

# PUBLISHING NOW

## Kathleen Whyman asks publishers whether we should be including Covid-19 in our novels

At the time of writing, coronavirus cases in the UK have spiked again and a second wave is feared. With restrictions tightening and anxiety for our health and the future of our economy growing, should we be incorporating Covid-19 into our storylines or should we be avoiding it?

'For me, it's too soon,' says Sara-Jade Virtue, brand development director at Simon and Schuster. 'There have been some wonderfully uplifting stories of resilience and kindness that might offer great inspiration for authors, and everyone's experience of living through the virus is unique to their own personal circumstances, which would make for hundreds of possible plot ideas. But for the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost loved ones to this disease, lost their businesses, jobs and income, have struggled with childcare, home schooling, protecting their shielding vulnerable relatives, and their own mental health and wellbeing, I'm not 100 per cent convinced that stories centred around Covid are something I'm ready to read yet, especially while we're still in

the depths of the pandemic.'

She isn't against Covid featuring in fiction at some point.

'I'm not saying I wouldn't love to read a beautiful love story that happens to be written against the backdrop of Covid in the future,' she says. 'At some time, we hope, this period in all our lives will become "history", and I think that's when I wouldn't feel quite so uncomfortable reading a novel set now.'

Hannah Smith, editorial director at Aria and new Head of Zeus imprint Aries, is also not looking for fiction based around the pandemic.

'I think it's still a bit too raw for people as we're living through it. In commercial escapist fiction we want to be able to forget what's happening in the world around us and that's not quite possible to do when reading about Covid.'

However, Hannah Todd, commissioning editor at HarperCollins, doesn't think it should be avoided.

'Fiction novels have been written about all areas of human existence and, unfortunately for us, Covid is just yet another area of this existence at the moment,' she says.

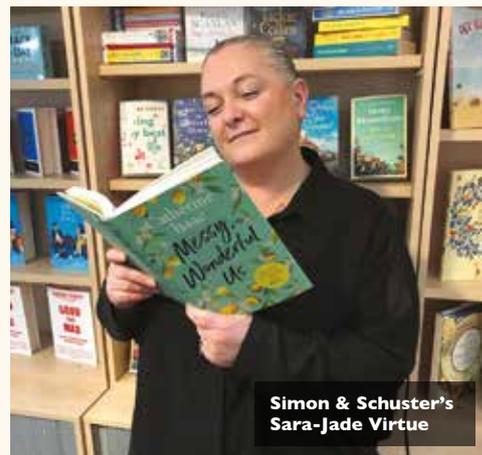
'Some readers want something

they can relate to and may actively seek out novels that mention Covid, whereas some want escapism. That escapism could be through a romcom where the protagonists are stuck in a beautiful destination due to flight restrictions, unable to come home, or through a crime novel in which a detective is faced with catching a killer in a locked-down world.'

Todd adds: 'As an editor, I think you have to trust your audience's judgement on what they choose to consume and when. I feel it doesn't harm to have put the option of a novel featuring Covid into the world.'

Janet Gover, New Writers' Scheme co-ordinator for the Romantic Novelists' Association, thinks it depends on what the writer is trying to say.

'If I was writing light-hearted fantasy romance, I'd probably avoid it,' she says. 'However, if I was writing grittier fiction, then I'd definitely include Covid if it was relevant to the story. The virus has had such a far-reaching impact on the whole world, I think any book set in 2020 must include a mention of Covid if it's



Simon & Schuster's Sara-Jade Virtue

to have any sense of realism.

'But how prominent it is in the book would depend entirely on the story. It might be central, or it might just be part of the background. I don't think, as writers, we should avoid any topic,' she adds. 'Books can and should address difficult topics.'

### Novel idea

Avon Books has shown it's all for including Covid in a novel by publishing *Love in Lockdown* by Chloe James, out 23 November. Tilda McDonald, senior commissioning editor for Avon, believes that this is exactly the right book for these times.

'Chloe James's characters are each dealing with lockdown and its challenges,' she says. 'But this isn't a story about the coronavirus or hospitals. Instead, it's an uplifting story about finding love in difficult times, and celebrating the power of community.'

James herself says: 'I feel really passionate about how difficult the lockdown has been for so many people, especially with regard to mental health, and I think the more it's talked about the better.'

The RNA's Janet Gover reminds us that art holds up a mirror to the world.

'Anything that's this big on the world stage must find its way into our fiction, because that is the job of any kind of art,' she points out. 'It evokes emotion – both good and bad. It causes us to think and reflect and wonder. Dark times can give rise to amazing, uplifting stories. I think both readers and writers should be, and will be, brave enough to face this.'



HarperCollins' Hannah Todd



The RNA's Janet Gover



Avon's Tilda McDonald