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How a Fortune Cookie Message Inspired Author Kevin Alan Milne's Third Book *Sweet Misfortune*

Interview with Kevin Alan Milne About Book Business, Fortune Cookies and Happiness

By Shamontiel

Sophie Jones has gone through foster care, her parents' death and a canceled wedding. She's had it up to here with unfortunate circumstances and decides to force other people to face reality. With a cynical sense of humor, Sophie Jones creates Misfortune Cookies and her customers love them for being so pessimistic. When her ex comes back into the picture a year later, Sophie is not interested in being hurt again. The only way she'll go out with him is if he places an ad in a newspaper and gets 100 legitimate responses for how to achieve long-lasting happiness. She's the only one who can approve of all 100. Does he get enough responses? And how did author Kevin Alan Milne come up with his third novel *Sweet Misfortune*. Find out here.

Shamontiel: When you go to Asian Food restaurants, how often do you actually read what's in the fortune cookies?

Kevin Alan Milne: I read the fortune every time.

S: Are you an optimistic one who believes what's in it or do you usually take it with a grain of salt?

KAM: I usually take it with a grain of salt.

S: What made you decide to write a book that basically centers around fortune cookies?

KAM: Though I take most of those messages with a grain of salt, I do sometimes pick out my favorites. If a particular fortune strikes me as interesting or clever, I'll stick it in my wallet. One day not too long ago just before I wrote the book, I was sitting in a Panda Express in Oregon actually just having lunch. This was in the spring of 2009. I got my fortune in the fortune cookie, and there was a message in it that just struck me for some reason that day as being so ridiculously optimistic as to be absurd. It was one of those where "all your wildest dreams will certainly come true." For whatever reason that didn't sit with me real well and as I was sitting there at lunch, I conceived of the antithesis of that of maybe somebody who was more pessimistic who doesn't believe that all their fortunes are going to come true.

S: If you had to compare yourself to one of the characters in the book, do you think you're more like Sophie, Ellen, Evalynn or Garrett?

KAM: I'm definitely more closely aligned with Sophie, a little bit cynical and I view myself as a realist. But I kind of view myself more as Sophie at the end of the story than at the beginning of the story.

S: So if you're more of a realist than an optimist then writing these Misfortune Cookies shouldn't have been a problem.

KAM: No, I had a lot of fun with that. Most of them came naturally out of what was happening in the story. It was fun to take the good fortunes in life and flip them upside down. See what the world is like from a pessimistic view.

S: You have a character who dealt with a real serious tragedy when she was little. She lost her parents in a car accident. How did that come about or was the rest of this all in your imagination?

KAM: I won't go so far as to say that any of the tragedies are based on my own experiences, but a lot of the tragedy that I write about in all of my books deal with some type of challenge that some people face. It all comes from things that I've seen people go through and the day-to-day tragedies of life. I find that in those tragedies, and getting through them, that's where you see the strength of character in people. That's where people grow and learn and become better. I did draw on people that I knew who'd gone through tough times. I observed and appreciated them getting through those things.

S: Not to discredit any other fiction book but I don't usually see as much diversity as I saw in your book. You had Evalynn. You had Ellen. And then you had Sophie. One was half-Latino. One was white. One was black. What made you decide to choose so much diversity within your characters?

KAM: I don't know that I was going for diversity consciously, but the characters sort of grew and developed. I generally start with traits in mind and different things that I want to express. For example, with the mother, I was just looking for someone who was a strong character. She's a police woman but very motherly and tender and faithful. In my mind, she was African-American. There wasn't any rhyme or reason to do it. As I got to know the characters as I wrote it, that diversity sort of developed.

S: In the book, Garrett places an ad for Sophie about long-lasting happiness. She got to choose 100 responses. But at the end of the book, you actually have a page in the book where you ask for e-mails about long-lasting happiness. What made you decide to do that? Were you just curious what your readers would come up with or was there a little bit of Sophie in you not just in character but wondering is their real happiness?

KAM: I have no doubt that there's real happiness. It was more just an interest to see what other people view, what happiness means to them. I've already received just tons of responses, some of them that really opened my eyes. Some of them I'd have never thought but things that people have gone through that have really sensitized them to the beauties of life and the joys that exist, things that I haven't gone through or considered. It's fun to see what brings happiness to other people, and that's why I asked for it.

S: What do you want people to come away with by reading *Sweet Misfortune*?

KAM: I want them to come away with the feeling that it was a good read for them, that it was a fun and enjoyable experience. That's always what I'm going for. Beyond that just the sense that life is really good. Sophie kind of learns that throughout the story, but life does have all these challenges that all of us go through whether we're rich or poor, or black or white, or whatever our situation in life is. We can't get around the tragedies of life, but that doesn't mean that life isn't good and that there aren't good things right around the corner if we can really just endure and get through them. That's what I see the book being about, just having that positive attitude wading through the bad times to really enjoy and savor the good times.

S: What is the most memorable experience you've had in person or even e-mail feedback from any of your three books, mainly for *Sweet Misfortune*?

KAM: One in particular was a woman who was carrying twins. She was told that she should **abort** the pregnancy because of a medical issue and that she would not be able to have children. It was a tragic situation for her. She felt like it was important to go through with the pregnancy even if it ended up costing her her own life. She now has two beautiful babies.

S: What have you learned from your own plots—not necessarily in the **writing business**—just from your own plots in general? What did you come away with from *Sweet Misfortune*?

KAM: I think I came away with a greater appreciation for tragedy. There's not really an easy way to say this. I've often heard people say how thankful they are for the experiences they have gone through. How could you be grateful for the bad things? I came away with (believing) if it weren't for the things that we go through, we wouldn't be the people that we are today and hopefully we can look back after having gone through something and really appreciate the fact that it made us a stronger person or it opened up a doorway that wouldn't have opened had we not gone through that. While those things are hard while we're going through them, ultimately if we have the right attitude there can be some good.

S: So you finished the book within a year's time?

KAM: I finished the book in three or four months. My publisher likes to have the first draft manuscript about a year before the publication date.

S: With all three books as a whole, what did you learn from working in the **writing industry**? What's been your biggest lesson?

KAM: It is truly work. The first book I wrote I had no visions of being a writer. I just wanted to write a book because I've always wanted to do so, and I had no dreams that it would actually be published or anything like that. Now that I've gotten into a contract with a pretty large publisher I'm finding that it is truly work. It's a lot of hours and it's a lot of dedication and the deadlines can be stressful. I have learned that there's a lot of behind-the-scenes that do a lot of great work. It takes an army of editors and marketing folks and artists to come up with something that will sell in the market. I've learned that it's just a lot of fun. It's a great business to be in.

If you would like to share what happiness is to you, send an e-mail to happiness@kevinamilne.com. He also has a blog at <http://kevinamilne.blogspot.com>.

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