



Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Kereen Getten and Sarah Odedina, author and editor of *When Life Gives You Mangoes*

When Life Gives You Mangoes is set on a small Caribbean island, where it seems nothing much happens. There is a mystery though: why can't central Clara remember what happened when she was playing in the sea last year? The truth when it emerges is shocking for readers, and a gentle story of rural life is suddenly taut with uncertainty.

The judges admired the way the book deals so beautifully with grief, guilt and friendship and the clever way the surprise twist is hidden from readers.

Q&A with author Kereen Getten

The *Branford Boase Award* judges loved the setting of your book and the characters. Where did the idea come from initially?

Thank you! The idea came from my childhood home. I was born in a small seaside town called Lucea, in Jamaica. We lived above the town on a hill that overlooked the ocean and behind us were forests of trees. Our house was surrounded by fruit trees and we spent our days playing games and exploring. It seemed like the perfect place for an adventure and I really wanted to write about my home town.

There's a wonderful twist in your book. How hard was it to structure the book to keep it secret from readers until the end?

It was tough! I wanted it to seem like a normal story with no hint of a twist so I spent a lot of time going through the story with a fine tooth comb and taking out anything that might give the twist away, but also leaving little nuggets so that when you go back and read it you will see that the clues were there all along.

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

I enjoyed playing with ideas and thoughts with Sarah. She was always on the same page as me and we both had the same goal which was to tell this story authentically and my way.

What is your favourite scene in the book and why?

The first time Clara, Rudy, Gaynah and Calvin went to Eldorath's house. I had so much fun with that scene and loved incorporating this mysterious house and its owner, with their thirst for adventure.

What advice would you give to debut writers?

It's easy to get disheartened when you see other people getting agents and book deals, but stay focused on your journey and don't lose focus. Your time will come, just keep writing, keep reading and save everything!

Q&A with editor Sarah Odedina

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

I loved Clara and her fabulous single-minded energy and I loved the setting and adventure story. The wonderful sense of place and the small details of family and community that so beautifully complement the bigger themes of the story – of loss and memory and friendship. For me the book really does have it all – character, adventure and great heart. I was also really struck by the confidence of Kereen's voice. As a debut writer she has such wonderful command and control of her novel – it is pitch perfect and the world of Sycamore Hill, all the different characters, the wonderful mystery at the heart of the novel, they all just felt so plausible and believable and tangible.

What were the main things you worked on with her as editor?

What were the main things you worked on with her as editor? My main concern when edited **When Life Gives You Mangoes** was to keep very true to the voice and style that Kereen had brought to the book. I wanted her characters to stand out distinctly from one another and for Clara's spirit to be very tangible to young readers. The character that I was most involved in this work with was Eldorath – making sure that his role in the novel felt natural and believable. I also worked quite a bit on the 'twist' and making the reveal both surprising and yet a 'ah ha!' moment when all the clues fall into place for young readers. I felt my role was to bring to the fore things that Kereen had already put in place but were sometimes not quite clear enough or logical enough for the reader.

What advice would you give anyone wanting to become an editor?

As an editor it is great to have strong personal taste – know what you like and what makes you tick as a reader. Then develop those tastes into careful and thoughtful opinions that you can share with authors to help bring out the strands and meanings in their stories. I think it is important to remember that this is not 'your' book. But you are helping shepherd it to life. That being an editor is being a reader with a bit more authority and to use that authority on behalf of the writer and their work. An editor also has to have the confidence to go forth and champion their authors. You literally have to be evangelic in your determination to make sure that everyone you talk to knows how great your authors are. You are their champion. Enthusiasm is catching. Share your enthusiasm.

Kereen's book is very different to Liz Hyder's *Bearmouth*, which won you last year's *Branford Boase Award*. Is there such a thing as a Sarah Odedina book do you think?

Yes, I think so. I think that all the books that I work on share certain qualities. They each have a strong and stand-out voice. They have layers of meaning that move the reader and touch the reader's heart. The characters are those that you really care about and root for throughout the book. There is a pacey adventure that keeps you reading on to find out what happens next. And I like books that explore our shared humanity while also celebrating the things that make us different.

What do you think marks out the most successful writers for children?

I think the primary thing that makes an author's work stand out, read and enjoyed is originality. It takes huge amounts of courage to be a writer and even more so to be an original one and dare to write your story your way. I think it is also really important to be prepared to work hard because it is not easy being a writer and it can take several attempts to get a story that you are happy with and then even more work once that book gets in to the hands of an editor who is working with you to make it shine. Despite everything writing is a skill that is learnt and polished and improved with practise and I think the best writers never fade in the face of that reality.

When Life Gives You Mangoes is published by Pushkin Children's Books, 978-1782692645, £7.99 pbk.

Thank you to **Kereen Getten** and **Sarah Odedina** for answering our questions.