

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Lesley Parr and Zöe Griffiths, author and editor of *The Valley of Lost Secrets*

When Jimmy is evacuated to a small village in Wales, it couldn't be more different from London. Green, quiet and full of strangers, he instantly feels out of place. But then he finds a skull hidden in a tree, and suddenly the valley is more frightening than the war.

The judges praised **The Valley of Lost Secrets** as a really good read, a satisfying that creates an unforgettable sense of place.

Q&A with author Lesley Parr

The Branford Boase Award judges described your book as 'atmospheric storytelling at its very best'. Where did the idea start from and what was your way into the book?

Thank you! When previously researching another story, I discovered a true account of children finding a skull in a tree. So I used that as a starting point for my own characters, setting and mystery. My way into the book was through Jimmy. The first scene I wrote was the skull discovery. It was different from the finished draft because Ronnie was with him, but the brothers instantly felt real to me and I really cared about what happened to them. I still feel very touched and happy when readers love them too. They're my boys, and once Florence appeared (out of the blue, as she would!), I'd found the friend Jimmy – and the story – needed.

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

I love my words being edited by Zöe; talking about the story and the characters and drawing out the best aspects of it at each draft. Zöe just 'got it' from the start. She 'got' my characters and my writing and what I was trying to say. She always guides, never prescribes – but isn't afraid to push me when I need it. I feel we've built up trust in our professional relationship and that we work well collaboratively. We both want and need my books to be the best they can be.

I find characterisation and the actual prose come comparatively easily, but I often feel overwhelmed by plot and structure. Zöe is so skilled at seeing the bigger picture, which complements my more detail-focused brain. And she's happy to work in whichever way suits me best, always asking what I want and need. We create an editing schedule together and communication is strong. This is still important now but, as a debut, it was invaluable.

What is the thing you are most proud of about your book and why?

I hope I'm allowed two things here! So ...

Firstly that I've created characters who readers seem to really invest in. People tell me they have laughed, cried, got angry ... all the emotions! A question I'm often asked is if Florence is OK after the story ends. Readers worry she'll go back to her dreadful life in London. For a fictional girl of my own creation to make them feel this way completely warms my heart, and I'm always happy to reassure them that, in my mind, Florence is happy and stays in Llanbryn forever.

I'm also immensely proud to set my stories in the kind of community in which I grew up. Beautiful, industrial places with working-class people who all know each other – and the blessing and the curse that can be! The biggest seal of approval is when Welsh readers think I've got it right.

How do you balance keeping the story historically accurate and telling a story that will captivate today's readers?

I think the key is that people never really change, not fundamentally. The world changes around us, but people are people. Writing with this in mind hopefully helps my readers to step into a character's shoes for a while and see how it feels, to make a connection. As long as I'm faithful to that – in the heart of the story – and pay attention to details of era and language (with a light touch) as I go along, it seems to work. I enjoy the restrictions placed on my writing by setting it in a certain era. It challenges me and makes me work harder at every word.

What advice would you give to debut writers?

The first answer which leaped into my head is to recommend scheduling your admin, because it takes up a lot of your time! But on a more literary note ...

There's no 'correct' way to write a book. I'm on my third, and each time the process has been wonderfully and frustratingly different. I've learned to embrace that and not to question it too much ... to let the characters and story lead me. I need to *write* my way in, others plan it out, but we all get there in the end.

Listen to your agent and your publisher, but ask questions too. Don't sit there worrying that they'll think you're silly or a pest! They won't. You're part of a team and they need to know what's on your mind. Zöe once told me that the people at Bloomsbury think I'm 'easy to look after' because I'm good at telling them what I want (and what I don't want!), so never be afraid to (politely) speak up. At the end of the day: happy author + happy publisher = good books!

Q&A with editor Zöe Griffiths

What was it about Lesley's writing that most excited you about her book?

I have always loved books set in the Second World War, but in all my years as an editor I hadn't yet found one that felt fresh and original enough to break through all the existing classics. **The Valley of Lost Secrets** hooked me in from the first line, and Jimmy's voice held my attention immediately.

Lesley's strength is undoubtedly her characterisation. I couldn't help but fall for Jimmy, his brother Ronnie and, of course, as the story progressed, Florence – Jimmy's unexpected ally. The warmth and depth Lesley added to each person's individual development made them authentic and relatable. The struggles that Jimmy faces – fitting in, fear, displacement – are still current and relevant for readers today. It reminded me of how scary it can be to be 'new' – to have to walk into a room where you don't know anybody or, worse, where you don't speak the language. It brought home to me how we discuss the current refugee crisis; how we can make people feel 'other' even if that isn't our intention. This ability to make connections and to encourage readers to question their actions is what makes historical fiction timeless. It is what helps us learn and grow.

As well as her wonderful characters, Lesley truly brought alive the sense of place – a Welsh valley like the one she grew up in, surrounded by mountains and industry; living in a terraced house as part of a tight-knit community of working-class people. Countless readers don't see their lives reflected in the endless adventures set in London, or in castles, boarding schools or fantastical places. We often swing between the privileged or the poverty line, so I was delighted to see Lesley shine a light on families where both parents have to work, where there is enough money to get by and keep a roof

over your head, where you borrow books from the library, where you help others and pull together, where you're proud of where you come from.

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

There is a mystery at the heart of **The Valley of Lost Secrets**. It begins when Jimmy discovers a human skull buried in a tree and ends when he discovers who it belonged to, resulting in the community coming back together in a way they haven't for years. This mystery was the main focus of the editorial work Lesley and I did together. The original draft had a lot of suspicion around one character, but it didn't ring true with the kindness that he showed others. I helped Lesley work on how to space out and unravel the various nuggets of information and clues that Jimmy discovers, making sure we had everything in the right order so that readers wouldn't guess too soon, and so that the conclusion would be moving and wholly satisfying.

On the back of working to strengthen the mystery, and in order to give us a point of difference, I suggested to Lesley that we include an extra mystery in the book – one that would be just for readers to solve. I wanted it to feel authentic to the time, so we made the finished book a flip book, meaning readers had to finish Lesley's wonderful story before they could start to unravel the extra mystery. Lesley wrote a gorgeous poem that gave readers an extra hint about who the skull belonged to, and we hid the letters of the poem in the folio artwork. Lesley also weaved in an extra scene where Jimmy looks at a flip book, and she wrote a wonderfully encouraging letter, explaining to readers how to solve this special puzzle. Having this extra element adds to my feeling that **The Valley of Lost Secrets** is a very unique and special book. It is unforgettable.

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

I think there are so many wonderful writers for young people today – you only have to look at this amazing shortlist so see the fabulous breadth of talent our industry is lucky enough to publish. I find success can be a hard thing to quantify though, as so much depends on more than just the quality of the writing.

But I do believe that for a book to be successful it needs to have that initial passion from an editor, whose vision for publication then galvanises everyone else in their team to share the book as widely as possible. For me that passion comes when a character has a stand-out voice like Jimmy does, and when I feel as if the book has something different to say – something that will make readers question themselves and will stay with them long after they have finished the last page. We have such a fantastic opportunity to open doors for young readers, and we should be publishing books that affect change and widen viewpoints. Every child deserves to see their reality reflected in a book, to know that the possibilities for them can be endless, to know that they can have adventures and that they can be the heroes. *The Valley of Lost Secrets* offered that opportunity by encouraging readers to think differently, to find friends in unlikely places and to ask for help. It will always have a special place in my heart because of that, and if even one reader feels the same then I think that is the real success.

What do you find most satisfying about being an editor?

For me it is when your advance copies come in and you get that completely wonderful feeling that you've helped make a book! A tangible thing that you can hold and sniff (book-sniffers unite!) and treasure. I feel a real personal satisfaction knowing I have helped someone get the best out of themselves, and a sense of pride and achievement that we've made a brilliant book together. For someone who loves books, you can't beat it.

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

Be kind! As much as publishing is a business, you're also working on a project that is hugely important and personal to someone. There's an intimacy to every editorial relationship, and it's crucial to be open and honest from the beginning – but in a way that is sensitive and considers what the author has had to give of themselves to make this book happen. It's not easy to write a book and I definitely couldn't do it. I'm in awe of everyone I work with.

I often think of my role as being a chameleon – it's up to me to change and adjust how I work so that my authors get the individual support they need, rather than the process having to be the same way for everyone. We have to be inclusive and willing to be flexible, otherwise you won't get the best book and it certainly won't be an enjoyable experience for either of you.

And, of course, read! As much as you can, and as broadly as you can. Editing is completely subjective. Editors don't have all the answers, and editorial conversations should be about suggestion and questioning intention. The experience to be able to do that only comes with reading lots of different styles and narrative structures. We need to be able to show our authors what is possible for them, as well for their readers – that only comes with keeping your brain alive with ideas.

The Valley of Lost Secrets is published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526620521, £6.99 pbk.

Thank you to **Lesley Parr** and **Zöe Griffiths** for answering our questions.