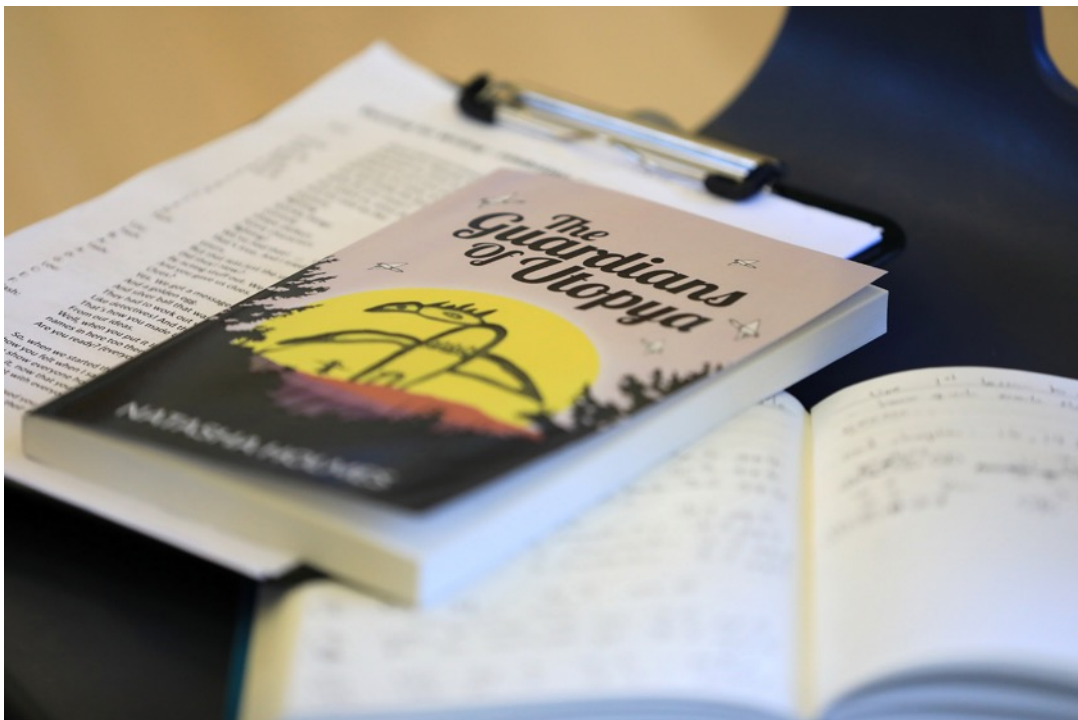


# Devising for writing



## Individual Artist Report Research & Development July 2017 – July 2018



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## Overview

Devising for Writing was conceived as a unique project to apply the inclusive process I have developed through 14 years of theatre making for children to the creation of a middle grade book.

A partnership was agreed with St John the Baptist Primary School, Penistone who applied to be involved in the project through a simple application process. Two classes, with a total of 63 children, worked with the writer and two other artists over the course of the school year on a series of workshops exploring; world building, plot, character and the illustration process. The writing process was overseen by a professional children's writer, Liz Flanagan.

The story was inspired by my research into the creation of East Germany and how the Stasi used a network of informants to both shield and protect the country from perceived enemies. I was interested in exploring this from a child's perspective, when is it right to tell on others and can authority always be trusted? What happens when an individual makes a stand in a society of tell tales?

The completed story was self published as a book titled, The Guardians of Utopya. Each of the 63 participants received their own copy of the book and presented a celebration assembly for the rest of the school to share what they had learnt.



## Key Achievements:

**Offer young people access to great and sometimes life-changing art that can be accessed on many levels providing a rich, exciting and engaging experience**

The proposed plan for the 'Devising for Writing' project provided a clear achievable aim: to write a mid-grade children's story using children's ideas to help create the narrative. The simple outline of the project belies the year of wonderment it has been for both author and children alike.

The project has entirely exceeded my expectations. Initially four artist visits were planned in paired teams for each session. These were to consist of either; writer/drama facilitator or writer/illustrator. However, it soon became apparent that for the children to have a true impact on the narrative they needed to be following the story as it was written. This meant that the four main artist sessions became key events in the process, but in between these visits was the opportunity for additional monthly visits, made by the author alone, to

read aloud the story as it was written and workshop new developments. It meant that the artist visits increased from 8 planned sessions to 16. The immediacy of the feedback from the participants enabled me to constantly respond to their ideas and engagement. This was no token involvement – they could see how their ideas worked their way through the plot line and their excitement in this was palpable.



## Using In-role to develop narrative

'In-role' is a drama technique used widely by drama practitioners, theatre companies, teachers, etc. to explore character, motivation, perspective and choice within a story. It's a great way to explore major themes within an existing text/story. For this project we needed to work the opposite way round. There was no story to begin with, but we wanted to use an 'actor in role' to help draw out ideas from the participants to help create the narrative. While some children were busy world building in set groups, a handful of volunteers were taken aside and tasked with spying on their peers to ensure everyone was working together to help create our land.

This situation was exploited by the actor in-role to see how easy or hard it was to get the volunteers to tell on others. And then we changed the parameters, to see if they were still prepared to tell on their peers when asked to do so in front of them. We paused the action at intervals to see how each of them felt both as volunteers or as the workers of the land. The outcome helped to create the first dilemma in the story which kicks off the action - where one child is accused of sabotage. It also enabled me, as writer, to observe how different children behaved/felt in this situation and gave me the foundations for the main characters in the book – all based on the participants' reactions.





## Using Clues to inspire ideas for the back story

The first clue was of a poster for this new land, Utopia. One of the first comments from one of the boys was, 'that it was like the bird was leading the children' in the image. Perhaps the birds were the leaders of this new land? This instigated the whole idea of the Leaders of this land, the Illuminati, being bird chimeras – able to transform at will between their human self and a specific type of bird. It beautifully paralleled the theme of 'spying' in East Germany when no one knew who was an informant of the Stasi and who wasn't. In our land, no one knew whether a bird was an ordinary bird or actually an Illuminati spy.



In order to develop the back story, I wanted to give the participants a choice; science fiction context or fantasy context. We developed two sets of clues to explore both options with each class.

The clues for the science fiction back story included; a sign saying, 'Do not feed the caged birds', an article on DNA experiments, syringe, test tube and petry dish. From these clues and another actor in-role intervention – this time with Louise as Dr. Simorgh a renowned DNA scientist – we asked the participants what each clue might mean. As narrative ideas were suggested, we got others to act them out.

The clues for the fantasy back story included; a golden egg, a picture of the Simorgh – a mythical bird, a cryptic help note in a bottle, a reflective silver ball and exotic feathers. Louise went in role using a bird mask as the Simorgh, explaining that a catastrophic event has just taken place – what happened? Ideas from the participants helped to create The Great Assembly and the reason why the Illuminati had become the leaders of the land.



Once both possible back stories had been fully explored with the groups, they were able to vote for which scenario they preferred. Two thirds voted for the fantasy back story – so that was the one developed into the narrative.

## Illustrations worthy of inclusion

Half way through the process, the participants worked with a professional illustrator to navigate them through the process of drawing a character. They were surprised by how much thought went into answering Samantha's character quiz questions before they even started to draw anything. Sam's quiz helped them to deepen their understanding of the character and then explore how that might look through expression, clothing, action and special features.

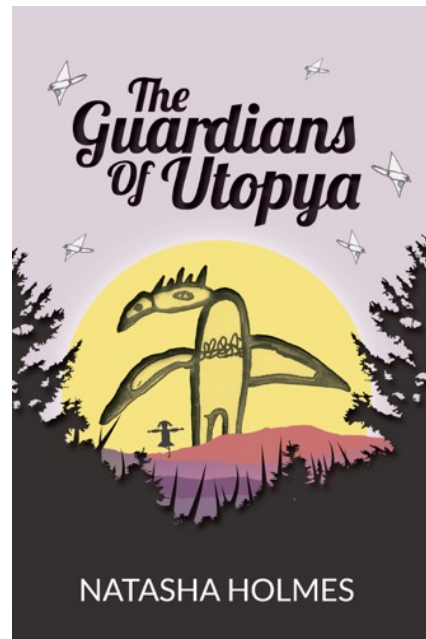
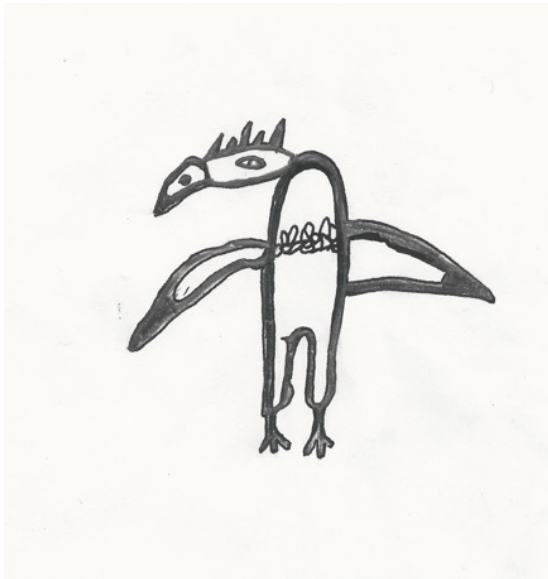


Initially I had thought to commission Sam to work up a couple of illustrations for inclusion in the book. However, it became clear after the session in the school that the children's artwork was strong enough in its own right to be used within the book. The planned commissioning funds were used instead to pay a professional graphic designer to create a book cover design that incorporated some of the children's best work.





The final book cover design incorporated an original image by Calvin. Calvin didn't think he could draw. He didn't think he could write either, because he had trouble with spelling. He was a child that hid his insecurities and lack of confidence behind an image of big bravado and aggression. I don't say that this project alone has helped Calvin to gain in confidence and self belief and consequently soften and respond more thoughtfully, but I do think it has played a significant part in his progress. Calvin's eyes shone when he saw the book cover. 'That's mine,' he said and everyone turned to look at him in admiration. 'Is that yours, Calvin?' someone asked. 'It's really good.' And it was. It was perfect and a very special moment.



## Celebration Assembly to share our achievement

The celebration assembly included all 63 participants and was conceived as a takeover style event. I opened the assembly by talking about the book I had written, only to be interrupted by the participants who wanted to prove that they had helped to write it too. They worked in groups to share different parts of the process; role-play re-enactment, world building, plot development, character descriptions, illustrating the story and marketing pitches. The result was whole school engagement and the question, "Can we buy a copy?" the school has been left with several copies for their library so that the book can be accessed by all.





## Mentored to success

All of these workshop sessions were not only richly serving the participants on their learning journeys but also providing me with plenty of the source material for the story. The challenge for me as writer was to honour the children's ideas while creating a story that was based on my historical research of East Germany and was still a page turner for a wider readership. This is where professional writing mentor, Liz Flanagan, came into her own. Liz began by giving me mini tutorials on writing for mid-grade and forensically analysed my strengths and weaknesses – always giving me constructive feedback on the developing manuscript that I could work on. She queried plot lines and motivations and when she could see the writing style beginning to flow she encouraged me with editorial notes and feedback every step of the way. Her encouragement persuaded me to send extracts of the manuscript to literary agents and the completed MS is currently being considered for representation.

*The Guardians of Utopya is an exciting middle-grade adventure which weaves together elements of magic, myth and history in a way that children will love. Natasha Holmes is a new talent to watch: deeply committed to her writing practice, she has listened to children's voices in her research and created a beautifully written story that is both resonant and accessible.* **Liz Flanagan, mentor and author of Eden Summer, and Dragon Daughter**

## Lessons Learnt

The main learning through the project took place in the following ways:

- 1) Project set up – I had plans for IVE (formerly Cape UK) & the Lawrence Batley Theatre (LBT) to help me find an engaged and committed school partner through a tendering process. Unfortunately, IVE were in the midst of a huge re-brand and the Kirklees Cultural Ed partnership had not yet got off the ground enough to help support our project. The LBT did disseminate the offer to interested schools but no applications were forth coming. Perhaps these schools already were well served through free arts initiatives. The participating school applied through seeing the call-out on our facebook page & came from a rural community that is often poorly served by the arts. It was interesting to see how much more proactive they were in applying – writing their application on a Sunday. This was a great example of where social media can have a positive impact in helping to find a partner when funded bridge organisations are tied up with other higher profile projects. It has also proved to me that running a tendering

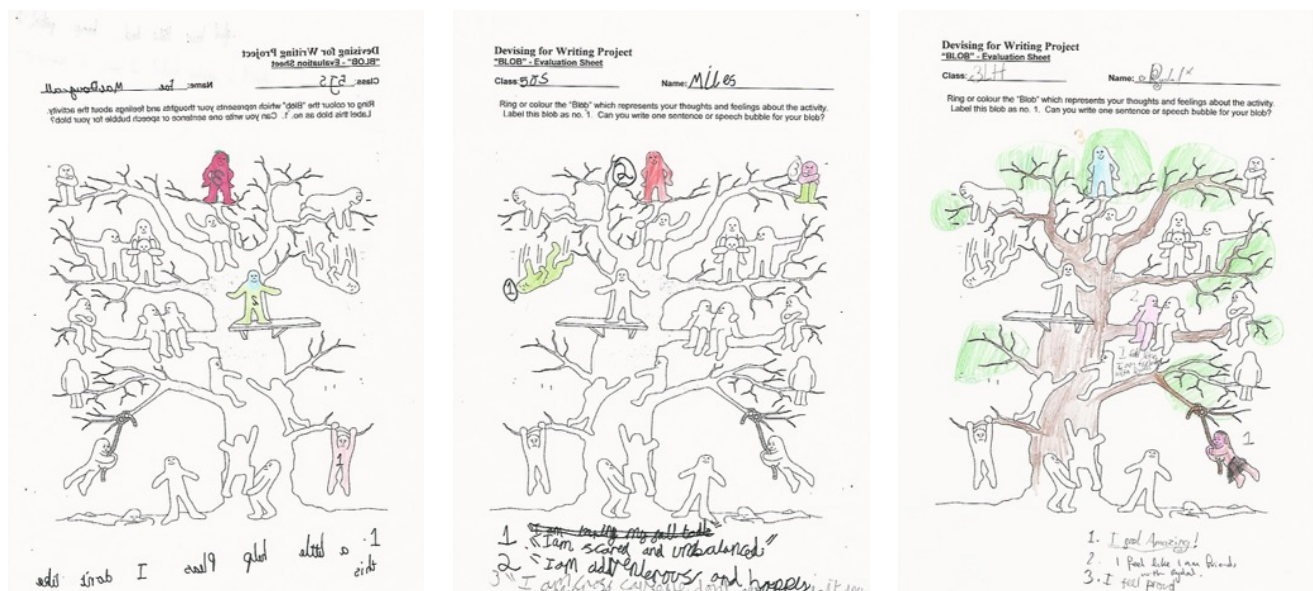
process ensured the school was committed to the principle of the project rather than just after a freebie. When the project needed to expand to allow more artist sessions the school were accommodating to all the requests made of them.

- 2) A published book for every participant – Originally the plan was to print two copies of the completed book for the participating school. It soon became apparent that the children's buy in to the project was huge. Their captivation with the writing process and being part of its creation was intoxicating. It didn't take long before they were asking, 'Can we get a copy of the book when it's finished?' When you are looking at thirty eager faces with eyes pleading, it's hard to say, 'No.' So, in addition to the planned library copies for each school, the 63 participants each received their own personal copy of the book, *The Guardians of Utopya*.

I hadn't realised how much of a 'thing' having their own physical book would be with their own name printed in the acknowledgements. Their pride and enthusiasm has spilled over at home too, many parents contributed voluntarily towards the extra costs of printing.

## Feed back from participants:

The children were requested to evaluate their thoughts/feelings about the project at three key points in the process: 1) at the beginning; 2) mid-way and 3) at the project end. This was done using the blob tree evaluation sheet. The participants could choose one of the blob characters which they felt most encapsulated how they were feeling at that particular stage in the process. They were also asked to write either a word or sentence to accompany the chosen blob and label it one, two or three depending on the project stage.



## A sample of Participant comments from their blob evaluation sheets

### Year 5 - Fae:

- 1) A little help pleas. I don't like this.
- 2) Feeling good but still need help.
- 3) Proud to say I helped wright a book



### **Year 5 - Miles:**

- 1) *I am scared and unbalanced.*
- 2) *I am adventurous and happy*
- 3) *I am cross cause we don't get to do it anymore.*

### **Year 3 Rydal:**

- 1) *I feel amazing!*
- 2) *I feel like I am friends with Rydal (from the story)*
- 3) *I feel proud.*

## **Feed back from staff:**

*"Many many thanks for giving our school, children and staff the opportunity to be involved in such an amazing project. It has helped to show children how a story can develop and that when writing there are many decisions and choices to be made, none of which are right or wrong. The project has allowed children, who otherwise would struggle with writing and reading and who have a general lack of interest, to be enthused and have an interest in a different genre of books. To see their faces light up as their name, idea and/or picture was used within the book was heart-warming."* – Jane Stuart, Year 5 class teacher

*"The project has been fantastic. It has really had a huge impact on their writing and their attitude towards books has significantly improved. Personally, I have also found it really awesome to hear how you have put their ideas and thoughts into the book. They are thrilled at having their ideas used and being a part of something real."* – Laura Harrison, Year 3 NQT class teacher

## **Feed back from creative team:**

*"Natasha Holmes is a new talent to watch and a delight to work with: deeply committed to her writing practice, she has listened to children's voices in her research and created a beautifully written story that is both resonant and accessible."* Liz Flanagan, mentor and author of Eden Summer, and Dragon Daughter

*"This project was an invitation for the young people to control everything about the world from the very beginning; this genuine and whole hearted offer of ownership to the young people was one of the most rewarding elements of the project, but it was also, in my opinion, one of the fundamental factors in engaging so many hearts and minds to such an enormous extent in the process. To see their joy and excitement in the finished book was a privilege to witness. This project has proved both the power and brilliance of young people's ideas when they are given the opportunity to use their voice. It has reminded me, as an artist, that when making work for and with young people, they need to be given much greater responsibility and control over the creative process."* - Louise Clark, drama facilitator

## **Sharing my Practice**

We arranged a sharing of our practice to the peer network of professionals based in Yorkshire who are keen to push the boundaries of using 'in-role' as a means of exploring text. The usual practice is for 'in-role' to be applied to an existing text, taking an unusual perspective of one of the characters to explore the issues or themes of the text. In my case there was no story to

start with – only an idea – so we used the device of ‘in-role’ to create a provocation for the children to draw out their ideas in order to create a text. The sharing was a huge success and provoked discussion of using more inclusivity in both the writing and theatre making process.



## In Conclusion

The project has proven that children’s input into the creation of a book enriches the creative process and ensures that the story created is both age appropriate and engaging whilst dealing with challenging historical material. While there are as many different writing practices as there are writers – all equally valid – this process has enabled these 63 participants to have voice and sway over the story in such a way as to leave a lasting legacy and in some cases a positively life-changing experience. For them the job of, ‘writer’ does not now seem so remote and unattainable and the role books have in enriching their lives is far more valued.

*“I feel strong now because I have helped write a book, so now I can write a book.”* – Emma, final evaluation comment

For my part, as artist and writer, this project has been invaluable in giving me the skills and confidence to approach the world as a writer. The GFA grant has enabled me to use the skills and methodology I have developed successfully in one art form (theatre) and apply it to another art form (literature) in which I had very little experience. The completed manuscript is currently under consideration by a vibrant literary agency and the hope is that this is the beginning of a new chapter for the story of, *The Guardians of Utopya*.



Report written by Natasha Holmes  
Photography of workshops by Natasha Holmes  
Photography of Celebration Assembly by Gavin Joynt.  
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