

Conference presentation – Brenda Gurr

My husband thinks my brain is a curiosity.

There are various reasons for this, but the main one is that I can remember whole sentences from favourite books I read as a child. They appear and rattle about in my mind at the strangest moments. Many of these derive from Enid Blyton books and so naturally involve statements about lashings of butter, queer goings-on, ginger beer, potted meat and plenty of jolly ripping chaps.

I prefer to think of my brain as a literary one—one that loves the sound and feel of words and the fascination of discovering how they can be put together to create a story. It was my love of words that led me to study English at university and work as a speech and drama teacher and very part-time actor, via other jobs where you would only find an Arts graduate—a wombat handler and a storytelling fairy perhaps my most colourful occupations. As I am a quieter sort of person, many of my friends were surprised that I was never too worried about performing for an audience. But I had a secret. As long as I had a script of carefully edited words, I was just fine. I'm not the sort of person who speaks well off the top of their head—as you can see. Nothing ever comes out the way I plan to say it. I would love to have a giant red pen to edit my words before they tumble out of my mouth. I often feel that I'm much better on paper than in person.

Perhaps then it was some kind of divine editorial intervention one Saturday morning many years ago that directed my eyes to a newspaper job advertisement for an educational publisher. They were looking for primary-trained teachers to join their publishing team. As I had just completed a short course in children's writing and was becoming one of those typically jaded teachers, it seemed perfect. So, with 'Storytelling fairy' written in very small letters on my résumé, I stuttered my way through an interview and was quite surprised when I landed the job. I found out later that my only competition was an enterprising woman who had written a mathematics manuscript and used the interview as a way to pitch her work. Not a bad idea!

The publisher I began working for specialised in blackline masters—photocopiable resources for primary school teachers. For many months, I worked solely as a typesetter. The idea was to immerse me in the type of material I would later be expected to write. It certainly gave me a solid understanding of the practical type of writing the publisher produced. When I was eventually allowed to put pen to paper, I had to imagine how teachers might use every page in their classrooms. For me, with minimal teaching experience, this was a challenge. And also made me rather paranoid. Could my dramatic role-plays be presented in a small classroom? Were teachers cursing my explosive science experiments in the staff room? And what of the students themselves? I know my elder son thinks that worksheets are produced by evil writers gleefully intent on inflicting pain upon him and his fellow students. I hoped that the students I wrote for were enjoying most, if not all, of the work I produced.

With more experience, I grew less paranoid and more skilled at producing student activities, fiction and nonfiction texts and teachers' notes. I was required to write in most primary subject areas, from social studies to mathematics. I now could claim the titles of 'Writer' and 'Educational Editor'. The writer part I was fine with. The editor

part I was not. I knew what editors were and what they did. They sat behind large oak desks, shouted at their staff and knew every nuance of English grammar. I had a melamine office cubby, meek character and couldn't even work out the difference between a clause and a phrase. Clearly, I was nowhere near being an editor. I felt like a fake. I constantly had to scramble for the Macquarie Dictionary or check with the Managing Editor over many wordy issues.

Time went by and an interstate move saw me working part-time hours for the same company and dabbling in writing for other educational publishers. I wrote chapter books and literature units for primary students, working with editors via email. I usually got these gigs by emailing publishers and begging for author guidelines. My experience as an in-house writer—I was still too scared to call myself an editor—seemed to have placed me in a niche market, for which I was grateful. I also wrote a children's novel manuscript, which got waylaid by the birth of my two sons.

When my younger son reached kindergarten age, I decided to look into further study. I was really keen to become formally qualified in editing, to brush up my skills and start my own freelance business. I was interested to discover that you could study editing at university level and thought this was an exciting possibility. Due to the age of my children, I chose the only completely online editing course available at the time, through the University of Southern Queensland. The course coordinator and marker of all my assignments was Pam Hewitt, whom I have only just met in person. I do hope she doesn't mind my non-paper self.

I found the course enlightening and far more practical than I had imagined. Real-life scenarios were a part of each exercise and assignment and I was grateful for the opportunity to practise skills required for the different levels of editing. I was thrilled to have received the required grade for the essay that I submitted for the 2014 IPed Prize and even more thrilled to have won. The prize is awarded annually for an essay written as part of a postgraduate degree in editing, publishing or another discipline that allows a focus on editing. My essay was in the style of a blog post, as there was an option to submit entries that were written in a non-traditional style. I was very pleased about this for two reasons. First, as I had not studied at university for so many years, I felt very anxious about writing in a formal academic style. And secondly, I think that my past experiences working in the creative arts—teaching drama, acting, writing fiction and even being that storytelling fairy—made me gravitate towards a style of essay where I could write in a narrative voice. I certainly remember enjoying the process of writing the essay, which I couldn't say for most of the assignments I had submitted for my previous Arts and Education degrees. And the writer in me was definitely pleased with the lovely IPed Prize judges who commented that my essay was entertaining and engaging and, best of all, that my prose was 'rather breezy'. I couldn't ask for better compliments.

In the essay, there was also scope to apply my knowledge of and experience in educational writing, talking about the Australian school curriculum and how grammar is being taught in innovative and practical new ways as the basis for a discussion about prescriptive and descriptive approaches to editing. I included examples from my current freelance job of writing teaching guides for *The School Magazine*, a literary publication for Australian primary school children that will celebrate its 100th

anniversary next year. I actually found out about this opportunity through one of the many helpful student forums that ran during my USQ course.

Completing the course and winning the IPEd Prize has provided so many other advantages for me beyond learning editing skills. It has strengthened my writing, improving my clarity and succinctness, and allowed me to consider my own work with a more critical eye. It has also given me the confidence to look for and take on writing and editing work that I never would have considered before. After beginning work for *The School Magazine*, I ventured into writing for the secondary school market, approaching an educational publisher in New Zealand. My resources *Australia and World War I* and *New Zealand and World War I* were released in March. The publisher, seeing my editing qualification, has also started to give me freelance editing work. I am looking forward to seeing my name on a book with 'Editor' written after it. It sounds very grown-up to me and perhaps even deserving of a large oak desk.

I've also been investigating other writing and editing opportunities to expand my portfolio and increase my contacts. I've worked as a judge for an annual writing competition for children's writers. I've approached a historical magazine for children and now contribute articles for various issues, with a possibility of writing teachers' notes in the future. I entered a picture book writing competition (even though I don't normally think of myself as a picture book writer) and was delighted to be awarded second place and meet a children's book editor at the prize-giving ceremony. I've taken on my first editing job through my freelance register listing on the Editors Victoria website for a client who had written a children's chapter book manuscript. I'm also making inroads into the massive American educational publishing market by submitting queries and proposals, and have almost convinced some of them to work with this Australian writer and editor. The challenge is to make sure that my writing voice doesn't sound too Australian and that I can edit according to American grammatical and spelling rules and make any activities I write fit the US educational initiative of the Common Core State Standards.

Overall, I'm looking forward to continuing in educational and children's publishing and investigating new types of writing to build up my freelance business, while working around school hours, children's activities and my husband's ever-changing work roster.

He's an airline pilot, by the way, and has an amazing ability to speak off the cuff and sound commanding. I've heard his unscripted announcements to his passengers that flow naturally and sound beautifully edited. I'm more than a little envious. But I also feel a bit sorry for him. He can't for the life of him remember anything that Biggles said to Fortymore in the series he read as a child.

For myself, I think I'm stuck with my curious, literary brain, continuing on my journey of creating and working with words. Along with loads of ginger beer and lashings of butter.