I didn't want a Ye Olde Chaucer look or feel to the text. So, the narrator is Jeff Chaucer, and that last name is a quiet clue and nothing more to a reader who isn't looking for it. I have a *dramatis personae* that links each character to the Chaucerian counterpart, but my editor and I had the section placed at the end of the novel, again to keep the adaptation concealed until they'd read the novel.

MKD: How much did you rely on Chaucer's text in your novel?

KZ: A lot, and not so much. I wanted fidelity to the characters and stories, but I had a looser hold on Chaucer's language as verse than Zadie Smith or Patience Agbabi had and was loose in other ways too. For example, I didn't want an entire bus filled with teen guys and two young women, so I freely swapped the gender of characters. I also took liberties to tell the stories in whatever order I wanted, once I was done with Fragment A, which somehow felt sacred to me. That way I could move a story earlier or later depending on what the characters were discussing on the bus. And I wasn't interested in a retraction; I wanted a destination.

MKD: In your reinterpretation of Chaucer's Pardoner, you delve into the mindset of an intersex teenager. What motivated you to focus on this specific age?

KZ: They are all teenagers, which is a limitation I found generative. I got to play with these larger-than-life characters as young people before they become the larger-than-life characters we all know. This became especially illuminating for reading the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner; the former because at eighteen she is newer to processing her sexuality and experience from age twelve onwards, the latter because he isn't a villain yet, and I hoped in this hypothetical version he would never become one.

MKD: Pard is one of the novel's key characters, if not the main one. Did you write it with the intention of redeeming Chaucer's Pardoner?

KZ: Exactly, I wanted to reject his original fate as a reviled villain. That kiss between the Pardoner and the threatening Host is cruel, so I knew from the beginning I wanted a better kiss for him. At first, I thought the Pardoner and the Summoner might be a couple, but I quickly saw the Pardoner could be elevated into being the main character's love interest, and in that position, we'd get to see the Pardoner as a fuller person, neither caricatured villainy nor comedic relief.

MKD: What are your thoughts on the growing interest in iconic *The Canterbury Tales* characters such as the wife of Bath, the Miller, the Pardoner, to name a few?

KZ: Is there growing interest? That's wonderful. Chaucer's characters make the poem what it is. When I teach Chaucer, I like to draw an onion on the whiteboard to signify all the layers of characters and tales nested in each other, and for the rest of the semester, students reference the onion as they explore the network of tales shaped by tellers and tellers shaped by tales. Talking about onions—and Chaucer's characters—always makes me happy.

MKD: Some teachers incorporate *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* into their lessons on *The Canterbury Tales*. Have you been surprised by how the novel has been used in classroom settings?

KZ: Very surprised and delighted. Sometimes I get a really nice email or a tag on the internet. I'm honored when the novel is offered to students. It's an unusual novel, and I'm most grateful it's found a supportive community. Fingers crossed, I hope it stays in print for Chaucer students and general readers to encounter in the future.

MKD: Have you heard from secondary/high school teachers/students whose interest in *The Canterbury Tales* has been whetted by reading *SWTTT*?

KZ: Yes, I have. A teacher in Texas told me the book is helpful for teaching the Wife of Bath and nipping in the bud all the slut-shaming that she used to get at the start of class. In my essay chapter just published in *Authentically Medieval*, I included some fan art by two teens who didn't know it was a Chaucer retelling but since then have had Chaucer on their radar. I don't at all recommend looking at Goodreads to see how your novel is being received, but even people who blasted the book with one-star reviews seem to show a cheerful interest in reading Chaucer. I call that a win for Team Chaucer.

MKD: Do you support the use of modern retellings of Chaucer alongside the original texts in the classroom? Should retellings be part of an inclusive pedagogy in teaching Chaucer?

KZ: I am very biased here, but yes, I do, as a supplement. Adaptations show students a way to create a place for themselves in the text, or to discover that they've had a place in Chaucer all along. Adaptations let the resonances between now and then become clear. As Zadie Smith wrote in her Introduction to *The Wife of Willesden*, "Alyson's voice—brash, honest, cheeky, salacious, outrageous, unapologetic—is one I've heard and loved all my life: in the flat, at school, in the playgrounds of my childhood and then the pubs of my maturity, at bus stops, in shops, and of course up and down the

Kilburn High Road, any day of the week” (2021, xiv–xv). I think adaptation helps you feel the text pour itself from one era into another—which involves some change to the text but also reveals surprising continuity. In addition, some of the changes from original to adaptation may not be due to modern values as much as the literary form used in the adaptation itself (I talk about form’s way of directing content in my essay chapter in *Women’s Restorative Medievalisms*). In my Chaucer class this semester, we’ve read Agbabi, Smith, and *Sometimes We Tell the Truth*, and the adaptations give students not just different settings but different forms: poetry, play, and novel. I’ll use Smith again as an example. When you pour Chaucer into a play, for example, Chaucer’s original monologue becomes populated with voices and little scenes. One of my students pointed out that the Wife’s female friend circle felt more vibrant and real than it does in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, where those voices are gestured at but not heightened due to the text being a monologue. Drama helps those other female voices pop. For me, using the novel allowed me a long form to give a character arc to Jeff and Pard, and to show stereotyped characters who then reveal a roundedness. Having a plot with a destination allowed me to give the story a direction and shape.

MKD: As a medievalist, do you often advocate for the relevance of medieval studies within your institution?

KZ: Oh, that is a tough question. I want to advocate but don’t quite know how. The past feels like it’s going out of business at my university. In my department, we used to have five early modernists; now we have none. My eighteenth-century colleague (now the main teacher of Shakespeare) guessed that the early British literature courses will simply stop after we both retire. If the premodern retires with us, it’s not for lack of students—the class size has always been on a level with other courses.

I suppose my advocacy is moving toward indirect angles. This Halloween, my Chaucer students trick-or-treated with their Middle English to the Department and beyond. They wore medieval-themed costumes and visited professors in office hours and colleagues’ classes (don’t worry—I asked colleagues first if this would be okay!). Students have been practicing their Middle English all semester through weekly voice journals (my thanks to Elizabeth Allen for this idea), and this public reading was a way of making that work public. My colleagues, in turn, can see and hear what we’ve been doing in our Chaucer class. After we divided to our different venues, we reconvened and made thank-you cards to faculty and crafted “medieval” bookmarks—scraps of parchment with quotations from Chaucer that felt suited for the recipients. This activity again gave them a public-facing activity with which to build on their new knowledge of manuscript production and calligraphy. Some groups even assigned a scribe and an illuminator. And colleagues who witnessed the Chaucer readings now have a cool bookmark to commemorate their connection to the class and its students.

Maybe, just maybe, my colleagues will like what they see and want to hire a medievalist when I am gone. I can’t control that decision, but what I can try to do is make medieval literature meaningful for my current students and give them memories to carry with them into that future. I’m so proud of this Chaucer cohort of thirty-one students for leaving their habitual English major comfort zones and instead reading out loud; touching—and smelling!—parchment scraps and writing on them, intimidating as that seemed; trying to read the script in the Ellesmere Chaucer; retelling stories in

works of fiction that both belong to them and pay homage to their originals; and wearing their costumes and getting their Middle English pronunciations out in the open. For me, education is about teaching students to amplify their voices. Medieval literature helps that process along and turns it into play.

MKD: Well, this feels like a perfect place to conclude. The interview has been truly illuminating and thoroughly enjoyable. I sincerely appreciate your generosity—both in sharing your valuable time and your thoughtful insights and experiences.

Works Cited

Smith, Zadie. 2021. *The Wife of Willesden*. London: Penguin.

Zarins, Kim. 2016. *Sometimes We Tell the Truth*. New York: Simon Pulse.