

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Manjeet Mann and Carmen McCullough, author and editor of *Run, Rebel*

Amber Rai is only truly alive when running and shows potential as an athlete. But her abusive father refuses to allow her on the track. Her mother is powerless to help, held back by illiteracy and lack of English and also a victim of Amber's father. But together, Amber, her mother and her sister Ruby can take small steps to freedom. A powerful, moving verse novel.

The judges found it a wonderful piece of storytelling and full of hope, despite the dark subject matter.

Q&A with author Manjeet Mann

The inspiration for *Run, Rebel* came from a community project that you created and ran called *Run the World*. Can you tell us more about that and how it led to your book?

Run, Rebel is partly inspired by my own experiences growing up and it is partly inspired by my work in the community through my organisation **Run The World**. **Run The World** works to empower women and girls through running and storytelling. I started writing **Run, Rebel** around the same time as I set up the organisation and I remember writing it thinking, this story isn't relevant, no one is going to find it interesting, the themes that it covers aren't prevalent in society today, (which I now realise was just a way of talking myself out of writing it!) but as I started working with these women, who were all survivors of domestic violence and seeing the women grow in confidence with every running session and hearing their brave, life changing stories, it gave me the confidence to dig deep and share the story I wanted to tell because it dawned on me that this story is relevant and the issues it covers are important and need to be talked about.

Why did you choose to write the book as a verse novel? What are the advantages of the form, or the thing you like most about it?

I'm not sure it was a conscious choice to be honest. When I sat down to write **Run, Rebel** it just came out that way. I'm a real fan of verse novels so I'm sure that had something to do with it and I'd also just finished touring a spoken word one woman show around the UK so I guess at the time performing and writing in verse was on my mind.

As I started writing I found writing in verse quite liberating. It was easier to deal with big emotional subjects by getting straight to the heart of the issue and saying more with very little. I also like playing with structure, and I like how verse novels can bring words to life on a page with the use of white space and by playing with key phrases. It forces you to want to speak the words out loud, which I think appeals to the actress in me.

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

There are so many things! I'm so grateful for Carmen, she took what was a VERY wonky first draft from a novice writer on a mentor scheme and helped shape it into a proper book. She saw all the broken bits so clearly and knew how to fix them without imposing her ideas onto me, instead she'd offer up solutions, helping me to find my way through. I really took my time with this book and Carmen allowed me the space to take the time I needed, she was always so kind, reassuring and supportive. I know she doesn't like hearing it, but **Run, Rebel** belongs just as much to Carmen as it does to me. She stuck with it for two and a half years, unwavering in her dedication, believing in it way more than I did.

What was the most challenging thing about creating the book?

Weirdly the happy, lighter bits. The darker more emotional topics came quite easily. (I'm not too sure what that says about me.) The earlier drafts of the novel were quite dark, and I was told I needed to balance that out. What's perhaps more troubling is that I didn't see those early drafts as particularly dark. Looking back, I can see that they were, so it's been a real learning curve . . . and not just for my writing! But Carmen was fantastic, always listening and always thoughtfully guiding me through each draft.

What advice would you give to young people wanting to write?

My main piece of advice is always TO START! If you have an idea, start it, be consistent and focus. You don't have to write every day – you might not have that luxury –but do you have thirty minutes once a week? Writing is just about turning up when you promised yourself you would and focusing. Don't worry about being perfect. Just get your story down on paper. To add to this, other little bits of advice I'd give are: don't just read what you want to write, read widely, your writing will be richer for it. Writing is an artform so get curious about all other artforms. Go to galleries, museums, the theatre etc. I get a lot of my ideas from photographic exhibitions. Finally, be observant of the world around you. You never know, that overheard snippet of conversation might just be the opening lines to your novel!

Q&A with editor Carmen McCullough

You first met Manjeet when you became her mentor on Penguin Random House's *WriteNow* programme. How important are schemes like this?

Until publishing has become a fair and level playing field for all then I think programmes like **WriteNow** are incredibly important. It's been wonderful to see a significant number of incredibly talented writers from under-represented backgrounds publishing their debut novels and picture books, winning awards, talking directly to children about their work. In addition to this **WriteNow** and programmes like this have enabled a huge number of people to receive constructive feedback on their work and useful information on the publishing industry and its processes, which can feel very opaque to those outside of the industry. All of this is gradually making publishing and the children's books market a more inclusive space. I also think that programmes like this are important because it gives an aspiring writer the creative space and time to work and re-work supported by an editor until it is ready to share more widely.

***Run, Rebel* is the first verse novel you edited. What are the particular challenges of that?**

It was a very interesting learning curve for me. I was very conscious that any of the edits I made could have the potential to disrupt the rhythm and flow of the verse that had been so carefully crafted. It meant that I had to be a lot more aware of what was happening in the text before and after a proposed change. It also meant that Manjeet and I worked even more collaboratively than I would usually do with my authors, talking through proposed changes/developments and how it could work. This was really rewarding as we were able to use each other as a springboard for our own creative thinking and I think this ultimately was really beneficial to the final book.

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

We looked a lot at how to balance the light and dark in the story. The story delves in to some challenging themes, which we absolutely didn't want to shy away from, but we also wanted **Run, Rebel** to be a really empowering and inspiring read for young readers. Amber is a complex heroine (and not always likeable) so we worked on developing her fierce personality and showing readers in detail what a conflicted character she was so that they could properly empathise with her. One of

the ways that we did this was to frame her journey as the seven stages of a revolution to really demonstrate how far she'd come through the story.

You describe *Run, Rebel* as 'more than a novel, it's a call to arms.' How important are books like this in the YA canon?

I think we only have to look at the reaction from readers to see how important this book is. So many teens, adults, teachers and librarians have been in touch to say how much this book meant to them, how it spoke to them personally or to their students.

Manjeet writes brilliantly about women's voices – in what ways their voices can be suppressed and how they can find a way to make themselves heard. And whilst it deals with some challenging themes, Manjeet's writing and the verse novel style she has perfected is incredibly accessible and a fantastic tool with which to explore these issues.

The inspiration for **Run, Rebel** came from a community project that Manjeet created called **Run the World**. The aim of **Run the World** was to unite women and empower them through running and then allow space to share their stories. Her aim was to chart the empowerment, strength and solidarity that women can find through running and storytelling. So everything about this book, from its original inspiration through to the final text is a call to arms. It's a conversation starter and a chance to raise your voice and be heard.

What advice would you give to anyone wanting to write for young adults?

- I think the most important thing is to do your research – immerse yourself in the YA market and read widely across a whole range of titles.
- I would also recommend thinking about your one line pitch for the book – what is it about your novel that makes it fresh and distinctive from everything else out there?
- Don't be disheartened when your first draft doesn't go exactly to plan. Writing and re-writing are very different things. Your initial draft is mostly about getting words on the blank page – once you have the basic structure and plot down, then you can work on making it the best book it can be.

Run, Rebel is published by Penguin, 978-0241411421, £7.99 pbk.

Thank you to **Manjeet Man** and **Carmen McCullough** for answering our questions.