



Buzz Words

The Latest Buzz on Books for Children

A fortnightly online newsletter © Dianne Bates

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Welcome to Buzz Words! If you wish to publicise any event or newly published children's book, or you wish to share information or to be considered for an interview, please contact me at dibates@enterprisingwords.com

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<EXTRACT> **AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR INTERVIEW**

SANDY FUSSELL, NEW STAR IN AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

It is often said that new children's writers have an almost impossible task in getting their manuscripts read and accepted for publication. However, in 2008 Sandy Fussell will have three trade children's books published: White Crane, Owl Ninja and Polar Boy (Walker Books Australia). Here she talks with Di Bates about her belief in herself and how she succeeded in achieving her dreams.

When did you decide to become a children's author? And what was the impetus?

Five years ago #1 son, suddenly stopped reading because 'all books are boring'. I suggested we write one that wasn't. And we did. It's a terrific story but the problem was he had all the creative control. When we had finished, I knew I desperately wanted to write a children's story all by

myself. (Note: great mother-son collaboration *Seven*, still unpublished, just waiting to be discovered...).

Can you tell about your first book, *White Crane* - what inspired it and what is the series' concept?

In the beginning I had one sentence. 'My name is Niya Moto and I'm the only one-legged samurai kid in Japan'. I loved it. I loved the way it asked lots of questions. What do samurai kids learn? How hard would it be with one leg? Who would teach a kid like that?

Then the answers started to form. A crazy old master would be the perfect teacher. And he probably had a motley rag-tag bunch of kids, just like Niya. And was there ever anything more crazy-wise than Zen?(what IS the sound of one hand clapping?)

Samurai Kids is the story of six children with individual challenges to overcome. Through friendship and a dangerous journey across the mountains they merge together as a team. In *White Crane* (Book 1) they learn the skills and find the courage they need to face the fearsome Dragon ryu kids at the Annual Samurai Training Games.

The initial manuscript was submitted as a stand-alone and Walker Books Australia saw the potential for a series.

Can you tell about how you work history and fiction into your books?

I write at the edge of history because there is enormous scope for imagination there, without tainting the authenticity. I like ancient cultures especially, because the line between religion and fantasy is very blurred, magic is almost historical fact. For example in my current project, the young Aztec boy has a spirit protector. While that seems like fantasy, to the people of the time it was a religious reality, a *nahual*.

History is full of pivots, places in time where the world changes. And right there, on the spot, were ordinary kids. And that's what I like to write about.

Samurai Kids is set at the end of the golden age of samurai when their role as warriors was diminishing. *Polar Boy* is set in the 12th century

above the Arctic tree line at a time when the Viking peoples were coming down from Greenland and the two paths were about to cross.

[How difficult was it to find a publisher for your first books \(both trade and educational\)?](#)

On one hand I was very lucky. My first education fiction acceptance was three years into my writing career and in the following year I had three trade acceptances. But on the other hand, I was extremely focused. I worked hard polishing my craft. I wrote every day. I read three children's books a week. I went to weekly workshops and subscribed to everything I could afford. I wrote education non-fiction specifically to reinvest the payments back into my fiction writing 'apprenticeship'.

I read in **Buzz Words** that UC Publishing were looking for manuscripts for a new series (Aussie, Aussie) and that directly led to *Ratbags* being published. I read a section from my WIP (*Samurai Kids*) at a get-together for people interested in writing, and Sue Whiting, Walker Books Commissioning Editor heard it and expressed interest. It's important to read industry journals and attend industry gatherings.

My secret is overkill. There's an old saying that achievement is 10% talent and 90% perspiration. I am 110% perspiration so any talent over that is just a bonus.

[What are your plans for launching and publicising the Samurai Kids' series?](#) I am fortunate that I have a background in event management and computer programming.

I am having four book launches. (Did I mention overkill?) Chronologically – the first is my 'author coming out party' where I will have the opportunity to thank the family, friends and colleagues who have supported me. The second is a public book launch in the Wollongong Library Theatre (Saturday 15th March, activities from 9.30am, official launch 10.45 am all welcome!) which will include craft activities such as origami, a martial arts demonstration (kids can get involved) and some displays on the theatre screen. In conjunction I am running a competition in all local schools, with the prizes generously donated by my publisher, Walker Books Australia. My third launch is school-based. A few years ago I was involved in a media campaign for new facilities including a library at #2 son's primary school. So it gives

me great pleasure to launch my book there and the school community is very excited about it. I am a minor celebrity in the playground! My fourth launch will be organized by Walker Books.

Concurrently I am launching a dedicated Samurai Kids website (www.samuraikids.com.au) with interactive fun content for kids, a monthly newsletter and a comprehensive teachers' resource area.

Can you describe your writing process for each book? How do you plan your book and go about writing it?

I am a terrible planner. I subscribe to a sort of chaos theory I call 'wild writing'. I start with the first paragraph. And it usually tells me who, when and where. All in a few sentences. If I love the first paragraph, I know I'll find the story. I throw fourteen chapter headings in a notebook and then I write. Of course, the end result is nothing to do with me. Once the characters take over, I'm just the typist.

With *Polar Boy*, my second novel due out later this year, I spent months refining the first paragraph (while I wrote on). I just knew I wanted a certain sound. I even dropped rocks and one of my saucepans off the balcony looking for it. And once I found it – there was a whole story in there.

I have this instance I call the 'validation moment' when it all just fits together so perfectly I know it was meant to be. With *Samurai Kids* I had a character with one leg, another with one arm and a blind boy. Then I discovered the story of the Samurai Creed: 'I have no arms.. I have no legs... I have no eye...' It was about my Kids!

How important is networking for a children's author? Do you attend many conferences and seminars? Networking is critical. It's true that publisher's doors are often closed but networking teaches you where and how to knock politely. It creates opportunities. I listened to participants read in the first paragraph competition at the NSW Writer's Centre Writing for Young Adults and Children's festival. After it was over I heard the publisher judge ask the winner (an unpublished author) if he would send her his manuscript. How's that for opportunity?

Also, you also meet a lot of wonderful people. I am convinced there is no vocation more generous in sharing their expertise and experience than children's authors.

Can you talk about the importance of workshopping? Why would you recommend it? I am a workshop addict. That doesn't mean I don't have my own opinion or that I need reinforcement. What I do need is the constant interaction, feedback from a different perspective, the focus it brings and the fact that a regular workshop creates a deadline to work to. No man (or woman) is an island, certainly not this writer!

You also make good friends with similar interests. These are the people who will dance around the room with you when that first acceptance comes in.

Can you suggest how a new writer can get past publishers' locked doors? Practice – be the best writer you possibly can
Networking – on-line and wherever possible, face to face
Be a professional – attend conferences, seminars, courses, subscribe to industry magazines. Follow up opportunities such as assessments by recognized industry professionals and competitions where an editor is a judge

I don't think the doors are locked. They are just closed and the suggestions above are where you learn to open them.

Do you have an overall plan for your writing career? What do you most aspire to? Oh how embarrassing to admit. I am a Virgo, a former project manager, I did industrial math at uni – can you see the pattern here? I am a real i-dotter and t-crosser when it comes to planning. I had a formal five year plan with milestones, objectives and goals for my 'publication project' (yes, I even had a purple folder with a big label on it!). I didn't expect to be published within that time but I expected to make measurable progress and then I would be motivated to do another five year plan.

But while I poke fun at myself I am a big believer in the benefits of planning. It demonstrates to yourself and others you are committed for the long haul. I even put away \$5 each week into my book launch fund

– I figured if it was a long wait then little amounts would add up - and when the time came I could afford more of a splash.

I aspire to write more, to try other mediums (I would love to write a verse novel and maybe just one picture book), to become more involved in children's literature working with kids and contribute something to the industry in general.

How do you fit your writing into your life as a wife, mother and IT career woman?

Fortunately I am a night owl and a poor sleeper. I am rarely in bed before 1 am. So until 10 pm I am wife, mother and small business person. Then I punch in as author. I am very strict about it – because the time is so precious. I write every night or work on a writing related project. I am also a founding reviewer for The Reading Stack (www.thereadingstack.com) and I write a book review column in a number of local newspapers.

Now that I have a trade book published I have decided I can legitimately allocate some day time to my 'author job' and I am going to spend half an hour walking along the beach thinking and then write for half an hour. I'll be interested to see what I write when my brain is more awake!

If you could have a wish list as an author, what would it be?

I am a big wisher. I would like to be involved in a successful campaign to establish a children's laureate in Australia. I had the pleasure of interviewing Michael Morpurgo when he came to Australia recently and he convinced me it is absolutely essential for the advancement of children's literature on a national scale.

Anything else you'd like to add?

I can't overstate the enormous benefit of having an experienced author mentor - someone with an in-depth industry knowledge, and comprehensive editing and writing skills, someone who is a great motivator – good at coaxing and shoving when necessary. Di Bates has been a huge source of inspiration to me.

Now I too am mentoring a new writer. Hopefully she'll be doing an interview one day soon!