

I can hardly believe sixteen years have passed since I was Emerging Writer-in-Residence at FAWWA.

In 2003, I used to joke about the word 'emerging'. By then I'd been emerging for two years. I'd had a couple of poems published in literary magazines. I'd had a mentorship for Young Adult writing via the then State Literature Centre. I'd spent a heady week at Varuna – The Writers' House at a masterclass for YA/Children's Writing. I'd rewritten, revised, re-everythinged my stunningly brilliant Young Adult novel approximately 123 times. I'd been called in for a meeting at Fremantle Press where a publisher told me I "definitely had talent" and that maybe Revision #124 would be the one. I was wondering how much longer this 'emerging' thing could possibly take.

Little did I know.

Three years later, nothing had changed. Except that I had a much fatter file of rejection letters. I was wondering whether to call it quits. Not to stop writing but to give up on the idea of a book. To return to just being a scribbler of fragments that occasionally turned into poems but mostly slept quietly in notebooks. To stop taking time and energy from my family and my 'real' job in the pursuit of something that might never happen.

Little did I know.

During those 'nothing' years, when it felt like all I was doing was gathering rejections, I didn't realise I was learning and growing and finding my voice as a writer. One day I pulled out my stunningly brilliant Young Adult novel and realised it was stunningly awful. I pulled out the middle grade novel I'd written during my FAWWA residency and realised it was even worse. The nuts and bolts were there, the pieces were in place, but my voice was nowhere. *I* was nowhere.

I looked at the novel I was currently working on and realised it was different. I had no idea where it was going, plot-wise, but it had a life and energy my other work lacked. It felt connected to me a truer way.

Six months later, that work connected with an editor. She said it had life and energy and a distinctive voice. Later, when we got past the glorious "She really, really likes it!" acquisitions stage and into the "Here are all the things you need to fix!" editorial stage, I asked her why she'd picked it up when it needed so much work. She laughed. "You do have a lot to learn about structure, but that's just plot. We can fix plot. We can't fix voice."

My debut novel, *Annabel, Again*, was published by Walker Books Australia in 2007 and I have clung to these words ever since, across seventeen books – humorous picture books and realist chapter books and speculative fiction middle-grade and many things in between. Voice, voice, voice. They can fix plot. *I* can fix plot. I've learned how to do that, too. Or to get better at it, at least. But if I'm not writing from myself, out of my own particular strangeness, I know I have nothing. I spent a long time connecting nuts to bolts, leaving myself behind, and I'll never do that again.

I've been very fortunate in the years since. I've found editors and readers who are willing to follow me into my odd spaces. I've built up a profile and a body of work and eventually, with the help of awards and grants, managed to transition into full-time writing. But I am absolutely incapable of writing effectively about something I don't care about, and I cannot write from an 'idea'. My work only has energy when it begins with some small thing that sinks its hooks into me, some strange shift in the light that perhaps only I can see. The most important thing I've learned is to tune in to my own particular frequency, to write out of that and let the publishing chips fall where they may. And to keep scribbling fragments and filling notebooks, always.

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