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MK MIX IN CONVERSATION WITH AUTHOR RUTH DOWNIE

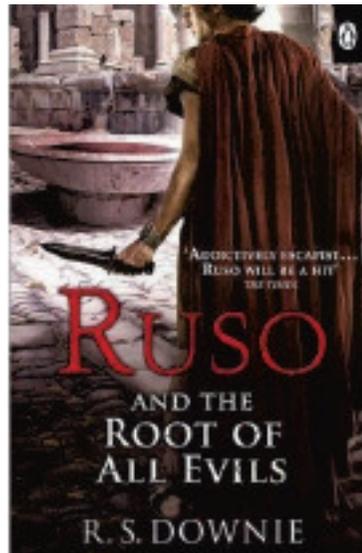


FILM director and
 screenwriter Segun
 Oguntola arrived in Milton
 Keynes in 2007 after
 growing up in south-east
 London and spending five
 years developing a film
 industry in the Gambia,
 west Africa.

He was immediately
 struck by how so many
 cultures and backgrounds
 were represented in the
 city's new population - and
 set out to find why so many
 people come here to make a
 new start, and become part
 of the MK Mix

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**RUTH Downie, right, has lived in Wolverton for 24
 years and is the successful author of a series of
 Roman crime thriller novels.
 Published by Penguin books, her latest novel 'Ruso
 And The root of All Evil', is described by
 The Times as 'addictively escapist'.**



1. Who are you and what is your background?

I was born in a seaside town in North Devon, where some of my family still live, but we moved to London when I was four. My dad was a student at the time and we lived in a grim series of rented rooms before settling in a flat that had the luxury of a bathroom shared with two other families on a rota.

That wasn't as tough as it sounds, because in those days most people only bathed once a week (at least, in our house they did).

My dad's job then took us to rural Essex, which was a bit of a culture shock, and on to Northampton where I went to secondary school.

I married straight after university at 21, which didn't seem at all young at the time, and spent many years working as a more or less grumpy administrator. We've now been married for - oh, ages, and have two grown-up sons and a serious book-buying habit.

2. What attracted to you come to MK in the first place?

My husband was working in MK and commuting from Northampton, and it seemed like a great idea for him to be able to walk to work. We'd only intended to stay a couple of years while we 'did up' the house. Twenty-four years later, we've just about finished...

3. What's the most striking difference you've found between MK and the place where you've lived the longest?

We were living on one of the expansion areas in Northampton before coming to Wolverton. So unlike most people moving to MK, we were transferring from a new community to an established one. I loved the traditional Victorian houses, and the redways were great for taking our small son for walks and bike rides, but I did struggle with the grid road navigation. I can't imagine why. It's really easy and quick, as I now blithely assure everyone who's baffled by it.

4. Please tell us about all the ways in which you are involved in MK Life?

We've always been involved in local churches, which is a good way to get to know people.

Our children went to local schools, so I did the usual PTA/school helper thing for several years and made some good friends that way. I'm also involved in making music (at least, that's what we call it) at church and I'm a member of Wolverton's Samba band, Lobo Tren. I have a lovely but very part-time job in the local library, and am a member of a couple of informal writers' groups and an archaeology group just across the border in Northants.

5. How easy have you found it to settle here?

Initially we found it really hard to settle in Wolverton. It wasn't that people weren't friendly, but in the 1980s it was a well-established community where many families had lived for generations.

Everyone seemed to know everyone else and it was said that if you sneezed at one end of the Railway Works, someone at the other end said, 'Bless you.' One kind lady explained to us that she was a newcomer to Wolverton because, 'I've only been here since the War'.

Also the town was a bit shellshocked after the arrival of Milton Keynes on the doorstep.

A lot of the shops had closed, jobs were being lost at the Works and there was a perception that crime had increased. 'Shut your windows when you go out,' one neighbour warned us. 'You're in Milton Keynes now.'

Over the years, Wolverton has changed and I daresay we have too.

More new families have moved in, other shops have opened, the town council and others have done a terrific job and there's a very different - and very positive - feel to the place.

6. We're interested in highlighting ways in which MK's diversity is working in practice, so how far have you spread your net so far?

Working in the library is great because it's a service that's used by a vast cross-section of the community, so you get to meet people who have come here from all over the world.

Some of them must have fascinating stories to tell but unfortunately I'm supposed to be working, not gassing to them...

Recently members of the Mosque and the local church arranged visits to each other's places of worship.

Although we share a community and our buildings are so close we could wave at each other across the Agora car park, we don't always communicate as well as we should, so I learnt a lot from the exchange.

7. Are you planning to stay in MK?

This is a tricky one. We're very happy here, but staying in one place until you drop isn't what you'd call adventurous, is it?

I do a lot of driving up and down the M5 to visit family in Devon and sometimes I think it would be nice to live by the seaside... if all our friends could come too.

8. If someone was considering moving to MK what's the best piece of advice you could give them?

Do it. And when you get here, don't be afraid to join things - including the Library, of course. There are stacks of things to do and people in MK tend to be very open to newcomers.

After all, many of them haven't lived here for long themselves, so they understand what it's like.

9. Tell us something about the city/country of your origins which only a local would know.

Hmm - when you come from a tourist resort it's quite tricky thinking of something people wouldn't know, but I think everyone who lives around the coast can be proud of the lifeboat service.

The crews are mostly volunteers who have other jobs, but if someone's in trouble they're prepared to go out in terrible conditions at any hour of the day or night to try and help. You can't get much more heroic than that.

10. What would you say to people who can't find anything good to say about the city?

Try a bike ride along Railway Walk, or follow the canal through the city. Visit Stacey Hill museum.

Stroll down past Bancroft Roman Villa and take photos of your friends sitting on those concrete cows.

Maybe MK will surprise you.