

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Beth Lincoln and Ben Horslen and Julie Strauss-Gabel, author and editors of *The Swifts*

Who caused Arch-Aunt Schadenfreude to fall down the stairs at the regular Swift family reunion? Is it linked to the family's periodic search for Vile Swift's missing treasure trove? The judges loved Beth Lincoln's clever, original reworking of the country house murder mystery, praising its comic inventiveness, and cast of colourfully named queer-friendly characters. "It's hard to put down and keeps you guessing throughout. Brilliant use of etymology and full of ideas."

## **Q&A with Beth Lincoln**

### **The Branford Boase Award judges loved your book, its clever use of etymology and inventiveness. When – and how – did you first get the idea for the book?**

Years ago I thought idly that Shenanigan would make a good character name. Since I forget most of my thoughts about thirty seconds after they occur, that might have been the end of it, but luckily I wrote it down in my notebook. From then on whenever I encountered a word I thought would make a good name (say, Winsome, for example) I'd add it to the book along with a short biography. I ended up with dozens, and had to invent Swift House just to have a place to put them all.

### **You have a large cast of characters, and the book is a murder mystery too. How much of a challenge was it keeping track of everything and everyone? How did you draw up the plot?**

Shenanigan and I aren't very alike, except in the way our brains work. Her frustration with logic and causality and linear time is MY frustration, and so plotting is very, very hard for me. I found that no matter what method I used to wrangle events - notecards, timelines, colour-coded paragraphs, murder boards with pins and connective string - every attempt to stick to a plan was scuppered the moment I started typing, because I got carried away by my own ideas. Essentially, I now write several versions of the same chapter or pivotal paragraph, compare them all, and then stitch the book together from those. Ben and Julie deserve a medal, never mind an award!

### **What did you enjoy most about the editorial process and working with your editors?**

I am one of those weird people who LOVES to get editorial feedback. I live for constructive criticism. So much of writing is self-directed that you can get trapped in your own head for weeks trying to figure out where you're going wrong, only for an editor to pinpoint the issue in about five seconds. Ben and Julie have always understood what I am trying to do, and are committed to helping me get there. They've been so generous with their time and their enthusiasm that I have only ever left meetings with them energised and full of ideas.

I plan on spending the rest of my life learning to improve as a writer, and when you work with people who understand that, and who aren't afraid to push you, to question you, and to help you create the best book you can, it only motivates you to push yourself even more.

### **What was the best piece of advice they gave you?**

‘Don’t overcomplicate things; It’s easier to write something simple and complicate it afterwards than it is to write something complicated and then simplify it.’ Took me ages to internalise that one. I repeat: medal.

And, ‘Perfect is the enemy of good’. I am a vicious perfectionist, which is one of those flaws that sounds like a strength when presented in the right way at a job interview, but is actually, genuinely insufferable. It stretches deadlines, it chokes your creativity, it doubles any pressure you’re under. I’ve had to learn to let go, to trust the process, and above all trust the people I’m working with to tell me if what I’ve handed them is secretly naff.

**Do you have a particular scene in the book that is a favourite? If so, which one and why?**

The Scrabble scene is many people’s favourite, but I wrote the whole thing in one sitting, like peeling an apple or an orange in one long unbroken strip. Writing is never that easy, so I remain deeply suspicious.

On the other hand, I hated every single second of writing the denouement section. I cannot think of anything more boring than explaining, step by step, the deductions that led to the mystery being solved. Unfortunately, it’s a staple of the genre, so I knew had to write it. The fact that I managed to, and that it’s coherent and occasionally funny, is what makes it my favourite.

**What advice would you give to anyone wanting to write for children?**

Enjoy it! Children can sense when you’re disingenuous, and they reject it. If you’re writing something that is primarily for children and not also, in some way, for yourself, they’ll pick up on it. They will suspect you of artifice, or trickery, or worst of all: condescension. But if they can sense that you are excited by what you’re making, if your enthusiasm and your sincerity are there on the page, they’ll respond to it tenfold.

**Q&A with editors Ben Horslen and Julie Strauss-Gabel**

**What excited you most about Beth’s writing when you first read her book?**

**Ben:** When I first read Beth’s work it was, as she memorably describes it, ‘five chapters and the shrug of an outline’, but the voice absolutely sang, which was the first thing that drew me to it – those five chapters made me laugh more than many a full manuscript.

**Julie:** One-part etymology plus one-part shenanigans was an irresistible combination and Beth delivered on that promise from the first page. Right away, **The Swifts** felt like the perfect contemporary successor to my most beloved books from childhood.

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

**Julie:** Something we can count on when untangling an issue with Beth is that there’s always going to be a fascinating conversation along the way. Problems that arise from Beth’s bottomless curiosity are first-class problems to have, but sometimes that ambition can overcomplicate matters, so part of our work together is keeping all of those wonderful ideas on the page without sacrificing clarity.

**Ben:** Beth’s oft stated preference for vibes over plot was another area of occasional challenge. She was very generous in her response to being regularly reminded that, if you’re writing a murder mystery, you can’t have one without the other.

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

**Ben:** It's a bit of a cliché, but for me it's the refusal to 'write down' just because your reader is young. Kids are *harsh* critics. If your story doesn't interest them, they won't hesitate to drop it. But if you challenge them, intrigue them, even occasionally frighten them, then you engage them.

**Julie:** I couldn't agree more! Kids are fiercely curious, passionate, and smart and deserve books that honour that truth.

**Crime and murder mysteries are very much in fashion with young readers at the moment, why do you think that is?**

**Julie:** A great mystery is never out of fashion. They're satisfying, self-propelled by the drive to find answers, as well as great vessels for character development. Real life is complicated, but a whodunnit gives readers in a microcosm where all the pieces eventually fit together.

**Ben:** In middle grade at least, the fact that such mysteries usually resolve with the baddies getting found out and punished can be a reassuring factor for readers who want the challenge of a crime but the neatness of a just conclusion. I love the fact that, in **The Swifts**, Beth manages to undercut that just a *tiny* bit.

**What advice would you give to debut writers wanting to write crime stories for young readers?**

**Ben:** First, know your genre. Read the adult classics – Agatha Christie, Conan Doyle – and the modern kidlit masters – Robin Stevens, Rebecca Stead – who play with the conventions and tropes so cleverly.

**Julie:** Being a savvy reader builds your craft and provides critical genre vocabulary from which you can also push boundaries. A tight plot, fun twists, and satisfying reveals are just as important as they are in books for adults, but I think young readers want equal investment in character and thematic development—justice matters.

**This is your 5th time on the Branford Boase Award shortlist Ben, and you won it in 2021 with Struan Murray. Can you describe your path to becoming an editor and what do you enjoy most about it?**

**Ben:** I came into children's books sideways, after working in adult illustrated reference and magazine publishing, but within weeks of starting my first job in kids, I knew I'd found my home. I think the thing I love most is that thrill you feel when a story leaps off the page and drags you down into itself with the promise of a unique adventure. Sometimes it's there in the first draft, sometimes you have to work with the author to bring it out, which is just as enjoyable.

**Julie:** Ben is fancy.

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Thank you to Beth Lincoln and to Ben Horslen and Julie Strauss-Gabel for answering our questions.

