

THE MOVIE THAT NO ONE SAW

A NOVEL



MAY SEAH

“Adjonis Keh is Derek Zoolander meets Chua En Lai. May Seah has the kind of wonderfully off-kilter brain that’s common in people who work in the media/entertainment industry, and she translates all that wonky brain juice into a witty, hilarious story. A funny addition to the repertoire of Singaporean fiction, and in the author, a very welcome voice in the pantheon of up-and-coming Singaporean writers.”

SUFFIAN HAKIM, author of *The Minorities*

“Do not read on public transport. This quirky little tale will trigger fits of giggles that may draw glares of disapproval from fellow commuters. Be warned.”

SEBASTIAN SIM, award-winning author of *The Riot Act*

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*For my parents, Peter and Jennifer—
forced to read my “books” since I was a child*

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Nimita’s Place by Akshita Nanda

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Band Eight by Tham Cheng-E

2016

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Lion Boy and Drummer Girl by Pauline Loh

2015

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Sugarbread by Balli Kaur Jaswal

Let’s Give It Up for Gimme Lao! by Sebastian Sim

Death of a Perm Sec by Wong Souk Yee

Annabelle Thong by Imran Hashim

Kappa Quartet by Daryl Qilin Yam

Altered Straits by Kevin Martens Wong

“Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental,” read the wisp of paper that fell out of his fortune cookie at his grandmother’s birthday dinner, the year that he turned sixteen.

“Mine says, ‘You will meet a tall, dark and handsome man,’” his grandmother said, squinting through her reading glasses. “I love these kitschy restaurants.” She chuckled conspiratorially to him over the boisterous surround-sound tinkling of porcelain tableware, looking up to survey the hall decorated with carved-wood wall hangings and pink and orange lanterns. “Oh, there he is already! That waiter coming out with my longevity cake.” She reached for the last prawn fritter with her chopsticks. “Does yours predict fame and fortune, dear?”

“No,” he replied, sitting back in his skirted chair. “I’m not sure if this restaurant puts its fortune cookies through quality control.” He was awash with mild indignation at the rank incompetence of this particular fortune cookie, which, tasked with only one job to do, had spewed a disclaimer in place of a prophecy.

“Never mind, dear.” His grandmother slipped a red packet stuffed with cash into his hand. “It’s my birthday, so you have to listen to me—take it. You’ll always have my blessing, fortune or no fortune.”

“Thanks, Grandma.” He brushed crumbs from his fingers, then pushed the uneaten cookie aside in favour of the mango and pomelo sago,

as the bow-tied waiter placed a towering platter of longevity buns on the lazy Susan; the heavy plate clattered onto the glass, and the background prattle of his relatives swelled into a birthday song.

It was nearly ten years later, after he became a full-time film and television actor, that he recalled the incident with a jolt, and the unfortunate fortune received vindication.

1

When Adjonis Keh first started out in television, his acting had been abysmal. He knew this not as a judgement that had been published by newspaper critics, but as a character flaw within himself: even as a child, he had always been relegated to non-speaking supporting parts, usually equine or ovine, in school plays.

In his first professional role, acting in a costumed superhero series, he had flubbed one of his lines upwards of thirty times. He had never been a stutterer, but as the Aubergine Ranger, he just could not succeed in sending the phrase, “Our productivity levels have been falling since 3.30pm” through his purplish-red helmet. He still recalled the pickling sensation of his brain, tongue and lips struggling to complete a task that became increasingly Sisyphean, while everyone on set checked their watches and clucked their tongues in exasperation. After that scene, the script was revised so that the Aubergine Ranger was instead more of the strong, silent type.

He felt as if that debacle had been immortalised in urban legend within the industry, but really, no one remembered it except himself. He was merely another good-looking kid in an endless string of wet-behind-the-ears rookies.

To his surprise, he was swiftly cast in the next production, the young-love romance *Flowerbuddles of Springtimeness*. He remembered

thinking that the title was rich, considering Singapore's equatorial climate, but he was a new actor at the bottom of the food chain; even the junior make-up artist's opinion counted for more than his did.

His acting had been shit in that show, too. Playing a lovelorn twenty-two-year-old glassblower whose poorly-thought-through suicide attempt was foiled by his uninterested love interest's schizophrenic twin sister, he had channelled all his personal brushes with unrequited love into the role, concentrating so hard on feeling every emotion that he thought he was going to have an aneurysm at the end of every take.

It didn't work. The tears, even when real, looked fake; he cringed along with the director as they watched the playback; this particular director took every chance to hint snidely that Keh's right to exist on set—nay, on this earth—had been earned only by his looks.

Amongst his peers in the industry, this was considered the ultimate slur. But because he had come into his looks suddenly, he really didn't have a problem admitting that his face had indeed gotten him the job and enabled him to remain gainfully employed.

As an only child, he had been scrawny in build and average in intelligence, so he was never noticed much, even by his parents. His blooming came late, but when it eventually arrived, it delivered in a big way. Almost overnight, he found himself with broad shoulders, comely features and hair so well-behaved you could trust it to bring your daughter home before midnight.

This happened sometime during the period when, having no vocational inclinations whatsoever, he'd elected to go into accounting, which simply happened to be the first in the menu of alphabetically-listed study courses. As an added bonus, it was a career path calculated to cause no offense to his middle-class parents.

But it was while he was on a student exchange programme in Tianjin that a fateful incident occurred. He'd gone on a hiking trip to the north with some friends just before the programme ended, and a few weeks after he returned home, he took ill. Because the disease-carrying species of tick that had formed an attachment to his right heel was not indigenous to Singapore, it was a long time before his condition was correctly diagnosed; by then, severe complications had set in, rendering a seemingly innocuous affliction life-threatening.

He was given five months to live.

Keh went through all the stages: denial, anger, et cetera. Like any young person, he had never really subscribed to the concept of his own personal mortality. To be old one day seemed as impossible as dying when one was not yet twenty.

When those around him started quietly mourning, their solicitation and their neediness began to affect him. Soon, death was no longer an abstract; it was an inevitability to become accustomed to. In fact, it did not take him very long to make his peace with it. A world without him in it would still go on, he realised.

He prepared for his death by buying a stack of in-advance Mother's Day cards, giving away all his PlayStation games and planning the playlist for his funeral. He stayed up later and later at night, wanting to extend consciousness for as long as possible. At first, he spent the nights writing in a diary. Expressing his ideas in words did not come naturally to him, but leaving a journal behind somehow felt like the thing to do if you wanted to exit this world with an appropriate sense of pathos. It was the sort of stuff that your friends would upload and circulate on Facebook after you'd died, and resurface every year on your death anniversary.

So, he filled numerous pages of an exercise book, slowly and laboriously, with his innermost thoughts, feelings and reflections.

But a few weeks later, when he read what he'd written, he was mildly stunned by how utterly boring his life was; he felt his own mind wandering while perusing his journal.

So he watched movies in his bedroom instead and spent the rest of his nights immersing himself in worlds of adventure, intrigue, romance, horror, fantasy and animated anthropomorphic animals. Night after night passed with Humphrey Bogart and Robert De Niro and Stephen Chow and many others for company. The television was almost never turned off as he spent hours lying in his bed, staring trance-like at the enlivened screen, for months on end.

His eyes were constantly bleary and red-rimmed. Friends, scratching their heads for something to say, commended his courage and told him he was an inspiration. He knew they'd rather remember him as such after he was gone, and so he only thanked them for coming to see him.

As his five-month expiry date approached, he was ready.

But the fifth month came and went. And then he started to get better.

There was an embarrassing sense of the anticlimactic, even as the doctors told him he should rejoice in his medical miracle. But mostly, and overwhelmingly, he felt at a loss. The certainty of having no future had been unceremoniously ripped from him, and he now felt adrift. He genuinely did not know what to do with all this life that had been bestowed upon him.

Restored to perfect health, he spent nearly a year at home doing nothing, paralysed by the unlimited possibilities of a fresh start. Without having completed his tertiary education, he had no certificate of qualification. And, having expended his energy on an existential crisis, he had neither the inclination nor the motivation to

go back to school or look for employment. It was like he'd been reborn, naked and alone and shivering, armed with no defences and cosmically redundant.

It was around this time that he realised he was having trouble looking at screens.

It started out as a niggling feeling of irritation in his eyes whenever he was absorbed in his computer for too long, but soon developed into a chronic condition.

It made no difference whether it was a television screen, computer screen, mobile phone screen or electronic display—he could no longer look at any screen for longer than a minute or two without his vision blurring, nausea setting in and an acute sense of discomfort bordering on pain. Even non-reflecting movie screens produced this effect.

The doctors tried to explain it as a result of the fervent and excessive hours he had spent watching television while he was ill, but since no definitive signs of nerve or retina damage could be found, they weren't sure how to treat the condition, apart from prescribing sessions of vision therapy that might go on for years but ultimately prove futile.

However, for someone who had been led to the edge of the grave and then frogmarched straight back in the direction from whence he came, this barely registered as a concern, any more than sinusitis or snoring would have. Keh simply avoided staring at screens for extended periods of time. Of course, this meant that he could no longer watch television—but strangely, he found that any desire to do so had been drained out of him.

It was also around this time that the talent scout spotted him, walking home from the convenience store on a sweltering day while sucking on a calamansi popsicle.

“You have such good bone structure,” said the scout, a nondescript man conspicuously missing a beret or any other stereotypical hallmarks of movie-making, his eyes scanning Keh intensely. “Really quite a good-looking face. And, most importantly, you’ve got height. Come in for an audition. It’s just a formality. We really, really need new talent. I’ll sign you right away.”

“I can’t act,” Keh replied, shifting from foot to foot.

The talent scout scoffed in amusement. “That doesn’t matter at all. What’s your name?”

“Adjonis Keh.”

“And I’m Hercules Jay. What’s your real name?”

“The ‘d’ in ‘Adjonis’ is silent.” He licked a dribble of melted ice off his thumb. “You can call me Jon if you like. My friends do.”

The talent scout was quiet for a moment, then said, “It’s perfect.”

Not having any discernible skills, Keh took the path that had been unexpectedly thrust upon him. Signing a contract to become a full-time actor, he realised, wasn’t a bad career choice. As an artiste in Moving Talkies Pictures’ stable, he was paid a regular salary by the film studio to appear in the dramas and movies that they churned out at a dizzying pace, which satisfied his parents with the knowledge that, at the very least, their son would no longer be a freeloader.

In interviews with journalists, he was often asked what he would have been if he hadn’t chosen the acting profession, and he decided that “ridge-backed marsupial conservationist” would be his story and he was sticking to it. In reality, he eventually came to realise that he didn’t believe in alternate universes. He grew more and more certain that there could never have been any life for him other than the one in which he inhabited the multiple lives of people who didn’t exist.

His good looks and inoffensive personality resulted in approval

by the media, who put him on their cover spreads and profiled him in their interviews. Each feature conferred more legitimacy upon him and consequently, his popularity skyrocketed among both the female and male public, who voted in favour of his dreamy eyes and perfect hair.

Of course, he wasn’t the most handsome of all the actors in the company’s employ. A good number of his peers outclassed him in that respect. But what people often didn’t realise was that it was more useful to have vague good looks than to have stunning good looks. Keh’s most bankable quality was that he had such an open face that anyone could project anything of themselves onto him. That was what got him cast in role after role, in spite of his hollow acting.

It wasn’t that he didn’t try. To play a destitute opium addict in a historical drama, he had tried to go Method, eating only gruel with the occasional pork rib and sleeping shirtless on the hard floor of his bedroom every night. He would go out with only a few coins in his pocket and walk everywhere in a pair of old flip-flops until they fell apart. He also attempted to purchase narcotics from a dealer he had found online, but quickly realised the envelope contained instead a blend of Horlicks and prickly heat powder.

Even total immersion in a given character didn’t make his acting better. Every scene was a struggle to emote and took much longer than it should; the directors always moved on to the next scene because they were running out of time, not because they had a perfect take. He went home every night in the deep cricket-quiet hours feeling like a fraud.

Then, one day, he became a real fraud when he suddenly discovered the only character he could play well: that of an actor. Quite by chance, he had stumbled upon the key that made everything click into place.

2

The next time he walked onto set, telling himself he was playing an actor tasked to play the particular character they had assigned him, his on-screen performance was pitch-perfect—full of magnetically-charged presence; sufficiently dramatic yet subtle; brimming with emotion, yet nuanced, as if he were bravely fighting to hold back tides of inexpressible yearning.

He did this for one day, then the next, and the day after, mentally putting on his actor persona when he arrived in the morning for hair and make-up and doffing it when the last “Cut!” of the day was called. To learn his lines, he convinced himself that he was playing an actor learning his lines. Even between takes, if any of the crew spoke to him, he’d respond from the point of view of his persona. As long as he was on set, even during the breaks, he never broke the character of “Actor”.

He did all this with such success that the more he practised, the more confident he grew. Subsequently, he always secretly pretended he was an actor acting whatever part they gave him.

The awards started rolling in.

His favourite scenes were mealtime scenes. This was not because he enjoyed getting paid to eat for hours on end—he was not overly interested in food—but because he would set himself the challenge of making sure every one of his characters ate in a distinct fashion.

The differences had to be very subtle, of course, but therein lay the fascination of the task. As one character, he would hold his spoon in a certain manner, or his chopsticks with different fingers; or he would rest his elbows on the edge of the table at a precise angle. He could alter his chewing speeds and styles. He could swallow pointedly before he spoke or talk loudly with his mouth semi-full. If he was at a long mahogany table dressed with brocaded placemats, heavy china and floral arrangements, he could twirl his fork or play with his wine glass. If he was at a hawker centre amid the chaos of brightly coloured melamine plates, blasting electric fans and the passing opportunistic mynah, he could stab at pieces of steamed chicken with varying degrees of violence. Some characters would hunch over the table like Slinkies; others would sit ramrod straight in their chairs; still others might prop one leg over the other knee and shake a foot distractedly. The way you dined, and how you carried on a conversation while you were dining, could convey so much about who you were.

There was usually at least one dinner table scene in each project, and there was always the issue of continuity. For each particular scene, you couldn't be eating steamed fish in one take and tofu in another take, in case the takes got spliced during the editing process. It would break the audience's suspension of disbelief, just like if you forgot which shirt you were wearing for which take and ended up wearing different shirts in the same scene. The most foolproof way to get around this was to pick one homogenous-looking dish and keep nibbling on it; like broccoli, which was always a good choice if he also knew he had a shirtless scene or photo shoot coming up.

Acting at being a professional actor meant viewing his working life as a series of acts and scenes. The imaginary camera started rolling once he walked onto a set, and the character subsumed everything.

When he was acting, he entered a different space, a different plane of existence, where the cameras and crew in his peripheral vision blurred away into nothing and he no longer existed, only the pulsing emotion did. It was like being overtaken by an invisible force. It was like being borne on a current of sound and light waves. It was like the out-of-body experience of driving endlessly up the dizzying spiral ramp of a multi-storey car park.

Each morning, as he pulled up in the parking lot, got prepped in hair and make-up and changed his clothes in his dressing room, he climbed, limb by limb, synapse by synapse, into his actor persona. And each morning, when he entered his dressing room, he was ritually forced to fight his way through cartons and cartons of vanilla yoghurt.

The yoghurt was delivered each day by the mail room guys, who had to transport it into the building in motorised carts. The little blue-and-white plastic pots swarmed the floor daily in tottering

heaps, forcing him to clamber through them like Prince Charming slashing his way through briar bushes to Sleeping Beauty. A little while later, the cleaning crew would come by and cart it all away, only to repeat the process the very next day.

It started when he'd played a sentimental ghost trapped in the world of the living who had an insatiable fondness for vanilla yoghurt. This particular ghost, defying all ectoplasmic laws, would scarf vanilla yoghurt down with the enthusiasm of a Labrador retriever, then lick the spoon and ask for more.

When the show aired, audiences latched onto the quirk and found it adorable. Reporters would ask him on camera, "How about that vanilla yoghurt, eh?" and he'd had no choice but to laugh as if it was the cutest thing in the world. The fans immediately began to send him avalanches of vanilla yoghurt.

"You can't tell them you don't actually like it—they'd be devastated," said Minnie, his manager, and promptly proceeded to sign him up for a vanilla yoghurt endorsement deal. That was a year ago. The yoghurt was still arriving.

He couldn't donate it to the poor because by the time it got to them, it would have gone bad. Now and then someone would walk by and take one, but most of his co-workers were sick of it, too. "Eat my yoghurt" had become a common epithet and inside joke among him and the crew. Each day, several dumpsters in the back lot were filled to the brim with cartons of vanilla yoghurt.

Apart from the risk he faced daily of stepping on a stray pot and breaking his neck, he was fortunate to have no real adversaries in showbiz. Nor did he have any close friends.

One of his first friends in the industry had been Jerome Goh, a colleague who happened to be of the same age. They had starred in one or two shows together as rivals in love and in water polo. Jerome

subsequently built a respectable career on taking his shirt off.

When they started to rise in popularity at a similar rate, fans and reporters began asking each of them, “How do you cope with the pressure from the competition between the two of you?” and “Tell the truth—how do you really feel about each other?”

There hadn’t been any competitive feelings—except maybe that Keh was conscious that Jerome was a little bit taller and a lot funnier than he was—but after the whole thing started to snowball, his cordial friendship with Jerome became irretrievably awkward.

Truth be told, the real rivalry was between their wardrobe stylists, who thrived on the energy and battled to outdo each other in the suits, shoes and snapbacks they dressed the actors in.

But everyone thought that Keh and Jerome hated each other’s guts, and protesting otherwise only proved the fact in people’s minds.

Eventually, it was just easier to do what was expected of them, so they made it a point never to stand together at events, and one would occasionally make snarky comments about the other, which the other would later read with private amusement.

People needed things to polarise, he thought, just like how winners needed losers and good guys needed bad guys to exist.

Bad guys were fun to play and, by sheer nature of their visibility, won you awards easily. He had a shiny trophy on a shelf at home for playing a one-handed serial killer who worked at Starbucks by day and dismembered dentists by night. Now, each time he went to get his teeth cleaned, he thought of mocha Frappuccinos and packets of fake blood.

It was good when he got a jaw-clenching villain to play. When fans came up to him to say, “Man, you were so evil in that show where you played a corporate scion plotting to demolish Newton Food Centre and build a shopping mall; I wanted to poke a satay

stick into your jugular vein,” his job satisfaction levels went through the roof. To hate was as good a cathartic experience as any.

In any case, bad guys, it must be noted, were simply delusional good guys. Nobody ever thought of themselves as a bad guy. Besides, he thought, we all have our own predilections; it’s just that some are more likely to get us busted than others.

It wasn’t that good guys were duds to play, but that, because the audience was by default already on their side, you had to work harder to keep their interest. You always had to think about how to magnify realistic aspects of a character, even though—no, especially since—they were already larger than life.

Once, after he had played a blind gigolo working the Geylang streets to fund his little sister’s insurmountable medical bills, a reporter asked how he had managed to portray the role so movingly. Had he based his performance on any one person, encountered during the course of his research, perhaps? He hadn’t done any research, and he had found the question both hilariously funny and devastatingly sad. Also, someone who later saw him driving his car called the police on him, complaining that it was irresponsible for a blind man to operate a vehicle. The police officer filed a written report, made him sign it and asked him for a selfie.

Responses from the public generally varied according to his latest role. He’d had iconic roles, of course, such as that of Zero Gravity Man in the *Galactic Godfathers* movie trilogy based on the comic book series of the same name, or the suave but sensitive Darkley Young in the tear-jerking romantic comedy *Midnight at Mount Pleasant*. But for the most part, whenever he met with fans, they were excited to discuss whichever project of his was currently out in cinemas or airing on TV, even if it was to do nothing more than hail him loudly by the character’s name.

If you turned your television on at eight o'clock in the evenings, you would see Adjonis Keh in *Fly Me Away*, a drama series about the secret life of air crew, starring as a pilot who was also trained in first-aid. In the first episode, his character fortuitously resuscitated a junior stewardess who had passed out somewhere above Uzbekistan. It was a light-hearted series peppered with eccentric characters, but his was the straight man because, as his manager had declared without regard for his feelings, he did not possess a face for comedy.

One airline had already offered him free flights in exchange for social media mentions while he travelled. The pleasantness of that was tempered by the crippling fear that, should either a medical or aviation emergency arise in mid-flight, he would be asked with sincere faith and expectation to assist.

And then there was the time when he'd played a mer-alien who could glow in the dark. After crashing to earth from his distant home planet, landing just off the shores of Sentosa Island and plunging headfirst into a chance encounter with an attractive human female, it was revealed that his character had the unique quality of phosphorescence from his face to his bare torso to the tips of his tail fins—a veritable Olympian achievement for the lighting and special effects guys.

Thanks to the role, he'd been appointed ambassador for vitamin supplements that made you “glow from the inside out”, for a company that manufactured LED lights, and for a campaign against the consumption of shark's fin.

Sometimes people would ask him if it was difficult to deal with fame. Sure, there were times when the fact that his face was a public commodity made him feel a little like a quokka in a petting zoo. But this problem, for the most part, was serendipitously managed by his naturally cultivated habit of staying home all

the time he wasn't working, and never really feeling the desire to go anywhere.

After assuming his actor persona, he started making enough money to move into a penthouse condominium on Shallot Road; it was just off the manic Orchard Road thoroughfare but, because of its topography, remained a relatively hidden lane shrouded by ancient angšana trees. He had chosen the place more for its tight security than for its swanky location or architectural features.

He didn't have an eye for decorating—his stylist often lamented that he had the aesthetic sensibilities of a blind chameleon—so his flat was sparse; one of its two defining features was that blackout curtains hung in every window. His manager Minnie's frequent adage, from the first day he'd met her, had always been, “Just remember: people are watching everything you do.”

The other defining feature was its conspicuous lack of a television.

It would have been considered a twist of irony that someone in his line of work did not possess even the smallest of flat screens. But everyone who had ever heard of him knew the oft-reported fact of Adjonis Keh's unusual medical condition: his eyes, while beautiful, were unable to look at screens for longer than one or two minutes at a time.

He could still text briefly or glance at the playbacks on the director's screen at work, although he tried to keep these activities to a minimum. But things like playing video games and surfing the Internet were activities of the past.

If he had perhaps been a gardener, a bartender or a ridge-backed marsupial conservationist, this rare condition would not have affected him as much in his professional capacity. But, as an actor, it had a strongly complex effect on him: he had never seen even one of his own works in its entirety. This was his biggest regret in life.

Not being able to watch his own performances meant that he could not correct his mistakes for the benefit of future performances. However, on the flip side, it also meant that he never had the opportunity to obsess over what he could have done better, after it was too late.

In addition, he was unable to personally maintain any of his own social media accounts, so Minnie and his personal assistant worked in tandem to handle that task. It was one thing less for him to worry about—and besides, he didn't have any aptitude for chronicling and sharing his daily adventures, whether historic or banal.

In terms of job satisfaction, though, it always bothered him that he could never enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes with surveying a final product and seeing the work of several months and countless colleagues come together in a unified whole. It was also strange when his friends, family and colleagues discussed his current works and he could not participate fully, because he could not envision exactly what they had seen on screen after all the edits had been made, the music and voiceovers had been added in, and the special effects had been rendered.

It also meant he could not study the screen performances of other actors, so these had neither the power to inspire him to greater heights nor cause his acting to become affectedly derivative. In fact, the only dramatic performances he had watched since he left school were stage plays and the ingratiating behaviour of select colleagues in front of persons of consequence.

Whenever he assumed his actor character—and this was not limited to on-set filming, but also came in useful at events and press conferences where the scrutiny made him nervous—he was never quite sure what the personage he was envisioning was really like.

But if he were pressed to describe this actor, well, he would probably be a cloudy mix of Clark Gable and Chow Yun-fat, maybe with a hint of Morgan Freeman or Sir Ian McKellen, and a dash of Bertolt Brecht thrown in for good measure.

Whoever he was, Keh blessed the day he had been birthed from the clamshell of his mind. People loved that guy, and so did he.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

May Seah has spent the better part of the last decade as a culture reporter, and currently works as a senior digital lifestyle journalist with Channel NewsAsia. Highlights of her professional career include sitting in Sheldon's spot on the set of *The Big Bang Theory*, training to be a K-pop star in Seoul, being asked by Chow Yun-fat for a selfie, and listening to Sir David Attenborough tell her about the reproductive habits of Algerian jirds. *The Movie That No One Saw* is her first novel.



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