

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Nadia Shireen and Ali Dougal, author and editor of *Grimwood*

Grimwood is a paradise for animals (or so it seems) which offers the perfect protection for the young fox, Ted, and his protective sister, Nancy. But is Grimwood really a fool proof hiding place? Time will tell.

Nadia Shireen's story, which includes lots of her own illustrations, made the Branford Boase Award judges laugh out loud. They found a wonderful sense of chaos throughout.

Q&A with Nadia Shireen

The Branford Boase Award judges described *Grimwood* as 'anarchic, weird and irreverent'. Where did the idea start and what was your way into writing fiction as opposed to picture books?

I'd had the idea for a while, but it wasn't until the first lockdown that I really decided to focus on it and see if I could develop it. I just felt the idea suited a longer format because Grimwood gave me a whole new world to explore.

What was the thing you most enjoyed about working with Ali on the book?

As it was my first time writing fiction I really valued Ali's steady hand on the whole thing. I didn't really know what I was doing, but Ali was great at balancing creative freedom with the realities of producing a readable book.

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

I'm glad we've managed to keep the sense of weirdness and humour. I always worry about those things being flattened out but they really haven't been.

You are a very successful picture book author. How did that affect your approach to *Grimwood* and storytelling generally?

It was strange having to sometimes 'write more words' as I'm used to editing text down in picture books. Also the illustrations maybe have less storytelling to do here, so I've focused more on them accentuating the mood, or maybe adding another layer of humour.

What advice would you give to debut writers?

Write, write, write some more until you have a first draft. Now you've got the raw material you need to start rewriting it into a book!

Q&A with Ali Dougal

What was it about Nadia's writing in *Grimwood* that was most refreshing and exciting?

Nadia's voice is unique – she marries spiky, anarchic comedy with tenderness in a way that I haven't seen before, she doesn't pull any punches, and her jokes work on multiple levels. These qualities are true of her artwork too. I think she's a genius!

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

Character, voice and world-building (as well as a strong visual aesthetic) were spot on from the get-go, so our main focus was on building a tight plot, a compelling narrative arc, and clear motivation for our central characters.

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

Most of the big successes that spring to mind combine a great hook, memorable characters and a well-realised world. Plot can always be developed, but a strong authorial vision and voice is key.

What do you find most satisfying about being an editor?

There's nothing like the thrill of reading a submission that blows me away, and it's immensely satisfying to work with that author to bring out the very best in their writing. Sometimes an author can take an editorial note and address it with something so clever and unexpected, that I am in awe of their talent and skill.

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

Read as much as you can, in as many different genres as possible. Spend time in bookshops. Learn about the market – but trust your instincts! Genuine passion will go a long way.

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Thank you to **Nadia Shireen** and **Ali Dougal** for answering our questions.