

UNDERCOVER PUBLISHING MUESLI DRESSED AS COCO POPS

Publisher and bestselling author Susannah McFarlane.



Susannah McFarlane works on both sides of the publishing fence, combining over 20 years of senior publishing experience in both Australia and the UK with her 'other job' as a bestselling author. Susannah believes engaging children with reading sometimes requires a touch of craftiness and cunning.

Whoever advised us not to judge a book by its cover was truly deluded! Everyone of course does, as the cover is the story's mini-billboard, giving the potential buyer or reader a taste of what's inside.

THE BEST BOOK IN THE WORLD IS NOT THE BEST BOOK IN THE WORLD IF NO ONE READS IT.

Publishing and writing for kids is different from any other kind of trade publishing, in that you are not publishing for yourself or your peers. An adult trade publisher will commission and curate books that speak to her, and that of her contemporary audience, but what of the kids' publisher? She is almost never a child herself and, in many cases, it's been quite some time since she was one. Yet a children's publisher's job is to create books that will talk to kids, their experiences or their fantasies, and then package them in a way that means the kids will actually pick them up.

And that's the trick of course, to make sure that it all comes together and the book gets read. The best book in the world is not the best book in the world if no one reads it.

As librarians and booksellers (the ultimate and expert 'speed dating service' to match reader and book) well know, kids are like anyone else looking for a book to read and the first stop – and often the last – is the cover.

And there's the rub with kids' publishing: more often than not, the buyer and the reader are two different people, from different generations, and with different aesthetics. So a cover that appeals to a mum, librarian or teacher is sometimes unlikely to appeal to their child. Which leaves the publisher with a hard choice. Do you package for the purchaser or the reader?

I like to create stories that kids want to read and package them in books that they will want to pick up. That means the books get covers the kids will like, not their parents (or even me sometimes!). I'm a Children's Choice rather than Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) kind of publishing girl, although I have great respect for both awards and would have to consider offering up my first born for either.

Yet because you can't take the parent out of the publisher, there is also always another agenda with the series I publish, beyond sales or just getting them read. With *Zac Power* (Hardie Grant Egmont) and *Boy vs Beast* (Scholastic) my

agenda was getting 'reluctant reading' boys to start and finish a book – and enjoy it. With *EJ12 Girl Hero* (Scholastic) it's about creating my own little affirmative action program for girls, and with my latest series *Stuff Happens* (Penguin) I want to develop boys' emotional literacy in a way that helps them deal with everyday challenges.

I love the way you can develop a message, shape a new outlook, or create a reader in this way. But including these messages in trade books – those books kids have choice over, as opposed to textbooks or school readers – is a real balancing act.

It involves being stealthy – even ninja-like – to create books that seduce not sermonise.

'Read this book so you can improve your literacy skills you reluctant reader you!' won't cut it. But stories with a boy secret agent who uses the coolest spy gadgets to foil evil plots, or a 21st century beast battler who stops mutant beasts invading earth might. And by delivering those stories in short chapters with short sentences with high frequency words, many will enjoy their first 'big boy book' without ever knowing they were also earning their literacy stripes.

Which brings me back to why the covers are so important. They need to look at home in their backpacks, not their schoolbags, comfy next to their skateboard or the latest PS3 game or whatever they are interested in, or they just won't get read.

It's what I call 'the muesli dressed as Coco Pops approach'.

And yet, even once you get it all right and kids want to read your books, you can find it's actually the grownups who turn away from the unashamedly foiled or glittery covers, or even the carefully chosen 'boring' simple words.

The commercial series fiction book is sometimes thought of as the fluffy, white bread of kids' publishing – selling large quantities somehow implying the books have less quality than those packaged to appeal to grownups. Interestingly, Enid Blyton's books suffered a bit from this before she was appropriately restored to much loved treasure, responsible for ensuring generation after generation would never look up at a huge, tall tree in a forest without wondering.

So maybe the person who first said 'don't judge a book' wasn't so deluded after all.

Don't judge the cover – look beyond the Coco Pops and you might just find some delicious and healthy muesli lurking between the covers – just don't tell the kids!

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