

Finding my voice: How I came to write *Fire Boy*

You might say I am a late-bloomer. I am 58 years-old and have taught in primary schools for over 30 years. My first novel, *Fire Boy*, a comedy adventure for middle grade readers, was published in March.

Back in the Before-Time when we used to meet in classrooms, I told my Year 6 English class that my first novel was coming out soon.

One girl put up her hand. 'What took you so long?' she asked.

There was, I reflected, a long and a short answer to that question. I chose the short one.

'I was busy marking these,' I replied, picking up their copybooks and dropping them on my desk.

Her eyes fluttered open. 'Oh my god!' she cried. 'How bad are they?'

Here's the longer answer.

I wanted to write from an early age. Putting words into the right order on a page (or close to it) has always brought me pleasure, whether writing essays or attempting fiction. For many years, I studied part-time, so there were always assignments to complete. I wrote plays for school and one for a contest. I published a few articles, but nothing regularly. I dabbled at writing. I would retreat to the attic at the start of the summer holidays and return in September with little.

Life always got in the way, I told myself. Though if I honest, I preferred it that way.

Writing frightened me.

Deep down, I felt it was the one thing in life I might be good at, the one that mattered. And if I risked taking writing seriously and failed...well, what would that say about me?

I had excuses: children, child-care, my wife, my job.

Time passed. My children grew older. My wife kept long hours so I was often alone. I needed more from life than my job.

I began writing again, this time more seriously. I took an online creative writing course and finished the story I had started long after the course had finished. That story led me to the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa.

You don't need me to beat a drum on behalf of the MAWYP at Bath Spa. Its alumni list speaks for itself. Many have already spoken about the debt they owe the course and the tutors who contribute so much to it, people like Julia Green, Steve Voake, Lucy Christopher and CJ Skuse. I am simply another one. Without the MA at Bath Spa, I would not be a published author.

It was no easy ride though.

Workshopping was a new and, at first, bruising experience. I had rarely shared my writing with others before. When I did, I had received praise, not line-edits. I soon found myself re-working pieces over and over again, and then struggling to cope with the demands of my teaching job. I wrote whenever I could and not always well. I experimented with genre. I toyed with dystopia. I flirted with fairy tales. I swapped points of view the way others try on shoes. Gradually, and with the support of my tutors and new friends I met on the course, my writing began to improve.

Over my second year, my manuscript took shape. A small boy with a mysterious power and a dark past is parachuted into a London primary school. The result: mayhem. A few chapters pleased me, though I wasn't entirely sure how to connect the beginning with its ending. Or, as my tutor, Julia Green, so very gently pit it, I was "finding my way into the story". Still, I was on track to finish. By Easter, I had 25k written. That left me the summer to finish my manuscript.

It was time to test the waters.

In the last week of April, I travelled to Ireland. I had booked a "Date with an Agent" at Dublin's International Festival of Literature. For over a year, my well-meaning friends and colleagues kept asking me when – not if – my novel was going to be published. It was beginning to unnerve me, so a chance to get feedback from an agent on the opening chapters of my manuscript seemed like a good idea. And who knows? Maybe she might ask me back.

I received a cold and very sobering wake-up call instead. During an address to about thirty other children's writers, the agent informed us that over a thousand manuscripts landed on this agent's desk in one year. Out of those scripts, she offered to represent one of them.

One.

What made this manuscript stand out?

Its voice, we were told. The characters, the telling of the story, its style and wordplay, were unique. When she turned its pages, she could hear a voice speaking loud and clear, a voice she had never heard before.

My session alone did not go well either. I was told my manuscript was “competent”. I left the Festival shortly afterwards and returned to my hotel room. I spent the rest of the afternoon lying on the bed and staring at the ceiling.

Deep down, I knew she was right.

Novels like *I Capture the Castle* and *Because of Winn-Dixie* pulled you in from their opening lines. Their voices sang. You wanted to sit down beside their narrators and listen in on their journey.

There was nothing like that in the pages of my manuscript, and I knew it.

When I returned home, I knew I had to start again. I had come too far to settle for second-best. After a week of soul-searching, I decided to write the novel I wanted to read when I was a boy – something which seems so obvious a starting place now.

This novel would need to be funny, I decided, because there is no better sound in all the world than children laughing.

This manuscript would speak directly to the reader too. From *Tristram Shady* to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, from *Ferris Bueller* to *Fleabag*, my favourite novels and films are metafictional, stories which wink at the audience and draw them in.

This novel would contain lists, excerpts, texts, information boxes: I wanted to write a story that could accommodate children wary of books with no illustrations. By playing with how a text appeared on a page, I hoped they would find it inviting.

And finally, it would recreate the fun I had reading Marvel comics when I was a boy.

That evening, while playing around with different ways to start a story, I hit on these lines:

You are handed a box marked TOP SECRET. The box is addressed to you.

Do you:

A) Rip it open?

Or

B) Wait for your parents to come home before unwrapping it?

I know. It's not exactly the start of *The Hobbit*. And yet I felt a sense of real elation when I read it back. Here was my voice.