



Franzeska G Ewart is a writer. She wishes to thank the staff of the Scottish Mining Museum, Newtongrange, for all their help. More details of the Fire Mask project can be found on her website – www.franzeskaewart.com (see 'My blog').

FIRE MASK



Discover one author's experience of a fantastic co-authorship project with schoolchildren

Writing is a lonely business – ask any writer. Maybe we writers like it that way? Our stories, after all, are ours. So, while I was excited when Barrington Stoke asked me to write a book in collaboration with children from six different Midlothian schools*, I was also a tad apprehensive! Barrington Stoke's books, carefully designed for reluctant readers, have straightforward vocabulary combined with exciting characters and plots. My challenge of co-writing the new book, therefore, had a lot to live up to.

Picking a theme

First off, I decided that the new book would be a thriller. To give a sense of 'ownership', I wanted each of my six schools to have a specific job. So, I thought about the stages in the writing process and allocated one to each school. As I worked with the children, I saw how the project magnified, and clarified, each stage of the writing process.

Research and creative context

Usually, when I research for a book, I build a 'creative context' – surrounding myself with material related to my theme. In

this instance, I decided that the thriller's theme would be masks, so I took my mask collection to the first school I visited, Lawfield Primary School. I showed the children Halloween masks, Victorian half masks, Noh and Commedia masks and a 'neutral' mask that was white and expressionless. While I found the neutral mask slightly unnerving, the Lawfield children were unimpressed. They definitely equated 'thriller' with masks featuring rotten teeth and flesh. However, despite their reservations about the white mask, I felt sure that it had potential.

After the visit, I needed time to think. I went to the nearby Scottish Mining Museum and was instantly smitten with its location. With its bleak exterior and potentially dangerous interior, I decided that it would be perfect for our story's setting. Driving home, my camera full of images of rusty cages and disused mineshafts, I felt the thrill writers get when they're onto something good!

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Fleshing out the characters

I draw characters before I write about them, so that's what children at Newtongrange and Mayfield Primary Schools did, and their drawings were great. But, the real inspiration came from discussions we had as we 'fleshed out' these characters together. The children's ideas were wonderful – I'd never have imagined that the main character's father died in Iraq. Nor would I have gone on to imagine that he hadn't actually died, but instead he'd had a horrific accident. But, it's what writers do all the time – have ideas, question them and then change them. Working on Barrington Stoke's writing project meant that I had co-authors to discuss different characters with. How would the main character feel? Would he be sad? Angry? Angrier than if his father had been killed? ▶

*THE SIX SCHOOLS INVOLVED WERE: LAWFIELD PRIMARY SCHOOL, NEWTONGRANGE PRIMARY SCHOOL, MAYFIELD PRIMARY SCHOOL, STOBHILL PRIMARY SCHOOL, MOORFOOT PRIMARY SCHOOL AND GOREBRIDGE PRIMARY SCHOOL. IMAGE © DYLAN GIBSON

Gathering descriptions

Writers often invent characters from 'bits and pieces' of different people. I had lots to choose from using the children's ideas from Newtongrange Primary School. Eventually, the name and appearance of the main character, Joshua, came from Alyssa. Joshua's dog, Dexter, was named by Nathan and drawn by Jack. Sammy told me that Joshua's Mum had no time for him. She told me that Josh had nightmares. With regards to the other characters, Iona's 'Sandy' was nice, but easily led, while Kaitlyn's 'Tiffany' was undeniably fashionable, beautiful and manipulative!

With the children's help, all the characters were real now. And then, the breakthrough came. I heard Joshua 'speak' to me in my mind: 'I'm Joshua,' he said. 'Josh to my friends, Squirt to my enemies.' That was it. The image I had of Josh based on ideas from the children, and that short speech, gave me the 'voice' I needed. And it defined the structure of our thriller book. It would be a diary. Josh's diary.

Setting the scene

At Stobhill Primary School, the children and I explored the sights and sounds of the Scottish Mining Museum through my photos and videos. We speculated about the emotions they might evoke. We discussed how setting is about time as well as place, and agreed that the main action of our story would be on a day that was, as Kieran put it: 'thundering, with grey clouds overhead'. We didn't just discuss setting, though. When I showed the children the image of a bombing victim, wearing a burns mask, the children's creative sparks flew once again. We kept coming back to the idea of someone's – or something's – eyes being the only 'living' thing in a mask. We all felt that potential power. The idea of living eyes in a deadly white face haunted me. The 'neutral' mask had returned!

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Padding out the plotline

Most writers find plotting hard. A common failing is over use of coincidence and the children from Stobhill Primary School fell into its trap. I asked: 'Would our readers swallow that?' – their laughter proved that they were developing audience awareness.

Another mistake some writers make is including 'unsuitable' material – in our case, the idea that Josh takes his father's gun to school to scare away the bullies. After discussion, my co-authors conceded that our publisher wouldn't allow this. Although I helped fine tune the plot, all the children's ideas, their powerful characters and fabulously spooky setting, meant that my plotting was easier than it's ever been.

Adding spooky elements

I took Cameron and Lewis' mask designs (from Lawfield Primary School) to Moorfoot Primary School. There, the children wrote beautiful, intense descriptive passages about them. They then voted for their favourite mask and Cameron's 'Fire Mask' triumphed as the winner. Later, budding writers at Gorebridge Primary School supplied me with 'Josh's nightmare', their vivid descriptions leaving little for me to add.

The editing process

The children's input was hugely helpful. I particularly sought advice on dialogue. 'Would Josh say that?' I kept asking. 'Would you say that?' The children were confident in providing feedback, asking me to change 'their' book when they thought appropriate – 'Mum' would drink vodka, not beer. Josh would be 'raging', not 'furious'. Occasionally, they criticised my punctuation, grammar and word order. Sometimes, however, in arguing my case for a seemingly 'ungrammatical' sentence, we all saw why, in context, it worked.

I also talked to the children about 'jacket design' and invited them to design one for what had now become the title of our book – *Fire Mask*. Rebecca Morgan from Mayfield Primary School's fabulous wax



Children from Midlothian schools were consulted on all aspects of *Fire Mask* – including its cover design



crayon drawing was chosen to inspire the illustrator, Dylan Gibson (see main image on page 27 and above).

Shared success

The 'point' of the *Fire Mask* project was to give children a deeper understanding of the writing process. I think it did. Their enthusiasm and sense of involvement were tangible. But, it did more than that. It deepened my understanding of the process. It made me grow as a writer. When *Fire Mask* comes out in March 2010, I'll have none of the usual 'butterflies'. The book's already passed muster with 200 children! And, despite my initial apprehension on co-authorship, *Fire Mask* is still 'my' book. I own it every bit as much as anything else I've written. But, that ownership is even more special – because this time it's shared. ■

ONLINE EXTRAS

Would you like to share these ideas with your colleagues? This article, along with a fantastic extract taken from *Fire Mask* to tickle your literary tastebuds, is available on our website.

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