

**Edges of Hope: the joy of writing for, and with, children**  
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*This life was hired out to me  
To decorate the earth with glee.*

This rhyme sits on a slab of wood in my friend's house in Cape Town, South Africa. It captures so much of my goal as a children's author and creative writing facilitator. First, 'hired out' implies contract and transience. My life is short, ever-changing and on loan; how am I going to use it? Then 'decorate' (Latin *decoris* 'an ornament; grace, dignity, honour'); I want to give grace, dignity and honour to children, especially those who don't feel it. And how will I do that? 'With glee' (Old English *gleoman* 'entertainer'). Glee is available to everyone, regardless of wealth, culture, age or education. It carries and confers joy, delight and fun.

What I love most of all about that rhyme, however, is its source. My friend bought it from an artist who lives, day and night, on the edge of a road. I think all creative work takes place at the edges: the edge of the mind, the edge of the group, the edge of normal life (whatever that is). Writing and working in schools, my aim is to encourage others to look in different ways at the world: to step into different shoes and see through different eyes. Like all creativity, writing uses familiar materials to invent new realms. The artist uses paint; the composer plays with sound; the dancer experiments with body movement, and the writer puts strange little squiggles on a page that jump into readers' brains and make them feel scared or thrilled, comforted or uncomfortable – that can even make their eyes leak tears or their shoulders wobble with giggles. How fantastically fabulous is that?

### **Edge of the mind**

Sitting down to a blank page is the hardest part of writing. There's something about staring straight ahead, focusing on what's in front, that makes ideas dry up like mud in sunshine. But getting up, going for a walk, listening to the birds or cleaning the fridge can shrink the centre of the mind and let the edges sing. Like the crust on a slice of bread or the skin of a potato, those are the tastiest, most nutritious parts. Edges are where the daydreams, nightmares, jokes, crazy images and ridiculous connections lurk, ready to sprinkle their brilliance if we step back and let them dance on to the stage without paying too much attention to them.

My last book began that way, during a morning run. As I rounded a corner, a sentence dropped into my head, apparently from nowhere: *My*

*mother is a dragon*. That led to questions. What if she lived in the real world – not as a winged monster but a normal-looking woman who happened to breathe fire? How would she cope with such a trait? What anatomical extras would she need to produce flames from her mouth? How did she inherit her fire-breathing genes and when did dragons branch off the evolutionary tree? Most importantly, how would she be received in the modern world? From these musings sprang *My Secret Dragon* (<http://littleisland.ie/books/my-secret-dragon/>), the story of Aidan Mooney, son of a part-dragon. Because of his mother's fire-breathing – either a superpower or a disability, depending on how you look at it – Aidan must hide away from society. He can't go to school or have friends in case they discover her secret and put her in a zoo or a circus or prison, or worse. The story explores marginalisation - being on the edge - and all the reactions to difference (in her case outlandish), from fear to disgust, from awe to manipulation.

### **The edge of the classroom**

*My Secret Dragon* is a great entry point for classroom discussions and workshops on prejudice, othering and why diversity is to be celebrated not feared. Fiction is an 'edgy' but non-threatening way of inspiring empathy and identification. It helps to bridge gaps in understanding and attitude without provoking shame and guilt. In our workshops, pupils tell personal stories of racism they have encountered or witnessed in others. They explore how they feel when someone judges them unfairly, and also when they realise they've done the same. They write about and share experiences of feeling on the edge.

Perhaps even more rewarding than this overt treatment of marginalisation is what happens covertly in the classroom during creative writing workshops. Going in as a visiting author, I have the huge privilege of being 'on the edge'. I don't know the children and have, typically, an hour and a half to make each one of them feel valued, honoured, capable and dignified. I want them to leave believing that they too can 'decorate the earth', starting in the classroom, with their unique creativity. It doesn't take long to pick up a few basic class dynamics: who is confident and popular, and who feels left out or inadequate. It's that second group I'm interested in. Those in the first get plenty of affirmation from teachers and peers. But mainstream school life can do little to help, and a lot to harm, those on the edge.

There is no finger-pointing here. Any stream – whether in a valley or a school – must take a shape, a form. Having a central, deep, predictable channel where most of the water, or class, flows smoothly, is necessary for the system to function. But to have such a 'mainstream', there must also be edges where the water eddies uncomfortably round rocks; where awkwardly shaped sticks

snag against the bank and can sometimes be left behind. Creative writing values and validates those outliers, I believe, because creativity is where the edge becomes the goal. And no one can fail to reach the goal because everybody is equally creative. If you strip away the spelling, the grammar, the handwriting – even the writing at all – you can access each child's unique way of thinking and world view. Once that child has confidence in recognising and expressing his or her original approach, s/he can communicate it in the way that suits best: from writing to drawing to dancing to making cakes, kicking a ball, gardening, organising (or even disorganising) a bedroom, or any other of the million different channels for creative expression.

### **The edge of society**

It's not just classrooms where creative writing can bring the edge to the centre. I work with refugee adults and children whose experiences on the edge of their former society - because of war, economic hardship, climate change etc. - or their new one because of racism, cultural misunderstanding, homesickness etc., can be shared through writing or telling their stories. I also work with child patients in one of Ireland's main hospitals, who have been excluded from many 'normal' childhood experiences by sickness. We have produced two books of stories and illustrations to help them explore the edges of their daily reality in hospital. In *My Handbook of Heroes* they had fun with the fantastical, imagining themselves as superheroes, as well as celebrating real-life heroes among their families and friends. Their second book, *Imagine-a-Nation*, is a compilation of make-believe countries where the children would love to live. They invented flags, laws, national holidays, languages, currencies etc. in which their dreams for a better world could literally be mapped out.

### **The edge of hope**

Edges bring change; they sit on the border between different places or conditions. Change can of course be good or bad, for better or for worse. So in order to 'decorate the earth with glee', I think the driving force for writing and working to and from the edge must be hope. Not bland, blind optimism – creative writing is a brilliant yet safe way to explore the dark, painful corners of life – but a torch to light the path towards a braver, kinder, better way of being.