

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Nathanael Lessore and Ruth Bennett and Ella Whidett, author and editors of *Steady For This*

MC Growls (Shaun to his mum) has his eyes set on fame and fortune, starting with the Raptology competition. But when he and his best friend accidentally go viral for all the wrong reasons, things go awry. Set in the Peckham estate where he grew up and written in lively, rap-infused language, Nathanael Lessore's debut is laugh-out-loud funny but tender and moving too, dealing with issues of peer pressure and social inequality. The judges described it as "close to perfect, with a loveable central character. The story is authentic, with real emotional depth."

### **Q&A with author Nathanael Lessore**

**The Branford Boase Award judges found Shaun, your central character, very lovable. Is he based on people you know? How did he come to you?**

Shaun is loosely based on myself. Lots and lots of the silly things he says and does are based on real life events that actually happened to me. The scene where he gets stuck in a pushchair, the cinema scene with the yogurt, anything that seems too silly to have happened probably did happen.

When I lived in Paris, my aunt nicknamed me "tete en l'air" which loosely translates to "head in the clouds". This informed Growls' voice, and my editors, Ella and Ruth, helped finetune Growls to make him infinitely more likable than he was in my first draft. I loved writing him, and he came very naturally.

**Your book is very funny but with much that is poignant too. How challenging was it to maintain the balance?**

Not challenging at all! My editors came in hard with the emotional beats. Originally, there was a joke in almost every other line, and it was a little overwhelming. Ella and Ruth knew exactly where to scale back the humour to ensure it remained impactful, and they suggested where to add poignant moments, and which scenes would push the emotional punches further, most notably in the last few chapters and throughout with Growls' relationship with his mum. All I had to do was take their advice and their suggestions seriously (easy work on my part!).

**You write in your Author's Note that you want kids like you were to see themselves represented in books in a positive and authentic way. How did that affect you when you were writing your book?**

My childhood on the North Peckham Estate was actually fun, and mostly positive, so all I had to do was write honestly about life in an estate.

It involved lots and lots of listening. I needed to sound like a modern teen, which is difficult when you're well into your thirties. Slang has evolved, and there's nothing more cringe than an adult writing uninformed versions of what they think young people sound like.

My cousin and brother who are both young, streetwise and difficult to please were my "authenticity" proofreaders. If I sound too old, they're the first to tell me. I also did lots of eavesdropping on the bus to get the rhythm of speech as realistic as possible!

**Tell us about your working relationship with your editors Ella and Ruth? What was most enjoyable about it?**

Average.

Lol JK, it was pretty terrific.

My mentality going in trying to get this book published this was to take advice from people who know better than me. At the time, I had zero experience publishing books. They had several years between them. It's a no brainer. I was quickly justified in my approach.

Every single editing note that they gave elevated the manuscript. This meant that, for me, the editing process was like flying a plane on autopilot. I had nothing to worry about. I felt very safe. They knew all the characters, and the world, as well as I did. Nothing they ever said was without deep thought or knowledge of the **Steady For This** universe. And this gave me freedom to be silly, to be imaginative, to go OTT with the gags, and still produce something worth publishing.

The most enjoyable part was the outtakes. If a joke or a line wasn't quite landing, I'd come up with several alternative suggestions, which was super fun. Ella and Ruth's reactions to the jokes encouraged me to keep going.

### **What are the major influences on your writing?**

I am blessed to be surrounded by fun people, socially and in my family. If I find something funny, I immediately make note of it.

I also love TV. I grew up watching *Friends*, *Scrubs*, *The Inbetweeners*, *Roll Safe*, stuff that hasn't always aged super well, but gave me a love of sitcom-style humour.

When it comes to reading, it's so varied. I loved the Spike Milligan war memoirs, I loved Malorie Blackman, Sophie Kinsella, Flannery O'Connor. Anything and everything really.

My uni lecturers, Tessa McWatt, Tim Atkins, Helena Blakemore, taught me how to write proper.

And finally, a bit cheesy, but obviously my editors. They both have an amazing sense of humour, as well as a mastery of narrative and the emotional elements of writing.

### **What advice would you give to anyone wanting to write for young people?**

Listen. Don't just throw random words like "innit" or "bruv" into sentences and think it's job done. There's a rhythm to the way young people speak. I never wrote anything good while actively trying to sound like a teenager.

Also, it's not all doom and gloom. Young people are just as funny and witty as adults.

Teens are intelligent. The best piece of advice I got was from my agent, who told me "don't write down" to younger readers.

### **Q&A with Ella Whiddett and Ruth Bennett**

#### **What appealed to you most about *Steady For This* when you first read it? What marked out Nate's writing as special?**

**Ella:** Growls' voice! It just leaped off the page. He simultaneously felt like no one I'd ever met before, but also an amalgamation of so many people I've known throughout my life. Nate's ability to capture the essence of teenagehood was remarkable in how effortless it felt. And then of course, we can't talk about **Steady For This** without mentioning the humour – comedy is notoriously one of the hardest genres to write, but again it just seemed to come so naturally to Nate.

**Ruth:** As Ella says, Nate's grasp of comedy is fantastic and this is a rare find. I remember being amazed at how fresh and unique **Steady For This** was when I first read it – it reads so naturally, but that is undoubtedly the result of a huge amount of craft and talent on Nate's part. I absolutely love the way that Nate captures the combination of enthusiasm and awkwardness that characterise being a teenager without ever seeming like it's mocking or patronising the young people who will recognise themselves in his characters.

### **What were the main things you worked on with Nate as his editors?**

We wanted to look at Growls' character growth across the book. How could we show that he ends the story somewhere emotionally different to where he began but he's still got the same heart? We asked what lessons does he need learn from beginning to end? Is it about how to be a better friend? Is it about how to listen? Is it about himself and his aspirations? And what is it that makes him realise this? We posed all these questions to Nate, who really ran with them and used Growls' relationships with his friends and family and teachers to expand his characterisation. For example, Growls' attitude to rap shifts over the course of the story, and it's symbolic of his personal growth. Originally though, in the first draft, he never really grappled with what he liked about rap, and in the end he gave it up because Shanks did. But through the editorial process, we uncovered that while initially Growls is just superficially interested in the ideas of money and fame associated with rap, through Mr Rix's mentorship he's able to realise he actually really enjoys the wordplay and linguistics of the music, and that it's something he's good at.

The other crucial part of Growls' journey is his counselling sessions with Karen. She becomes a real safe space for him, in spite of the fact he has lots of reasons to distrust the process. Nate worked hard to give these sessions a clear aim and structure and ensure that Growls could take something from them. In an early draft, he was sent to therapy as a punishment for his bad behaviour at school, but we discussed whether it needed to be a more positive experience for him, to encourage young people, especially boys, to feel they can be open talking about their feelings. Nate then worked on these scenes so that Karen's focus is on allowing Growls a space to talk through his feelings about Shanks and his own emotional response to the incident, rather than it being a chore or punishment.

### **Which scene in the book is your favourite and what does it reveal about Nate's talent?**

**Ella:** There are so many! Whenever I talk to people about the book, they'll always have a favourite, and say "Oh my god, in the cinema with the yoghurt", or "When he's stuck in the pushchair!", or "The Italian restaurant scene had me crying laughing". I love all of those – they are truly iconic and so memorable – but I think my personal favourite is a slightly more understated scene. It's when Growls goes to visit Shanks after he's been in hospital and they've both been missing each other and dealing with big emotions alone. Their reunion is this lovely moment of friendship in its purest form, and they're goofing around but they're also finally talking openly about their mental health and what they've learned and I think it's a really special thing to show two teenage boys being so emotionally vulnerable and reaping the rewards of it.

**Ruth:** My personal favourite is the scene where Growls first meets Siobhan – or Shevon, as he calls her then. In his first interaction with Siobhan, we are given a glimpse of how Growls handles an encounter that is outside of his usual experience and it creates a shift in the way we see him in a really subtle and effective way. Shevon lives within the same neighbourhood as Growls but has a fundamentally different life. Up until this point in the story, we are very much

living in Growls' world and seeing the world through his eyes. The interaction between Growls and Siobhan is funny, tender and heartwarming and Nate manages to write it in a way that really pushes us, as readers, to expand our preconceptions of who Growls is and what he's about without it ever seeming heavy-handed.

**Nate has highlighted his aim of increasing authentic representation of kids like he was. Do you feel a responsibility to do that too and how do you go about it?**

Definitely. We strive to ensure all readers can see themselves in the books we publish. With **Steady For This** in particular, we thought a lot about who the readership was. Initially Nate had conceived of the story as YA, and he then aged it down to MG, but when we read it, it felt like it was a story for a really underserved readership: teens, that inbetween age of 11-14, especially teenage boys. So we introduced and teased out some of the more sophisticated themes and discussions, like mental health, racism, classism and ableism to acknowledge that these slightly older readers are aware of and grappling with these issues in their lives. But we always wanted to balance that with keeping true to the tone of the story, which isn't dark and gritty, but fun and celebratory. We think it's really important that books by writers from under-represented backgrounds aren't pigeonholed into being 'issues' books if that's not the story the writer wants to tell, or the story that will make young readers feel represented.

**This is the second time in three years that you have been shortlisted for the Branford Boase Award. What's the secret to your successful working relationship?**

**Ella:** Like writers, often as an editor it's just you and the manuscript at a desk, so when you get to co-edit it's so much fun. Ruth and I have worked together for six years and have shared so many incredible projects in that time. I think we have an innate trust in the other's judgement and we collaborate in a really natural way. Ruth spots things I don't and vice versa, and together we strike the right balance.

**Ruth:** I think Ella and I work together well because we both really value the other's opinions but we don't feel that we always have to agree! People don't necessarily think of editing as a creative process but it absolutely is. Like all creative processes, it's important to have strong communication and trust. There's no one way to edit, just like there's no one way to write, and there's also no definitive right or wrong. Working as a team opens up so much room for creative discussion and exciting ideas and I feel that in the case of **Steady For This** it's given Nate a supportive platform for being able to try things out and produce his best work.

**How can publishers encourage diversity amongst editors as well as writers?**

Outreach and transparency. Publishing is still a very opaque industry for those on the outside trying to look in, and we need to keep working to demystify it to ensure we open the doors for people from all walks of life, because having a diverse team will always make for better books. A particular route we've both found to be useful is taking time to mentor new writers and publishing hopefuls. It's great to see lots of schemes and organisations dedicating time and resources to this, particularly in a post-covid society, where there's much more flexibility to do so virtually, which will hopefully help to break down the London-centric bubble of publishing.

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Thank you to Nate Lessore and to Ruth Bennett and Ella Whiddett for answering our questions.

