

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Jenny Ireland and Ruth Knowles and Sara Jafari, author and editors of *The First Move*

With the support of her family, Juliet is managing her arthritis but when it comes to socialising, she generally stays home to play chess online rather than be singled out at parties as the “girl with crutches”. Like Juliet, Ronan takes solace in playing chess on an online forum. Little do they know that the flirtatious friendships they’ve struck up with online chess-mates could become a real-life romance... The judges were enthralled by this book and admire the quality of the writing, adding, ‘It’s rare to see disability represented in romances and Juliet’s unglamorous disease is described very well’.

### **Q&A with author Jenny Ireland**

**The Branford Boase Award judges admired the quality of your writing but also the representation of disability. Where did the idea for the book come from and what was your starting point?**

I vividly remember what I felt like as a teenager. That’s probably not a good thing. I remember being deeply mortified by everything I did 85% of the time, and the other 15% I lived in desperation for my own love story.

And that’s where Juliet came in. As always for me, the book started with a voice. And this voice was a teenage girl who was living with inflammatory arthritis, claiming to be cynical about love, but just like I was at the same age, hoping for her own love story.

It was lockdown when I started **The First Move**, my arthritis had flared, and my husband had put in a sufficient amount of complaining to get me to learn how to play chess. He showed me an app he used to play with people online, and it all started to come together.

**Please describe your working relationship with your editors Ruth and Sara. What did you enjoy most about working together on your book?**

Ever since I was matched with Ruth in the Penguin **WriteNow** programme, I knew I was lucky. I adore the editorial process, and I think that is one hundred percent down to Ruth and how she works. And I know it’s her job, but it’s a testament to how good she is at it when I’m always embarrassed by my original drafts because her suggestions for improvement always appear so obvious. They aren’t of course, but I am in total awe of someone who can spark my creativity in such a fundamental way and make me genuinely excited to change huge parts of my book. The only explanation is witchcraft.

Working with Sara was incredible. Having her input on **The First Move** was invaluable and I particularly appreciated how lovely she was, making it so easy to ask questions. I think feeling comfortable with your editor is such an important part of the process.

I have been so incredibly lucky to be matched with such talented women.

### **What insights did they give you about your writing?**

The biggest insights were plot-wise. It was completely eye opening when it was suggested that Juliet and Ronan should meet earlier, which effectively changed the entire second half of the book. So instead of them discovering each other's identities at the chess tournament, the revelation comes right in the middle. It was one of those times I felt so lucky and so in awe of these editors who could see this sliding door universe. It made the book so much better.

I also appreciated Sara's comments on my teenage characters dress sense. I live in fear of accidentally writing a 2020's character that dresses or speaks like they belong in 2005. Sara kept me right and I am eternally grateful.

### **What is the most satisfying thing about writing a romance?**

I grew up watching romcoms and I could not be more delighted that I get to write them now. I don't think there is a 'most satisfying' thing. I love the whole thing. The first meeting, whether it's awkward or hostile, the will-they-won't-they, the misunderstandings, the tropes, the disaster moments when everything falls apart and the character thinks all is lost, the first kiss. All of it. It's all satisfying!

### **What are you most proud of about the book?**

I'm proud that together, Ruth, Sara and I created a teenage love story that I would have swooned over as a lovesick teen. But more than that. I think when you have disability representation in fiction, there's a fine line between it being a 'disability story,' and just a story that happens to have a disabled protagonist. I didn't want it to just be a 'disability story.' In saying that, it would have been disingenuous if I hadn't portrayed Juliet's illness as having such a big impact on her life, as it does mine, but she's just a teenage girl with the same flaws and wants and desires as every other teenager. And that's the heart of it. With the help of Ruth and Sara I'm proud of what we've achieved. I've had many messages from young readers with conditions like Juliet's who have thanked me for the story and expressed how much they could relate to my character and one young reader expressed how it gave her hope that she might find her own Ronan. As an author I don't think I could ask for much more than that.

### **What advice would you give to debut authors?**

Learn to work on the next thing while you're waiting. It's taken me ages to be able to do that. And there is a lot of waiting, but I think as soon as it clicks that that's just the way it is, it makes it much easier to get something else done. Also, don't compare yourself and your book to anyone else's journey. Everyone's writing journey is so unique and special, it makes absolutely no sense to compare. It's so easy to lose sight of your achievement in the noise that is social media. Celebrate every success.

## Q&A with Ruth Knowles and Sara Jafari

### Jenny came through the *WriteNow* programme. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Ruth: The programme began in 2016 (at the very first workshop in Birmingham we met the now award-winning Manjeet Mann and Emma Smith Barton for the first time!) with the aim of seeking out, nurturing and publishing writers underrepresented on our bookshelves. As the programme has grown, so too have the applications. We're delighted to read everything that any writer submits, of course, but some are stand out. As was the case with Jenny.

Initially you read only 1,000 words of somebody's writing. Editors across the business volunteer to read a number of these 1,000 words and rank and discuss them together. At the next stage, an editor is paired with one of the writers for a phonecall and a slightly longer piece of writing before the final cohort of writers to be mentored are chosen. Then over the course of a year there are a variety of workshops to open up and demystify the publish process, give networking and connection opportunities, and six hours with an editor working directly on the book. Leading, we hope, to a successful publishing contract for the author at the end of it.

I read Jenny's writing in the first 1,000 word stage and immediately it stood out as something special, so that at each stage I asked to be paired with her, ultimately becoming her mentor for the programme.

Sara: And I read Jenny's book in our editorial meeting after Ruth had circulated it. I was so struck by how real and raw the story was – it felt like exactly the kind of book I wanted (and needed) as a teenager, and so I took it to our acquisitions meeting alongside Ruth.

### What was it about her writing that made it stand out?

**Ruth:** How immediately teenage it felt, never like an adult writing for younger people, but meeting them and their thoughts and feelings on their level. I was also excited by Juliet and how invested I felt in her having a love story. My one-liner feedback on that first 1,000-word sample was: *Sparky, slick writing with a clear and interesting hook. I can see this really fitting into the YA market well. Very exciting!*

**Sara:** For me, I felt similarly to Ruth that while reading **The First Move** I got the clear sense that this was an author who knew her target audience really well, and I totally bought into Juliet and Ronan's perspectives in the story. Reading **The First Move** brought me back to being a teenager again – with all the highs and lows – and I think that is such a special quality to possess as a YA author.

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

**Ruth:** The biggest editorial work we did was around the timeline of the novel and, wow, did this get shifted around! In the very first full draft, Juliet and Ronan had already been

talking online and the key party scene was much earlier in the novel, meaning the pacing was patchy and the narrative arc less satisfying. We worked through this, moving things earlier so we saw them first meet online as well as in real life so we were fully invested from the off, seeing what they brought to each other's lives that wasn't there before. We also did a lot to round them as characters. We join them both at very challenging points in their lives and so needed to work to show their highs and moments of relief as well as the lows. There were also points where the reading felt quite episodic with the consequences from interactions and events not flowing through and leading us on to other plot points, so we worked together through that; boosting side characters (friends Tara and Michael and Jules's parents, especially) to help with this, and linking things more clearly on the page.

At the point of the third draft, Sara joined me with her fresh eyes and made the vital observation that the finale of the book – whilst incredibly joyful and satisfying – meant that we ended the book with Jules and Ronan kissing at the chess tournament. As such, we ended with their love story just starting. Sara felt strongly that, as a key part of the disability representation so important to Jenny in this book, we should show Jules actually living her love story. So the timeline shifted again! We worked with Jenny to do some trimming, move everything earlier again and add on a final section. The other thing we did in these final stages was a thorough line edit to really make the teen voices other than Jules – who was always spot on – even more real and a touch more **Sex Education-y**.

### **What do you think marks out the best writers for YA audiences?**

**Ruth:** We're so lucky to be reading such incredible YA talent at the moment, and across genres we are spoiled for choice. The best writers for young adults handle the emotions and behaviours of coming of age with depth, realness and nuance – interactions, highs and lows are not trite but treated with the importance they hold at that stage of life. Crucially for me and my reading taste, this layer works perfectly alongside a compelling, gripping plot that moves along at a pace.

**Sara:** As Ruth said, understanding the concerns of young adults, and treating them with care is incredibly important when writing a YA novel. Particularly when writing coming of age YA novels, really drawing out characters that are three-dimensional, unique but also relatable to readers is a sure way to write a stand-out YA novel.

### **What do you each find most satisfying about being an editor?**

**Ruth:** I think it's an incredibly privileged role that I never take for granted. I love the peeling back of more layers with each stage of the editorial process as doing something to one aspect of the book, characters or plot then reveals something else. I also love (in the flip of Jenny's answer!) that magical moment when you have posed questions to an author and then what they come back with is just so much more creative and brilliant

than you could have imagined. As a children's and YA editor I also love the variety of our jobs that I don't think adult editors get: one day a brilliant YA romance, the next non-fiction about the human body, the next middle grade fantasy. Aren't we lucky?

**Sara:** There are so many satisfying parts of the role, but I find brainstorming phone calls with my authors as we unpick any knots in the plot together a particularly satisfying part of the job. I love that my role as an editor is so collaborative with my authors, as we work to achieve their vision for their book and make it the best possible version it can be. Seeing the package come together is another part of the job that I love. As an editor, you're not only involved in edits in the manuscript, but often in titling, cover tag lines, briefing covers and writing back cover copy. Even after so many years as an editor, seeing everything come together for the finished copy is still so special, and makes me so excited for my authors.

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

**Ruth:** Read! Of course, 'the market' is a construct that can change quickly – outliers come along and surprise us all in a joyful way. However, it is helpful to see and understand what your writing would be sitting alongside and what else young people are enjoying. But also – just do it! Don't feel you have to start at the beginning and get to the end. If you have a scene vividly in your head, or a conversation, write that as a first step. It will come alive for you from there.

**Sara:** As Ruth said, familiarising yourself with the age range is key, both through reading and watching TV/movies targeted towards young people. If you're struggling, and need more structure, perhaps consider joining a writing group, online or in person, for accountability and community. I often find a lot of writers put a lot of pressure on the writing process, so if you're in that position, consider anything you write as 'Draft 0' and you can go back over everything at the end to perfect it. Just getting the words down first is enough. And remember the beauty of writing and being an author is that anyone can do it at any time in their life – so why not start now!

[The First Move is published by Penguin, 978-0241591826, £8.99 pbk.](#)

Thank you to Jenny Ireland and to Ruth Knowles and Sara Jafari for answering our questions.