



Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Jamie Littler and Naomi Colthurst, author and editor of *Frostheart*

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Jamie Littler and Naomi Colthurst, author and editor of *Frostheart*

Life or death battles against terrifying monsters, an orphan's desperate search for home and family, escapes in the nick of time, a snowy other-world setting, a crew of lovable outsiders, and big questions about right and wrong – **Frostheart** has them all!

'Kids will gobble this up', said the **Branford Boase Award** judges, who also loved the great world-building and the characters and their relationships to one another. **Frostheart** is 'a fresh and very different fantasy adventure'.

Q&A with author Jamie Littler



*What did you enjoy most about creating the **Frostheart** world and writing the story?*

It may sound cheesy, but I think it was the fact that it was a dream come true! Since I can remember, I've always wanted to tell an adventure story within a fantasy world involving a rag-tag bunch of adventurers. **Frostheart** gave me the opportunity to do that, after so many years of trying. For years I'd bounced around different ideas, trying to find a story or world that gripped me (or that would be taken by publishers...), with no success. And then, all of a sudden, different ideas merged together, and I had the frozen world of the Snow Sea taking shape in my head. It psyched me up like no other idea before it. Unlike previous concepts I'd had, I *wanted* to explore the Snow Sea, I *wanted* to write about it and the people who lived there. Once it was in my head, it was clear it wasn't going anywhere, and that made creating **Frostheart** a thing of passion rather than of work, per se. The idea of the separate Strongholds was a big draw to me, too – different clans of people who look, act and dress very differently from each other depending on their locations, their resources, their beliefs. It resulted in a lot of opportunities for world building that, whilst challenging, proved incredibly satisfying, and, to be honest, down-right fun to draw and write about!

You are author and illustrator – how does that work? Do you sketch the characters before writing them, or is it the other way round?

During the ideas stage, they both come at the same time. I do pages and pages of sketches with scribbled notes, lines of dialogue or even entire paragraphs of text that flesh out some character moments or beats in the story. But when it comes to the final thing, the writing tends to come first (defaced with loads of doodles and sketches, of course!). It sounds weird, but because I've been illustrating for many years beforehand, I knew that side of things would take care of itself once I got to it. It would still be a challenge, but one I had a better idea of how to handle. So, I just focused on writing the best story I could, although it was impossible for me not to imagine the scenes as images

whilst I was writing - the whole story was running like a movie in my head! So I had a pretty good idea of the moments in the story I wanted to illustrate, or how the things I'd written about were going to look. That's not to say the text was sacred, though! As I did the illustrations, sometimes something looked cooler in the drawing than I'd described it in the story, so I'd go back in and change the text afterwards. It was really loose and fun, and a lot of that was down to my great art director at Puffin, Ben Hughes, being so open with this approach.

What was the thing you most enjoyed about working with your editor Naomi on the book? Why?

I think what I enjoyed the most was coming to the realisation that editors are actual wizards. Naomi has been absolutely fantastic. Whilst writing, I found I could get such intense tunnel-vision, that I'd get so close to the story that I couldn't see the wood for the trees and would get really stuck on convoluted plot points, tying my brain into knots. What would seem like an impossible plot hole to clamber out of would be resolved with one quick chat with Naomi. Naomi had lots of brilliant: 'What if you just did this?' or 'What if we simplify it to that?' moments that would leave me wide-eyed and open-mouthed, whispering 'Of course!' under my breath. I genuinely couldn't have done it without her. I could also tell that she really cared for the story too, from the moment she acquired **Frostheart** to the day of publication, and that meant the world to me. I knew the story was in good hands. As such, she was incredibly respectful of my idea. If something that meant a lot to me needed to be cut or changed in the story, Naomi would always find a happy compromise. Saying that – I agreed with 99.5% of her suggestions because they pretty much always made the story better!

What was the most challenging thing about writing the book? What aspect of it are you most proud of?

The most challenging thing for me was writing a story that was going to work as a trilogy. Juggling all of these elements that had to link together, trying to balance what is and isn't revealed in each book, how the character arcs progress across the three books, making sure each book had something to say and wasn't just repeating the previous one – it was *really* hard! I wanted each story to be satisfying in its own right, but also to work within the greater planned narrative and to leave the reader wanting more. It was a real challenge and I've learned a *lot* whilst doing it. There are certainly things I would change, things I wish I'd done differently, but all in all I'm just so happy it's come together in some shape or form! Actually finishing a story is a great challenge in itself, and the fact the trilogy is planned, the first book is published and the second book well on its way to being complete is something I have never achieved before, and at times doubted I ever could!

What advice would you give to debut authors?

Be kind, be hard-working and willing to learn. Write what inspires you. For so long, I tried to write what I thought I *should* be writing instead of what I *wanted* to write. I studied the bestseller lists and tried to make something like those books, but those stories weren't my stories. The stories I was trying to tell didn't mean anything to me, and my stories suffered for it. They were bland and uninspired, if they were finished at all. I think that when you find something that means something to you, that you're passionate about, that'll come through in the story and writing and readers will be swept away by it. Regardless if what you want to do is on trend or not, just do it! Tell that story!

Q&A with editor Naomi Colthurst



What most excited you about Jamie's manuscript when you first read it?

The humour! It was clear from reading Jamie's very first draft that he had already nailed so many elements of classic fantasy fiction – gorgeous world-building, an exciting mystery-adventure, and a host of wonderful characters – but what set the story apart was the enormously warm, witty – and importantly, contemporary-feeling – tone that ran through the writing. Writing genuinely funny books is SO hard, especially ones aimed at middle-grade readers, so it was exciting that Jamie's natural, easy talent for it came across so strongly. The humour in **Frostheart** also immediately makes it much more accessible for readers who might otherwise feel put off by what they see as a fantasy book – and we know it's really resonated with reluctant readers because of that too.

What would you say are the requisites of a really good fantasy adventure for young readers?

An exciting, fabulous world which readers immediately feel immersed in is so important – readers should be able to imagine themselves there, and understand the rules of the world quickly, without having it over-explained to them. Don't simply describe each scene – instead weave the sights, sounds, smells and culture of that world into every sentence, like it's second nature (as it would be to your characters). On that note, your characters need to feel relatable. It doesn't matter if they're human or humanoid – so long as they feel like real children, whose core emotional concerns and responses are ones that children can recognise from their own experiences. If you're already asking them to accept a fantastical world (and possibly an outlandish plot) they'll probably be working offputtingly hard to get on board if they don't see themselves at least a little reflected in the characters they're reading about. Finally, pace! Although it's tempting to spend time setting up vast worlds and complicated storylines, you'll lose your readership quickly if you don't keep the action moving . . .

Is there something you asked him to change that made his book even better?

Yes – great big chunks of the plot! Although Jamie had a good sense of where he wanted the story to go – not just in book one, but over the course of his trilogy – the first draft of **Frostheart** needed a lot of work to pull together various story strands into one really exciting and pacey plotline. Jamie pretty much had to go back to the drawing board to work out exactly what the story he wanted to tell was (specifically what Ash's main motivation was, and why he wanted to achieve it) and then how he was going to do it – and in as simple a way as possible. It's hard to imagine now, but the main story of **Frostheart** – i.e. Ash's search for his parents, and the lullaby that guides him there – didn't really emerge until at least the second draft. This meant we had to cut swathes of the original text, which was hard, as almost all of it was so lovely – but sometimes you have to be brutal...

What is the best thing about being an editor?

I truly love working with authors to help them solve the riddles of their stories. It's such a fun dance and there's nothing better than having a call or a meeting where you spark ideas off one another and suddenly a plot reveals itself, or we work out that XYZ is completely unnecessary, or we realise that this secondary character is actually the key to everything. I firmly believe that the author-editor

relationship should be exactly that – a two-way relationship where you trust one another’s opinion, know you can be honest in your feedback, and (most importantly!) have fun whilst crafting something together. Ultimately your job as an editor is to facilitate and harness the author’s imagination and help them realise their creative vision, so getting to join in on even a bit that journey is amazing.

What advice would you give to debut authors?

Keep going – writing can be such a lonely enterprise and I’m sure it must be hard to keep the faith when it’s just you, your laptop and an empty Word document. Especially when it feels like all you read about in the news are debut books being sold in massive, global six figure deals. But remember that is only the case for a handful of people, and everyone’s journey to getting their book published is different – and hopefully you’ll find the perfect editor and publishing home soon.

Frostheart is published by Puffin, 978-0241355220, £7.99 pbk.