

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview for Luke Palmer and Penny Thomas, author and editor of *Grow*

Sixteen-year-old Josh's father was killed in the suicide bombing of a train, while he was going to work. This challenging novel chronicles the grief of Josh and his mother and also the attempt to radicalise Josh made by a group of white supremacists.

The judges found it a very powerful read with a sense of raw newness. They felt really immersed in the story.

Q&A with author Luke Palmer

The Branford Boase Award judges described *Grow* as an ‘unflinching exploration of an important subject’. Where did the idea come from and what was your way in?

The idea for **Grow** came out of many conversations I'd been having with young people at about the time of the Brexit vote; all the toxic rhetoric around immigration, about what was 'ours' and what 'they' were taking away, was having a pretty adverse effect on the young people I was teaching – especially boys. I was wondering what would happen if any of these young men had a reason to explore those feelings further, and Josh popped into my head one day, fully formed, with a back story and a complete voice. He was the way in.

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

Penny absolutely understood, from day one, what I was trying to do. Rather than seeming worried or scared by the moral grey areas the book was exploring, she wanted me to push deeper, probe them harder. We ended up adding extra characters and scenes into the book, rather than taking anything away. She was also fully committed to a process of sensitivity reading, which was very important to me. It was vital to both of us that the book feel as authentic as possible.

How did you retain the rawness and power of the story, which deals with violence and prejudice, while keeping it accessible for relatively young readers?

Josh's confusion and vulnerability – his naivety in lots of places, particularly where his relationship with Dana is concerned – is, I think, pretty relatable. It's certainly how I remember experiencing my teenage years! So, despite being caught up in fairly exceptional circumstances, I hope there's enough about Josh that is recognisable for young readers. There's also a kind of balancing act to perform: on the one hand you've got the national contexts of radicalisation and the methods used by those who groom vulnerable people like Josh; on the other, you need to consider what the average 15 year old would know about these things and how they would experience them. I hope we got it right!

You completed the prestigious Bath Spa Creative Writing course. What are the key things you learned there do you think and what did you gain most from doing it?

It is a brilliant course. I focussed on poetry (my debut collection is coming out in early 2024, actually!) so mostly I was forensically interested in the small stuff – word choice, nuances of syntax and other intricate machineries. Lots of **Grow** is dominated by silence – stunted conversation, not knowing what to say, the silence that accompanies grief. So I think the poetry helped most with that side of things. Poetry is defined, much more than prose, by its relationship with silence. The course also reinforced the importance of experimenting and editing; how other ideas could bring new light to my writing and push it in new directions. Writing's a more collaborative process than many people give it credit for.

What advice would you give to debut writers?

Share your work. Get it out there. Whether it be with friends or a formal writing group, find people who get what you're trying to do and will help you learn to do it better. Not only does this hone your craft it also helps you develop that necessary 'thick skin' that everyone talks about. A lot of the writing process is spent getting it not quite right, making improvements, and then trying again. We all see and celebrate the successes, but the other part of the work – the behind-the-scenes stuff – is absolutely vital.

Q&A with editor Penny Thomas

What was it about Luke's writing that most excited you about his book?

Luke's writing is deeply sensitive. It keeps close to its first-person narrator and expresses his grief and thought process, or lack of it, in a credible and empathetic way, while leaving no doubt in the reader's mind when Josh is going down a horribly wrong path. This is a really tough act to pull off, but I think Luke does it. No one wants to have to deal with the subject of right-wing radicalisation at school, but it exists, and Luke had written a brave and skilful account of a 15-year-old boy caught in its web.

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

The overall structure of the novel, and the central character of Josh, his relationship with his mum, and his journey needed very little work, and nor did the writing style. My work with Luke was mainly drilling down on detail. Some small scenes and details didn't quite work physically or technically (eg how the road accident plays out) others didn't quite work emotionally. Anywhere where I thought there was some vagueness, particularly about Josh's emotions and state of mind, I just asked Luke to spell it out a bit more clearly. We also worked a little on the characters and circumstances of Dana and Ahmed to make quite sure they were as convincing as possible. We took the story through three different sensitivity readings too, with particular attention to the racist language used by racist characters to make sure it was credible without being unnecessary and offensive.

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

All the best writers work with language in a particularly close way, as all artists work with their media, whether it's paint, clay, words etc. Outstanding writers for young people also have incredible imagination, combined with sensitivity to their readers – they will remember what it's like to be young themselves, but will be willing to learn about changing circumstances for young people now. A sense of humour helps, a passion for storytelling and courage to tell the story. And of course they work very hard. Not much really!

What do you find most satisfying about being an editor?

The variety of brilliant books and authors I get to work with! I'm so lucky to be working in absolutely my favourite field: children's fiction, reading and calling it work! I can be working on anything from humour to horror, realism to adventure or epic fantasy, day in day out. Every author works differently and of course the relationship with them is important. But if I can help them gain an overview and rework any parts of the book that aren't quite there yet, and we get a successful result, that is a real pleasure!

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

Read lots and lots, be confident and reassuring when necessary, but remember every author works in a different way and their book is deeply important to them, so respect that.

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Thank you to **Luke Palmer** and **Penny Thomas** for answering our questions.