

## **Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Jenny Pearson and Rebecca Hill and Becky Walker, author and editors of *The Super Miraculous Life of Freddie Yates***

When Freddie sets off on a secret journey that will take him half-way across the country, his two best friends come too; they have their own reasons for wanting to escape home for a bit. Together the three boys get into and out of some extraordinary scrapes, inadvertently becoming heroes in the process, and Freddie experiences what might be an actual miracle. A wonderful road-trip adventure.

The judges found ***The Super Miraculous Life of Freddie Yates*** wonderfully funny with some terrific visual gags. They also found it heartwarming and full of beautifully observed emotions.

### **Q&A with author Jenny Pearson**

**The Branford Boase Award judges loved the humour and the heartfelt emotions in your book. Where did the idea come from initially?**

Thank you! Gosh, the idea came from so many different sources. The deeper themes of loss and grief came after my stepdad passed away and from discussions with my eldest son about where his grandpa had gone. As a teacher, I know bereavement is something children do experience and I think it's important to find ways to talk about it with them. The miracle part of the book was inspired by a Year 5 RE lesson I taught that, frankly, went off on quite a tangent. And much of the humour in the book was inspired by actual events (I too have set fire to my own clothes), and real-life kids who I'm fortunate to be around a lot.

**There are some wonderfully funny scenes in the book. Which is your favourite and why?**

I do like the scene on the boat when everything descends into chaos and they're running around in their underpants. I really enjoyed writing the dialogue for that. Also the mistaken handkerchief scene because I think it's a bit of a surprise which comes right when it's needed because Freddie is having a bit of a tough time.

**What was the thing you most enjoyed about working with your editors on the book?**

I cannot tell you one thing! I enjoyed so many things, but moving beyond the fact that Rebecca Hill and Becky Walker are two of the most fantastic, warm-hearted and generous human beings I have ever met – they have taught, and continue to teach me so much. They've taught me how to really tell a story, to keep the children in mind with every word I put down, to go deeper, to show more, to think about every single character and make sure they earn their place on the page, not to stray from the narrative and more and more and more! They are brilliant at pushing me to do better without ever actually saying *do better!* I love their passion for Freddie's story and their belief in me. They give me the confidence to keep showing up at the keyboard. Every single comment they made I agreed with. I'd read one of their notes and think, *why of course!* Watching how they helped me craft **Freddie Yates** into something stronger and bigger was an experience that I will forever be grateful for. I am incredibly fortunate to work with them both.

**Your book had the Branford Boase Award judges laughing out loud one minute and crying the next. How difficult was it to maintain that balance?**

I think that balance is something that comes fairly naturally to me because when things are sad or difficult in my own life, I often use humour to help me cope. I do think humour is a powerful tool that can be underestimated. It gains children's trust and makes them feel comfortable and safe when talking about some of the harder parts of life. So when it comes to the deeper themes in my own writing, the need for a reminder that while things may feel bleak, there is still joy to be found, is

something I'm consciously thinking about. And because I'm writing for children it is very important to me that the story looks after them – if I take my young readers somewhere a little darker, then I have to bring them back out into the light. Having Rebecca and Becky reading my work and always keeping my readership at the forefront of what we do is a huge reassurance. Knowing they are there to check that I haven't got the balance wrong, enables me to take greater risks because I know we will always do right by the kids.

### **Are there any rules or tips on writing funny books that you'd like to share?**

Watch the world around you and use it. Take a moment to see the humour in situations. I guarantee something funny will happen every day, you just have to look at it in the right way. Kids have a far more advanced sense of humour than a lot of people think. Sure, they might laugh at the odd fart reference, but they appreciate a well-observed joke with a good set up more – and they deserve the best.

### **Q&A with editors Rebecca Hill and Becky Walker**

#### **Why do funny books for children get overlooked?**

We don't think funny books do get overlooked by children, and TCM data shows publishers just how much children love funny books. You only have to ask children and they'll tell you exactly how much they want funny books.

We know that funny books often entice the more reluctant reader to pick up a book; they help develop confidence in young readers and also help engender a love of reading. However, I think it is probably fair to say that mainstream media and book prize panels can overlook funny books. I'm not sure why, because children love and need all types of books – and funny books play a crucial role in helping us survive and understand the world we live in.

#### **How excited were you to receive Jenny's manuscript and what made her writing stand out?**

HUGELY! We'd emailed Sam, Jenny's agent, before even finishing the whole book. Jenny is an incredible talent: she creates characters you care about and plots that make you turn the page. However, what made Jenny's writing stand out is her ability to write light and shade; she doesn't shy away from difficult issues and writes them with an emotional precision that resonates. She 'makes 'em laugh, makes 'em cry, makes 'em wait'. It truly was love at first read.

#### **What were the main things you needed to work on with her as editors?**

Jenny makes our job very easy; occasionally, we worked on pace, adding in a little more incident or drawing out a few emotional beats here and there. She is a masterful writer and plotter! I think the main thing we worked on was bringing the book to market, in as exciting a package as possible – we were delighted to bring Rob Biddulph on board, as we knew he was the perfect illustrator to bring Jenny's world to life – and trying to carve out a space for Jenny, in a market dominated by celebrities.

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

Rebecca says, 'Writing books that children want to read. I think successful writers are in control of their plots and know the book they are trying to write.'

Becky says, 'I personally love books that make readers question the big things in life, books that help us empathise and teach us compassion. However, it is important to remember great books come in all shapes and sizes and a mark of success is if children want to read them.'

**You are both won the Branford Boase Award in 2018 and were shortlisted in 2019? What makes you such good editors?!**

At Usborne we care a great deal about the books we work on and the children that are going to read them. Working with authors is such a privilege – they truly are such incredible, talented, creative and inspirational people – and it is a treat to help shape a book in the editing process, in whatever way that may be.

**The Super Miraculous Life of Freddie Yates** is published by Usborne, 978-1474974042, £6.99 pbk.

Thank you to **Jenny Pearson** and **Rebecca Hill** and **Becky Walker** for answering our questions.