

The East Kent Mencap interview: Neil Alexander, author of 'The Vanishing of Margaret Small'.

Neil's debut novel was published last November. He tells us about his connection with Mencap and the inspiration behind his book.



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Neil Alexander

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**'The Vanishing of Margaret Small' will speak directly to people with a learning disability. Tell us about your connection with people with a learning disability and how the idea for your book came about.**

Growing up, I had an Auntie that worked for a special needs school as a Head Teacher. She used to bring ex-students, William and Patricia, to our house, so I was very comfortable being with people with a learning disability from a young age. In 2001, I worked for the Royal Mencap Society in London, my job was in the PR (Public Relations) team as 'Celebrity Manager'. I was responsible for recruiting ambassadors to support the charity.

During my time at Mencap, I met an extraordinary lady, Mabel. She would come to our fundraising events and talk about her life at long-stay institutions. Mabel had spent about 30 years of her life in a long-stay institution, just like Margaret the main character in my book. Mabel had written a short biography for the Open University. I found Mabel's story fascinating and

extremely moving. I thought not a lot of people know about this history and there was a danger that it would get lost. I felt it was something that needed to be shared more widely, as there is still quite a lot of prejudice for people with a learning disability. Mabel was the catalyst for my book.

**East Kent Mencap celebrates its 75th anniversary this year and a lot has changed over the years for people with a learning disability. The book takes us into Margaret's difficult and heart-breaking upbringing in a long-stay institution, how did you research that?**

I started with the London Metropolitan Archives, as I found out that held all the original records for the hospital in Croydon that Mabel was a resident of for all those years. I used to go there after work (at Mencap) and they had boxes of archives dating back to the First World War, with medical records, theatre programmes, and photos, which I sifted through. I took lots of photos on my digital camera (as it was pre-smartphones) and made

notes; this was incredibly valuable raw material which then eventually formed part of the book. It was interesting knowing Mabel, together with reading the documentation, it was a fascinating experience. There were also a lot of books I looked at for my research of first-person accounts of people living in long-stay care.

**Margaret lives in Whitstable, why did you decide to base her there and what's the appeal?**

It was always going to be set in Whitstable. I lived there as a student back in the 90's; it was a cheap place to live then, believe it or not! I had to move to London when I took the job at Mencap, but when I was writing the core part of the story it was like I was taking part of myself back to Whitstable every time I sat at my keyboard. In my head, I would go down to Whitstable to visit and I missed it. I always say I wrote my way back home, as during the pandemic I sold up in London and moved back. Whitstable was always part of



the books DNA and it suited the character.

**I loved Margaret, she is so kind, funny, and has such a positive outlook. What was it like writing about her character?**

I really missed Margaret after I finished writing the book. I got so into her voice and knew how she would react in any situation; it took a while to write in her voice and find that sweet spot between authenticity and readability.

We did have sensitivity readers check the book. I felt it was necessary as it is my story, but it is based on other people's lived experiences. For me, there was a pressure to get it right and do justice to the stories and make it compelling with that page-turning element.

**Wayne is an inspirational Support Worker. Is he based on someone you know?**

Over the years I have met lots of Support Workers, so he is a mix of them and a lot of inventions too.

I think there are parts of myself in each of the characters, certainly true of Wayne and Margaret. I have a lot in common with all of them, for example, I have a long personal history with the record shop in the book, and I love going in there.

**Why is Margaret a superfan of the legendary singer and TV presenter Cilla Black?**

I wanted someone British who had a big catalogue of music, with quite emotional songs. I wasn't hugely aware of Cilla as a singer growing up, for me, it was her 'Blind Date' and 'Surprise! Surprise!' TV shows. Margaret needed someone whom she followed and looked up to throughout her life and who was about the same age as her; Cilla was a huge star.

**You generously donated the money from your book launch at Harbour Books in Whitstable to East Kent Mencap, thank you so much. What is your connection with East Kent Mencap?**

It came out of my own work for Mencap. I understand the way the local Mencap organisations work,

and I thought it would be nice to give the money to a local charity. Sometimes when I go to my local swimming pool, I see the East Kent Mencap van, so when I thought about the book launch, I decided we could sell tickets and get people to come along.

**As well as an author, you are also an English teacher, so you must be very busy. However, we hear you have made time to write another book, tell us more.**

I can't say too much! I just sent off the synopsis and so the title of the new book might change. It is set in Belfast where I grew up, again it is a mystery story but set in the late 1980s. Think Kylie and Jason, it is a very different soundtrack. It will be out in November 2023.

**'The Vanishing of Margaret Small' is going to get a 'lorra lorra' love from East Kent Mencap members, supporters, and employees. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. We look forward to working with you in the future to support people with a learning disability to achieve the things they want out of life.**

Signed copies of 'The Vanishing of Margaret Small' are available at Harbour Books in Whitstable. You can also purchase the book at your local independent bookshop and online at Amazon. Kindle and audio versions are available and it is also stocked in Kent Libraries.

