

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Matt Goodfellow and Charlotte Hacking, author and editor of *The Final Year*

Matt Goodfellow's verse novel tells the story of Nate as he navigates the final year of primary school, facing particular challenges at home. His life with his little brothers and single parent mother is one not often represented in children's books. The judges found this extremely accomplished, a perfect verse novel. It's harrowing, but has a playfulness to it too, and reads like a true story.

Q&A with author Matt Goodfellow

You are well known for your poetry, but *The Final Year* is your first verse novel. What did you enjoy most about writing it and what were the challenges?

I enjoyed giving space to tell the full story of a character. The challenge was to try to keep hold of all the threads within the story, especially when you have a short attention span, like mine!

***Skellig* by David Almond is central to your book. Why did you choose to weave it into your story and what do you admire most about it?**

When I became a primary school teacher, *Skellig* was the first book that stopped me in my tracks and made me realise just how textured and nuanced children's literature could be. David Almond is a master of place and people and I admire his ability to continually produce thoughtful and intuitive narratives. I chose to weave it into the story because I thought it was such an important book to me personally.

How much have you drawn on your own experiences, both growing up and as a teacher for *The Final Year*?

Everything that I write is a combination of my life, lives that I've seen and stuff I've made up. As a teacher, I've seen many Nates and wanted to write a story that allowed kids like him to see themselves in a book, which they might not already be able to do.

Verse novels are enjoying something of a boom, why do you think this is?

It's great to see verse novels in the spotlight. Sarah Crossan has been a pioneer of the form. She is a tremendous writer and it's great to see so many new voices coming through with something powerful to say. As a writer, the verse novel form is very interesting because you can say a lot, but you can condense what you want to say. For a reader, if you have a very short attention span like me, it means there's not as much to read - there's a lot of white space - and I think that's a very appealing thing if you are somebody that's overwhelmed by a novel.

Can you describe the editorial process and working with your editor Charlotte Hacking on the book? What were the main things you worked on together?

The book wouldn't exist without Charlotte. She understands the way my brain is wired and understands my idiosyncrasies with grace and patience. The writing process was an entirely creative one, we worked together to produce the most powerful and authentic piece of writing that we could. We really wanted, as a partnership, to ensure Nate's voice was as authentic as possible and worked together to craft and realise that. From the first time Charlotte saw the book, when it was barely more than a tenuous set of threads tangled across pages of random poems, she believed in it - and my ability to craft its message, supporting me to tell the story better.

What advice would you give to anyone wanting to write a verse novel?

My biggest piece of advice would be to try to say what you want to say in as lyrical a way as possible. A verse novel should move a reader through its poetry, as well as having a compelling narrative.

Questions for Charlotte Hacking

What do you think makes Matt's writing (his poetry and *The Final Year*) stand out?

I've been a huge admirer of Matt's writing since his first collection, **Carry Me Away**, came out in 2016. There's a real authenticity to what he writes. The way he portrays people and places and conveys emotions and situations, which are very real to many children, is highly intuitive and deeply engaging. He's also an incredible poet. The voice, lyricism, layout and carefully crafted language come together to engage readers, whether poems be laugh out loud funny or highly emotional. The minute I saw the first threads of the manuscript for **The Final Year**, I knew it was going to be something very special and something that so many children would relate to in a way they may not find in other stories.

What do you think makes a great verse novel?

The poetry. A verse novel must be a compelling narrative, but it needs to be poetic. The best verse novels are a journey into language, lyricism and form, enabling a reader to experience the narrative conveyed, and the emotional journey within it, in a uniquely compelling way.

How did you come to work with Matt editing the book (this is your first book as editor)?

What did you enjoy most about the process and what was most challenging?

This was all thanks to another incredible poet, Dom Conlon. He suggested that editing would be an interesting path for me and recommended me to Janetta Otter-Barry, who published **The Final Year**. I've always had a deep admiration for Janetta. Her passion for children's poetry is laudable. After we met, she suggested working with Matt on **The Final Year** and was incredibly generous in allowing me to suggest Joe Todd-Stanton as the illustrator.

I can honestly say that all of it was enjoyable. Working alongside Matt to pull the threads together to shape the story, working on Nate's voice to make sure it conveyed the character Matt wanted and supporting him to get to the book he wanted it to be. The most challenging aspect was probably me getting my head around all the variations between our Northern and Southern pronunciations, colloquialisms and dialect specific words, when we made the decision to ensure Nate's voice actively conveyed the way he spoke. Also, to ensure that we made very character authentic. I wanted us to be careful with Nate's mum especially, as she strongly reflects someone very close to me. It was particularly important to me that she felt real, she wasn't demonised for who she is, and the love that she has for her boys and the warmth and sisterhood of the friendship she has with Auntie San, shone through.

What were the main edits you made? How did they improve the book?

I think the main thing was in giving licence to Matt to portray the authentic voice of Nate on the page. The first draft I saw was written in Standard English, and although Matt knew the character, who he wanted him to be and how grounded he was in the place he was from; this wasn't apparent on the page to the reader. Having seen Matt talk about his work with children and teachers, I knew just how important voice as an indicator of place and identity was to him

and wanted to give him the freedom to show this on the page. Although it took a lot of copy editing afterwards, it was absolutely the right thing to do.

The second big thing was to ensure the medical storyline was authentic and accurate. I managed to engage a wonderful paediatric cardiologist, Dr Edmund J Ladusans, who honestly treated Dylan (Nate's brother) as if he were a living, breathing patient of his own, researching conditions and helping us to ensure the doctor's language and actions were exactly right. Other than that, it was about carefully considering together how to get to the heart of what Matt wanted to say and convey that, looking at what needed stripping back, what needed developing further, how to ensure the pace of the story kept the reader engaged, and how best to convey aspects of the story in the different poetic forms he chooses and uses throughout the text. I think the decisions we made allowed us to get to a compelling and authentic narrative. We've both been amazed by the reception it's had since the release.

How closely did you work with illustrator Joe Todd-Stanton? What edits if any did you suggest to him?

Joe's an incredibly talented visual artist; for me, he's one of the best out there. I was delighted when he said he'd come on board, because I knew he was exactly the right person to authentically get to the heart of the emotion we wanted to convey in the words.

We talked a lot beforehand about the importance of authentically representing the place and the people involved. We had conversations throughout about specific details, what settings and characters might be like, how Nate's uniform might look – we traded a few images and Google map references to gain a sense of these things, then Joe worked his magic from there. How he understood and portrayed The Beast (the anger that lives inside Nate) was just incredible. I think he's been able to so perfectly convey the kitchen sink realism we wanted to achieve and we're beyond delighted that he's been part of the team. All of us had such love for the story and the characters and wanted to do our very best for them.

The judges commented on the fact that boys like Nate are underrepresented in contemporary children's fiction. How did you and Matt ensure Nate's voice is so authentic and believable?

Matt and I have both known children like Nate and families like his. His voice represents the area that he's from in East Manchester and we wanted to ensure this came through on the page. That voice is one Matt knows well, so he made careful choices in the language he chose and used. We've both worked as primary school teachers, which also helped us to ensure the voice of the children was authentic, as well as the teacher's voices and actions.

The family's story also holds great personal importance to me – as I said, it's very reflective of the life of someone incredibly close to me. So, we wanted to draw on all these experiences to ensure the authenticity of every character and the experiences they have. There's a lot of love for this family and their story from everyone involved in this book and we all worked hard to ensure it authentically reflects the people we know it represents.

[The Final Year is published by Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659040, £8.99 pbk.](#)

Thank you to Matt Goodfellow and to Charlotte Hacking for answering our questions.