

Branford Boase Award Q&A with Becki Jayne Crossley and Cathy Liney, author and editor of **Tart**

Set in a quaint English village, Becki Jayne Crossley's YA novel **Tart** explores the damaging effects of peer pressure and crowd mentality and how hiding your identity to fit in can be devastating. The small-town setting is very convincing, say the judges, and the book deals with important themes honestly and authentically. It has an incredibly strong opening and holds readers' attention to the end.

For Becki Jayne Crossley:

When did you first know you wanted to be a writer and how long did it take you to decide to write for a YA audience?

I've always wanted to be a writer. Truly, it's the first thing I ever remember wanting to do with my life, from as young as about six years old. All through school creative writing was my favourite topic, and I remember writing little 'books' in the school holidays too.

The decision to write YA happened really naturally. It's my favourite genre to read, and I suppose there's lots from my young adulthood that I still want to explore through fiction. From a distance, the drama of being a teenager is just fun to write about, and it's really cathartic to be able to pick apart certain feelings and experiences with the benefit of hindsight.

The judges commented on the extremely strong opening to your novel, *Tart*. Was it the first scene that came to you, or did you write it later?

It came quite late in the process! It was one of those decisions that, once I made it, I couldn't believe it hadn't been there the whole time. **Tart** took ten years, on and off, to get a first proper draft down, and there are some scenes that have made it through every single rewrite, restructure and edit. But that opening is relatively new, which is really funny to think about now.

What did you enjoy most about the editorial process and working with Cathy?

From the first conversation I had with Cathy about **Tart**, I knew we both had the same vision for the book. Her excitement and enthusiasm for the characters and their journeys was so evident from day one that I knew I could trust her with this thing that, for the last ten years, had been an entirely solo project. Nine times out of ten Cathy would point something out and I would all but shout '*of course!*'

Something Cathy highlighted as key right from the start was the queer joy and how she wanted to see even more of it, building on what was already there and making it clearer. It was so rewarding to see someone responding strongly to this element of the book, which was a big focus for me, and getting the push to amp that up even more was amazing as an author.

You thank your sensitivity readers in your Acknowledgements, can you tell us about any of their advice or shared comments, and would you suggest that other authors use sensitivity readers?

It was really important to me to get sensitivity readers for the aspects of my characters that don't align with my lived experience. Even though the story I was telling centred around queerness, there were elements of Neha and Dan's experiences that we needed to be sure were reading as authentic.

Krish Jeyakumar and Elly Valdez offered invaluable advice on what might have been missing from the narrative to make Neha and Dan's experiences feel more complete. For Neha, there

were moments where it would have been appropriate to mention her culture or experiences with racism that weren't there originally. And for Dan, there were things about his recovery that weren't quite reading true. Krish and Elly's comments really helped to give these elements a final steer to the correct place.

As an author trying to write diverse stories, you may find yourself writing characters who don't share your lived experience. I think it's important to make sure you're never talking over someone else, or telling a story that isn't yours to tell, and a sensitivity reader can help you to make sure that balance is met.

Your novel is described in the blurb as an uplifting friends-to-lovers queer romance. When you were the age your readers are, did you have books like this? If not, how important was it to you to write one, and if you did, which books influenced your writing most?

I read a lot as a teenager, but couldn't name you a single queer book I was able to access until I was into my 20s. Maybe part of that was not knowing where to look (or even what to look for), but I don't think you should have to go digging to find representation. If I'd had a book like this, or like some of the other incredible queer books on the shelves today, it wouldn't have taken me so long to come out – to myself as well as others.

It was so important to me to write something that could help towards filling the gap for young people when trying to find themselves in fiction. I wanted to write something that would have helped me at 15 years old feel more comfortable in my identity, and if *Tart* can do that for even one young person I'd be absolutely thrilled.

What's the best piece of advice you've received as an author?

Anyone who has talked to me for more than five minutes about writing will have heard me say this, but my absolute favourite piece of advice I ever received was to always write three drafts – the first to make it exist, the second to make it make sense, and the third to make it good.

Tart took me ten years to write because I was always trying to make it perfect on the first go, which is pretty much impossible. Once I learnt to let go of that, and embrace the fact that the first draft's *only* job is to just exist, it became a much quicker and far more enjoyable process!

For Cathy Liney

What was it about Becki's writing that first caught your eye?

There was so much about Becki's writing and the story of **Tart** that pulled me in immediately, but what stood out most was how brilliantly she handled the split POV and how invested I became in the characters from the very beginning. Becki managed to end so many chapters at exactly the right moment, leaving me desperate to stay with one character while being equally excited to return to another.

What do you look for in YA novels when commissioning or acquiring? What makes you excited?

The things that always draw me into a YA novel are authentic writing, strong pacing, and a story that feels fresh and distinctive. Above all for me though it always comes down to character. I want them to feel real, relatable and believable. I look for stories that readers can connect with and I want to find characters I'm rooting for from the first chapters and feel that I've lost a friend when the book is finished.

What were the main elements you worked on editorially with Becki to help her make the book even better?

Becki and I worked hard to refine various aspects of the story, while staying true to the heart of what she had already created. Much of the original plotting and many of her ideas remained exactly as they were; our focus was on strengthening what was already working.

One of the biggest areas we explored was weaving more queer joy into the novel without losing the important conversations around bullying and slut-shaming. One way we achieved that was by adding more moments between Libby and Neha. Some of my favourite scenes came out of that process, including the cookie-burning scene, which helped deepen their connection and gave readers even more reason to root for them. I remember telling Becki that I wanted to be shouting at the page, "Just kiss already!" and she absolutely delivered.

We also spent a lot of time developing Katie's character. We didn't want her to feel like a stereotypical or one-dimensional antagonist, but equally we didn't want readers to sympathise with her to the point that it undermined the story's emotional core. Finding that balance took careful thought and a bit of trial and error.

Another key focus was pacing. The concept was incredibly hooky, but we wanted to ensure readers reached the heart of the story as quickly as possible without sacrificing the necessary setup and character development.

The judges commented on the authenticity and honesty of the novel, how hard is it to get that right, and is there advice you have on this for would-be authors?

I don't think it's hard to get that right if the author is writing from the heart. As an editor I take their lead on that, trusting that the story they've written is one that they stand by and want to speak to authentically. For would-be authors I would say write what you're passionate about, write what feels true to you, but do your research! – this is so important and the book simply won't land without it. Lastly keep in mind at all times exactly who it is that you're writing for; I think if you have that as your north star guiding you from start to finish then you can't go wrong.

What was your path to becoming an editor and what do you find most enjoyable about it?

I first heard about editorial work while I was at university, when two publishers came to speak to a room full of slightly lost English undergraduates. I was immediately fascinated by the idea of a career that involved working so closely with books and the people who create them, and, as I imagined at the time, lots of reading. (Although it turns out editors don't actually get to spend all day reading!)

During the pandemic, I decided to complete an MA in Publishing at Kingston University. The course gave me tonnes of hands-on experience across many areas of the industry and my first real insight into what editorial work actually involves. Including my first attempt at making a publishing schedule ... safe to say I wouldn't follow that one now!

After finishing my MA, I was fortunate enough to secure an Editorial Assistant role working across both picture books and fiction at Scholastic. It was an incredible learning experience and gave me a broad understanding of the publishing process, from how to bring a 36-page picture book to life, to what a structural edit on a 400-page YA novel looks like. Later, I was lucky enough to find a home at Bloomsbury, where I was able to jump into their fantastic fiction list and begin acquiring and working with authors of my own.

There are so many aspects of the job that I love, but my favourite part is sitting down with authors to discuss edits, bounce ideas around and talk about books in their earliest stages. Nothing beats those meetings for me.

What is your best piece of advice for debut authors?

Have a blast, enjoy the ride of creating and seeing your first book be published and trust that your editor has your back!

Thank you to Becki and Cathy for answering our questions.

[Tart by Becki Jayne Crossley is published by Bloomsbury YA, 9781526684455, £8.99 pbk](#)