

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Helen Rutter and Lauren Fortune, author and editor of The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh

Billy Plimpton has a stammer, and he's determined that it isn't going to dictate how he is viewed at his new school. In fact, he's got a list of ways to get rid of the stammer before anyone even notices it. One of the ideas has just got to work, so he can start pursuing his dream of being a stand-up comedian.

The judges felt that readers absolutely inhabit Billy's world, and that children would love the jokes. They loved the details included throughout.

Q&A with author Helen Rutter

The Branford Boase Award loved your central character Billy and the empathy throughout the book. Where did the idea start and what was your way into writing it?

It began with my son Lenny. He had been through much of what Billy experiences in the book and so it was a really great way into writing as I felt totally connected to him! Lenny loved listening to each chapter as I wrote them too, it was a very special process.

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

Lauren is brilliant. She sees the bigger picture in a way that I just can't. Her ability to zoom out and know what a story needs is so impressive. She got so much more out of me and this story than I ever thought was possible. Writing scenes that would not have existed, were it not for her notes, and those scenes becoming my favourite moments made me feel incredibly lucky to have her.

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

I am usually a very impatient person and getting through the first draft was quick and relatively easy for me. It was the editing process that really challenged me! It meant I had to stick with something for much longer than I ever have before. I am so proud that I did as I learnt so much and think that I became a much better writer because of it. Lauren has a way of pushing me and at the same time lifting me up so that I know I can do it.

You have been an actor and stand-up comic. How did that feed into your storytelling?

I think I approach writing firmly with character in mind and that is down to my life as an actress. I almost wrote it like a one-person show, imaging Billy telling me his story. Comedy obviously made its way firmly into the plot as well!

What advice would you give to debut writers?

Don't get it right, get it written. You can't make something better if it doesn't exist in the first place so just get something down on the page and worry about how good it is later!

Q&A with editor Lauren Fortune

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

Billy's voice! It was instantly engaging and endearing, it is hugely skilful how quickly the reader finds themselves standing alongside him and rooting for him. This book has a truly authentic depiction of life with a stammer, the highs and lows and everything in between: Helen makes the switch from heart-breaking to hilarious, daft to devastating look effortless. I knew as I finished reading the first

draft that her writing would start conversations, promote empathy and hugely entertain a young reader whilst doing so – it was must-have for me.

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

My main edit note was to ask for ***more*** that was already working so well, more air-time with the wonderful characters, with a particular focus on the bully, William Blakemore, and Billy's kind teacher, Mr Osho. I saw real potential for William to move beyond a traditional mean bully as the book proceeds, revealing a vulnerable side and learning to be empathetic by the end. I suggested that Billy witness William having a tough time at home and helps him/extends the hand of friendship, which makes sense of William's bad behaviour and leaves him in a better place by the close of the book.

The power of an inspirational, kind teacher on a child who is struggling cannot be underestimated, and I encouraged Helen to give Mr Osho a much more pivotal and proactive role in Billy's increasing confidence and self-acceptance. The scenes between the two of them are my favourite in the book; Mr Osho is so gentle and supportive without ever becoming intrusive. Helen and I worked together to ensure that most scenes unfolded 'in real time', to ensure the readers' total engagement. The first draft saw some key events reported by Billy retrospectively, which I thought robbed the reader of seeing Billy's emotional reactions at the very moment he felt them. Helen reworked the scenes to ensure that we're right there with Billy throughout the book.

We rejigged the first few chapters to include more about Billy's starting-a-new-school nerves – moving up to senior school is something every child will go through; I remember it being a real shock to the system to go from being the oldest to the youngest again and I encouraged Helen to develop Billy's conflicted feelings around anxiety at everything changing versus the opportunity he has to start from scratch and reinvent himself.

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

I think it's really simple: they know what makes kids tick – what's important to them, what they find funny, what frightens them and what their needs and dreams are. An eye for brilliant, vivid characterisation, an instinct for what makes a page-turning plot and original, high-stakes adventure and the ability to hit a deadline (I joke) are also hugely important, but does the young reader believe, heart and soul, in the child characters? That's the key for me.

What do you find most satisfying about being an editor?

I have always loved the editing process itself, the dialogue that develops as I work with an author to make every aspect of their writing and story shine brightly. I love puzzles and problem-solving so the 'bigger picture' stage of editing is my happy place. But there's so much more to being a book's editor: I love pitching books to the commercial teams, getting everyone excited about an author and their story, and then the collaborative work begins, which is so energising and satisfying: working with Design and Production on the cover, Publicity and Marketing on how we're going to spread the word, the Sales teams on how we make a book must-have for retailers. Being an author's champion and cheerleader!

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

A love of language, storytelling and reading is the base-line, but I think it's so important that editors have a natural curiosity about the world and wider cultural landscape beyond books, especially the

lives and experiences of people not like them. Be open-minded, passionate and a team player and you'll get so much out of this job.

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Thank you to **Helen Rutter** and **Lauren Fortune** for answering our questions.