

My Mentorship

By Kathy Helidoniotis

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Two years ago this was beyond my wildest dreams and here I am hanging up the phone after having just agreed to visit a library as an author. Me! An author? But how did it happen ...

Almost three years ago I saw an ad in *Newswrite*. There were five mentorships on offer. I had been writing “seriously” by this time for about a year, done a few courses and attended writing festivals. I was working on my first children’s manuscript and had churned out 20 000 words. I was pretty confident that the novel was almost finished.

I applied for the mentorship. I didn’t really know a lot about putting a manuscript together. Okay, so I knew nothing about putting a manuscript together. Thinking I had no real shot at this prize I sent in the first few thousand words of my masterpiece anyway and hoped for the best.

No one could have prepared me for the afternoon a few weeks later when I arrived home to find a message. Irina from the Writers’ Centre had called. Could I call back? I did, with trembling fingers. Could it be? No, I told myself. Maybe my postal details had gone AWOL. Maybe I hadn’t remembered to renew my membership. Something like that, surely.

I was wrong. When Irina told me that I had actually managed to secure a mentorship I was speechless, thrilled! It took days to sink in with me wandering around with a grin plastered across my face.

The search for a mentor began. I scanned the list, amazed at the names on the sheet of paper. That these incredible writers were willing to sit down with a learner was almost unbelievable. I stopped at a familiar name – Stephen Measday. I had spent a day at the Centre in one of his workshops a year earlier and walked away totally inspired by his passion for writing for children and his knowledge. I knew he was the mentor for me.

A few phone calls later and my manuscript was in the mail. It wasn’t long before I heard from Stephen. Our first meeting was arranged. I was so nervous. Apart from a few people I’d met briefly at writing courses and the judges of the mentorship, nobody had ever read my work before. What if he hated it?

On the day of the meeting the manuscript emerged from his bag. I had never seen so many post-it notes in the one place at the one time in my life. But I opened my notebook, picked up my pen, listened, learned and began all over again. That day, and over the next few months Stephen taught me how to write a novel. He encouraged and

advised me. He guided me and inspired me. He gave me a deadline. And by November, five months later, the first draft of *Totally Horse Mad* was finished.

The manuscript weighed in at a whopping 55 000 words! Stephen read it and took out his post-it notes and pen. It came back to me 20 000 words slimmer! My first editing lesson was complete. I re-wrote and revised and sent it off to Stephen one more time. He was happy with what we'd achieved, and so was I. I felt ready to take on the world of publishing.

Another lesson had to be learned. I'd written the novel and read *The Writer's Guide* from cover to cover. Sure I knew everything there was to know about sending a manuscript to a publisher I sent a synopsis, the first three chapters and my publishing resume to a well-known publishing house. It came back six days' later! I picked myself up and sent it to another. Again, it came back. I began to ask myself, why? How could this be? It wasn't until the novel had been returned four times that I learned that lesson. I hadn't done any research.

I'd written a horse adventure for readers aged 8 – 12 that was 35 000 words long and sent it to a publisher who dealt with young adult fiction, another who didn't publish works over 15 000 words and another who had stopped accepting unsolicited manuscripts. I was advised to try Banana Books, a young publishing house who were looking for manuscripts for readers under the age of 12. I called first, spoke to the children's editor and told her about the novel. She asked me to send it in full.

A week later she called me to let me know that Banana Books were interested. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. But I had to wait another three weeks for the best news I'd heard since having my kids. A year after the final word had been written *Totally Horse Mad* had found a publisher. Another year later and I had a copy in my hand.

The few months since *Totally Horse Mad* rolled off the press have been amazing. I was honoured to have my novel launched by Libby Gleeson, who had taught the first writing course I ever did. I have done book signings, interviews and been booked to do library talks. There's been a lot of hard promotional work behind the scenes as well as a sequel to write and there will be more hard work to come. But it's the dream of my life I'm beginning to realise and I thank the Writers' Centre for the gift I was given.