

Mentorship

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I am currently attempting to write a junior novel for 10-12 year olds of approximately 30,000 words. It has a working title only - *Mem*. I am approximately half way through the first draft of *Mem*. Although I have written many shorter stories I have difficulty in sustaining the narrative in a longer work. Basically, I lose confidence in the work the further I go and then lose impetus to continue. I end up re-drafting and re-drafting earlier chapters, getting nowhere fast. My writing group is helpful but with nine members feedback is often conflicting and thus confusing. I need help.

Correspondence, 17 August 2000

Thus began one of the most amazing journeys in my writing life when I had the great fortune to be selected for a Mentorship by the NSW Writers' Centre.

I made my first tentative foray into Writing for Children in late October 1996 when I did a weekend workshop with Di Bates. In two days I was inspired. I was going to be a children's writer. After deciding that I knew very little about children's books, despite reading to all three of my children in the womb, I enrolled in a Masters Degree in Children's Literature at Macquarie University, at the same time continuing to take short courses at the Writers' Centre with children's authors such as Duncan Ball and Libby Hathorn.

Di Bates warned me to give myself 'fifty rejections' before I would sample success. Another mentor, Pearlie McNeil, said to give myself 'five years' and when I passed this comment on to John Hughes, my tutor in creative writing at Macquarie his reply was, 'No, ten.'

Now, patience is something I prided myself on but my patience was sorely tested. Month after month I'd wait for a publisher to respond to my submission only to find it was yet another rejection letter. Four years into my creative writing journey I had some book reviews published and a few articles, but no fiction. By now I'd clocked up something like 123 rejection letters and that five year deadline was looming. It was then that I decided to apply for a mentorship at the Writers' Centre and I never looked back.

I can remember receiving the letter and being the Queen of Rejections I turned to my daughter and said, 'I know what this's going to say. Dear Author, Thank you for applying for a mentorship. I'm sorry but you have not been successful.' My vision blurred as I read the words, 'You have been selected ...' and I danced around the kitchen.

With great trepidation I picked up the phone to speak to a "proper author" and keeled over when Stephen Measday actually answered. At that stage I still had the romantic misconception that authors slaved with their muse, foregoing food, drink and social contact in pursuit of The Novel. Stephen agreed to mentor me and my intimate relationship with self-adhesive notes began. Stephen read my draft of the novel and hedge-hogged it with

sticky yellow notes. We then met to discuss where my novel was going, or not going to be more precise, and to set writing challenges for me to meet.

This process of writing and receiving feedback continued for many months. Through all that time Stephen remained enthusiastic and encouraging. A Stephen Measday email was one to be savored, always bringing comfort and support. He was a salve for the soul. Those crippling doubts subsided as my novel took shape however, the same could not be said for Stephen's love of sticky notes. Go, the *Post-It* note!

Even when our allotted time was reached Stephen continued to mentor me, encouraging me to submit the re-named novel, *Team Dream*, to publishers. It was about this time that HarperCollins Publishers Australia accepted my first 'So' book, *So Gross!*, for publication. Although HarperCollins were initially keen to publish *Team Dream*, it failed to get off the ground and as the 'So' books soared in popularity *Team Dream* was put on the back burner.

Years passed, then in 2004 my youngest daughter, Tulli, convinced me to get *Team Dream* published. Fortunately for me Otford Press agreed to publish it under their Banana Books imprint. It will be released one week after that J.K. woman's book hits the shelves this month. Roll on J.A!

For anyone who is struggling with their writing a mentorship can be just the thing to help them on their way. I am forever grateful for Stephen's wisdom and kindness and the NSW Writers' Centre for bringing us together.

Jeni (J.A.) Mawter