

EdVic February speaker meeting

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On 25 February 2021, up to 90 members and non-members registered to hear about what sounded like a fairytale topic indeed: On editing and being edited in the enchanting world of children's books.

The speaker was Davina Bell, author and publisher of children's books. Davina is currently a publisher in the Children's and Young Adult department at Allen and Unwin and is the award-winning author of picture books (*All the ways to be smart*, *All of the factors of why I love tractors*), junior fiction and middle-grade series. Her most recent book is the young adult (YA) novel *The end of the world is bigger than love*.

From the first moment, Davina captured her audience's attention as she described the world of children's books, from picture books to YA literature. From her dual perspective in the industry she was able to provide an expert opinion on the editorial process from both sides, and provide practical tips for how to approach a manuscript with a child reader in mind.

She said editors should ask themselves rhetorical questions when authoring or making suggestions to authors in their editing roles:

What is a child reader looking for?

- Characters to invest in?
- A sense of immersion/escapism/subversiveness/anarchy?
- Justice and moral clarity?
- Emotional and or material wish-fulfilment?
- Empowerment through something conquered and overcome?

So, as the editor, you:

- are the stand-in and advocate for the child
- play an essential role in establishing the author's credibility with the audience
- can make a huge impact on accessibility for the child reader with your input to design
- must be aware that you may be caretaking for, or fighting against, an author's childhood memories
- should keep the market in mind.

Therefore, editors should focus on:

- voice, authenticity and age-appropriateness
- satisfying balance of originality and familiarity
- detail in the right register
- growth and change of the protagonist
- dramatic tension — plot advancement and the interplay between action and character
- how the child character is portrayed in the resolution.

Some mistakes to avoid, as cautioned by Davina:

1. A focus on the language, with no eye for the reader. For instance, long passages of description and long exchanges of dialogue that do not move the plot.
2. Clutter masquerading as world-building. Keep it taut!
3. 'Dumbing down' the text. With enough context around a word, the meaning can become clear, but too many complicated words can lose a child's commitment.
4. Assuming that there is one 'child reader'. There's a huge range of abilities and understandings.
5. Assuming the emotional landscape of children is different from when you were young. Enduring themes.

However, be aware of other environmental factors in play for young children, such as social media and technology, expansion of knowledge, new ways of problem-solving, social dynamics and FOMO (fear of missing out).

Look out for diversity and representation

- The #OwnVoices movement has influenced what's acceptable for an author to tackle — and how.
- Language and terminology evolve very quickly in the YA space. Research. Lurk in teen spaces and consume content. Ask.
- Use or suggest sensitivity readers when appropriate.
- First Nations' content has its own sensitivities, permissions and protocols. Do your homework.

Check for problematic representation or stereotyping in any of the following areas:

- **Bodies**
- **Age**
- **Disability**
- **Religion**
- **Ethnicity/race**
- **Socioeconomic**
- **Sexual orientation**
- **Indigenous heritage**
- **National origin**
- **Gender**

With illustrated children's books, editors should ask themselves the following questions:

When editing illustration:

- Is there a sense of narrative in the illustrations, or do they merely repeat the text?
- Is there a sense of movement?
- Is there emotion through body language as well as expression?
- Is there enough interesting visual detail in the scenery to hold the attention of the non-reader?

- Do the palette and medium suit the mood/atmosphere of the story?
- Have you maximised the use of perspective — above, below, close up, far away? Mix it up.
- What is the rhythm, in terms of double-page spreads (DPS), single pages and vignettes? Wordless?
- Is anything falling in the gutter? Outside trim? Is there room for the text?
- Have you represented people of diverse backgrounds and abilities?
- Pay attention to crowd scenes. Are different family constellations represented? Can you work any harder to include a variety of children's experience of the world?
- Clothing — what is it telling the child reader?
- Does the physical environment reflect accessibility?

When editing picture-book texts:

- What is the universal truth that is being distilled?
- How does this sound, read aloud?
- Is there text that can be cut because it is repeated in the illustrations? Are there details that can be added in the illustrations to expand, enhance or replace the text?
- Is this text as tight as it can possibly be? Look at every word.
- Does the rhyme scan? Hint: meter, not number of syllables. Cramming?
- Have you maximised the drama of the page-turn?
- Does the resolution provide enough of an 'ahh!' moment of delight, whimsy or satisfaction? Is there any way you can play this up?

Davina suggested these useful resources to help editors of children's books:

- *Dear genius* by Ursula Nordstrom
- Samaritans: [Guidance for depiction of suicide and self-harm in literature](#)
- [Mindframe Stage and Screen guidelines: Mental illness and suicide](#)
- [Australia Council for the Arts: Protocols for using First Nations cultural and intellectual property for the arts](#) (updated September 2020)
- Terri Janke and Company Indigenous Law Firm
- Website — disabilityinkidlit.com.

Davina said editors are stand-ins and advocates for a child reader, and both writers and editors should see a book through the lens of a child's eye. She advocated using sensitivity readers as back-up for manuscripts before they are published, for spotting any problems and biases mentioned above such as language, cultural inaccuracies, representation, stereotyping, etcetera. While not new to the publishing industry, sensitivity readers have risen to prominence in the current climate of litigation and can steer the author away from many hazardous issues.

The audience had so much to take in from this information-packed presentation that question-time saw a flood of messages on chat.

A recording is available for purchase [here](#).

Use of speaker slides in transcriptions authorised by Davina Bell.