



Real magic

The birthing of a children's novel

Who would have thought that my second 'child' would fly around the world and be known by people on five continents by the time he was eleven?

When my one and only wonderful son was nine, I got an urge to write fiction. After writing a few short stories, I decided to embark on something for children.

Awakening my intention

I spent time reflecting on what the books I had read by age nine meant to me. I was in love with Aslan, the lion in Narnia, and gazed inwardly at him for hours in a dreamy, knowing glow. I delighted in Eloise pouring molasses down the mail chute in the New York Plaza hotel. Emulating my beloved Pippi Longstocking, I walked backwards with one foot in the gutter on my way home from school, and banged sorely into a lamppost more than once. Those unusual, independent girls held out hope for me that life

could be fun, exciting and lived on my terms. They kindled my spirit.

I thought about how satisfying it would be to create a character like them; a character who children would love to know, who they would want in their lives, who would inspire them into realms they might otherwise never encounter. I didn't know if I could do it, but I decided to try.

The mystery of conception

How would I find such a character? I had no idea. So I went on a long walk in the late summer, and at the furthest point lay down in the long grass beside the track and gazed at the sky. As I lay there Zak came to me. He seemed to arrive from above, and join me there. As I walked back, I felt him with me and began to get to know him.

As soon as I got home I went to my computer and started to type. The words poured out of me, and within twenty minutes I had written what is now Chapter Three, 'Getting Born'.

"I could just get my toes onto some sort of bony ridge, so I pushed as hard as I could on that and I felt my head move forward a little. I could tell this was going to be hard work. It was the hardest thing I had had to do so far. OK, learning to read hadn't been easy, but I had been able to take my time over it."

To understand this last line you need to know that Zak could see out of his mother's tummy when he was inside getting ready to be born. She was reading 'Teach Yourself Plumbing' and other books. Zak spent so long staring at these books that he learned to read. Only of course, he learned to read upside down!

"Well you would call it upside down. It seemed fine to me and it still does. Why not hold the book the other way up, start reading at the bottom of the page, and work your way up to the top?"

Gestation - nine years!

The book is written in Zak's voice, so writing was as much about listening to him, as about inventing the story myself. This partnership worked well for me. I love Zak's humour and perspective on life, and often laughed out loud as I wrote.

Together, we wrote the first draft over the next few months. That sounds easy. It wasn't! First I had to cut down on my work – which at that time was teaching the Alexander Technique – so as to free up a couple of hours a day for writing. This was tough when I already had a low income and sole financial responsibility for my son.

Then, once I got to those hours, I had to stay awake. This wasn't easy either! During the previous eight years of pretty exhausting single parenting, I had learned to fall asleep anywhere, any time I had a chance.

And then there was the challenge of making the transition out of my daily life into a space where I could tune in to Zak's voice. To help with this I recorded a tape that took me into meditation and then brought me into Zak's world. Sometimes it worked. Often it didn't and I simply fell asleep in front of my computer.

When in the flow, I delighted in the freedom that fiction writing gives. I could throw in any of my values and experiences. And I found it fantastic that I could make everything up! This sounds obvious, but it was quite intoxicating. I wove in my first partner's Greek father, Socrates, my first experience of seeing an aura, the best tree house I ever knew, my uncle's love of knitting when he was a boy, and the importance of listening, really listening, when scary and painful things are going on inside people.

I revelled in creating Sh'krump the Squirrel and Laloune the Owl - Zak's day-time and night-time companions on the island, the magical 'zing' that shines where nature is not disturbed, and Leah, who becomes Zak's best friend, and startles him into realising he is not the only one with special powers.

I felt enormously relieved when I found ways to lightly express things that are painful to me and close to my heart: how children's individuality and aliveness is so easily misunderstood in school; how important it is that wild places in nature are left wild to keep our world sane.

I loved writing the parts where Zak is in a philosophical mood:

"This is going to be the story of the strange and amazing summer I just

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spent on this island. I don't know if you ever spent a summer on an island, but believe me, some pretty weird things can happen. I'm actually sitting on the island right now, well, not now for you, but now for me. By the time you are reading this I will probably be back in London where I usually live. But then maybe you'll read this in a hundred years, and I won't even be alive! That's strange. That's time travel!"

Talking of time travel, it took me another eight years to achieve publication. I got stuck for two years at a time! How to create a second draft? No idea! How to get an agent or a publisher? Tried and tried without success.

Once I decided to self publish, I had other things to figure out. How would I find someone to co-create the cover with me? What about the text layout? I delighted in the discovery that books snap shut, or stay softly open, depending on the direction of the weave of the paper. Having been a weaver in my early twenties, this reawakened my love of craft. I realised what a gift it was to participate in every stage of this book, from inspiration to manifestation.

Birth and beyond

The arrival of boxes of Zak was an extraordinarily sweet moment which, like any birth, ushered in the next round of hard work! I began to learn the role of a publisher, and support Zak's steady growth - at his unique pace. A month of 'normal' publishing life seems to be equivalent to a year of his life!



The first year the book was reviewed. The second year I negotiated my way through the London Book Fair, got a distributor, my first foreign edition (Turkish!), and sold Zak into libraries. The third year I did some readings in cafés, in schools and at The Fairyland Fair. And now, in the fourth year, I feel daily joy knowing Zak is being read around the world.

He found a welcome in a global network of people practising Nonviolent Communication (NVC). They are seeking stories which show that conflicts can be resolved without violence, which convey the values of presence, respect and understanding – and which kids want to read! I came across NVC soon after I completed the first draft of Zak. I was deeply impressed by this learnable process which helped me survive direly difficult moments as a parent, and which gave me a new level of consciousness and choice in all my relationships. I immersed myself, became a trainer, and joined others getting NVC known in the UK and beyond.

So I am a busy 'parent', but I make sure I have quality time with my 'second child'. The best is when I read Zak to children. I marvel as I witness the character who first came to me on my sunny walk, entering their world. Real magic. ●

Zak by Bridget Belgrave, Life Resources, £4.99

Zak can be ordered from all bookshops in the UK. Available online from amazon.co.uk and www.life-resources-shop.com www.zak-the-book.com