

## 'Addressing the Zeitgeist' – What Authors and Illustrators Need to Succeed in Children's Publishing

### Transcript

Hello, my name is David Rogers, and I'd like to welcome you to this podcast - recorded on what is a very mild 18th of October 2021 - in which we discuss what authors and illustrators need to succeed in contemporary children's publishing.

To begin with, I'd like to introduce you to James Catchpole of the Catchpole Literary Agency - an Agency that works exclusively with children's and YA authors and illustrators.

I sat down with James to ask him a few questions regarding how to get ahead in children's publishing.

*--- Start of Interview ---*

### **DAVE**

What advice would you give new authors interested in getting into children's writing and illustrating?

### **JAMES**

Know who you're writing for. Know what age group you're writing for, know what format you're writing in - picture book, middle grade, YA. Start off with a knowledge of the industry and what books are being published before you approach anyone.

### **DAVE**

And is there anything in particular that you look for when assessing submitted work, particularly from first time authors and illustrators?

### **JAMES**

Yes, a voice. With authors, a voice. That's the bit that can't really be taught. You can help authors with story structure. You can help them work through their ideas until they find a good one, because very few people submit the perfect idea to start with. But you can't really help them develop a voice - they either have it or they don't - and by voice, I mean, a sort of spark of charisma in their writing that makes you want to read more. That's either there or it's not, really. People don't generally decide to be a children's author, it's just that their writing comes out that way.

### **DAVE**

Do you think societal issues are important to address in contemporary children's writing when it comes to reaching a wider audience? So, in other words, do you think current issues are as important as a riveting story in contemporary children's fiction?

## JAMES

You can get unbalanced. So, there are lots of books out at the moment, especially published in America, that specifically try to address societal issues, and without a good story. And that can just get exceptionally boring. On the other hand, it is tremendously important that the industry is starting to recognise it needs to make books by people from marginalised identities and for children from marginalised identities. It's just that those books need to have stories as well.

--- End of Interview ---

In our interview, James covered four main topics: finding your voice, knowing the industry, the importance of a good story, and how vital diversity and inclusion are within contemporary children's publishing.

Finding a voice as a writer is always a difficult process, and this is no different when writing for children. Editor Jane Griffiths spoke in the Guardian in 2015 of the folly of authors writing what they think children want to read, rather than focusing on the story that they want to tell. In the same article, Annalie Grainger, Commissioning Editor of *Trouble* by Non Pratt, speaks of the importance of industry knowledge, mentioning that not reading enough of the type of books you want to write to better understand your audience as well as the competition can cause a multitude of issues for a new author hoping to be published.

This same concept is also applicable to children's illustrating. In an article written for the Penguin publishing website, artist Nadia Shireen claims that an illustrating portfolio should not only contain work you feel proud of, but should also, in her words, 'include stuff that reflects what you genuinely enjoy drawing' (2021). As with writing, however, it is also very important to know the industry, as well as your own style. For instance, Pam Smy wrote in the Bookseller in May 2020 that 'the crafting of imagery, cutting, sticking, stencilling, brushing and printing' was 'currently very in', and a great example of this trait can be found in *One Fox* by Kate Read, which incidentally was shortlisted for the Klaus Flugge prize for illustration that same year.

Regarding James' point of the importance of story in children's writing, Natasha Carthew, author of *Winter Damage*, wrote in the Guardian of how she used plot, momentum, and pace to carry her stories forward, without 'forgetting the bigger picture, to keep a sense of motion, tension and engagement' (Baggott, 2015). In our interview, James also mentioned how vital this was when writing of complex societal issues such as diversity and representation, which are vastly important elements in modern children's publishing. Julia Eccleshare wrote in the Bookseller last year that improving these aspects in publishing is a challenge, and that 'the fact that there is so little publishing which includes children from BAME backgrounds, children with disabilities, or even children anywhere in the UK except the south east has remained a disappointment' (2020).

There were however signs of improvement at the time that she was writing, as evidenced by the range of books and authors that made the Branford Boase Awards 2020 shortlist. This is a trend that happily continues this year, with the 2021 shortlist including books such as *When Life Gives You Mangoes* by Kereen Getten – a book set on a Caribbean island and containing authentic West Indian characters - and *A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll, which is about a young girl with autism. Children's and YA books concerning emotional well-being are being increasingly welcomed by publishers. Eland's *When Sadness Comes to Call* is another

excellent example of this shift, and it is a book that has won both the Klaus Flugge prize and the V&A Award for its illustrations.

In summary, there are a wide range of criteria that writers and illustrators can adhere to in order to succeed within children's publishing. As mentioned by James, it is vital to know the industry you are writing and illustrating for, but it is also as important to take the time to find your own voice as an artist. It is also critical to not forget the significance of a good story. Diversity and inclusion are important within a modern narrative, and the experience of the reader, as has always been the case, remains paramount.

### Web Copy

Join me, David Rogers, and my guest, literary agent James Catchpole (<http://www.thecatchpoleagency.co.uk>) as we discuss what illustrators and authors need to succeed in contemporary children's publishing.

During our talk, we consider four key principles of finding success: the importance of having an individual voice, how vital it is to know the audience and industry you are writing or illustrating for, the significance of a good story, and an appropriate consideration of societal issues, such as diversity and representation.

Examples of successful children's and YA books are also provided, and further insights are referenced from a range of industry professionals.

### Sources

The James Catchpole Literary Agency: <http://www.thecatchpoleagency.co.uk/>

Branford Boase Award 2020 Shortlist: <https://branfordboaseaward.org.uk/shortlist-2020>

Branford Boase Award 2021 Shortlist: <https://branfordboaseaward.org.uk/shortlist-2021/>

Klauss Flugge Prize 2020 Shortlist: <https://www.klausfluggeprize.co.uk/shortlist-2020/>

V&A Awards Blog: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/va-illustration-awards-in-discussion-with-eva-eland-book-cover-design-award-2020>

### Books (in order of appearance)

*Trouble* by Non Pratt:

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Trouble/Non-Pratt/9781442497733>

*One Fox* by Katie Read:

<https://www.panmacmillan.com/authors/kate-read/one-fox/9781529010893>

*Winter Damage* by Natasha Carthew:

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/search/?q=winter%20damage>

*When Life Gives You Mangoes* by Kereen Getten:  
<https://pushkinpress.com/books/when-life-gives-you-mangoes>

*A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll:  
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/669051/a-kind-of-spark-by-elle-mcnicoll>

*When Sadness Comes to Call* by Eva Eland:  
<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1115890/when-sadness-comes-to-call/9781783447954.html>

## References

Baggott, S. (2014). 'The best advice my editor gave me' by the Branford Boase shortlisted authors. [online]. *The Guardian*. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/jul/10/branford-boase-awards-advice-from-editors>> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

Eccleshare, J. (2020). Publishing for the future: how children's books have changed in 20 years. [online]. *The Bookseller*. Available at: <<https://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/publishing-future-how-children-s-books-have-changed-20-years-1201586>> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

Grainger, A. & Griffiths, J. (2015). Top writing tips for new children's authors from top editors. [online]. *The Guardian*. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/jul/09/the-best-writing-advice-for-new-childrens-authors-from-top-editors>> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

Penguin Publishing. (2021). Getting Published: How to become a book illustrator. [online]. *Penguin Publishing*. Available at: <<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/company/getting-published/How-to-become-a-book-illustrator.html>> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

Smy, P. (2020). Children's illustrations: what publishers want now. [online]. *The Bookseller*. Available at: <<https://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/childrens-picture-book-illustrations-what-publishers-want-now-1204137>> [Accessed 21 October 2021].