



Questions for: Rachel Lawrence

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The StoryHouse founder on progress in children's books, and the benefits of lockdown



Describe your job

We're a really small team, so I'm involved in everything from finding and commissioning contributors to ensuring our books reach retail. I've learnt a lot about sales and distribution since setting up the business.

What was your first job in the book industry?

I was a publishing assistant at Parragon Publishing, and my first task was to select an image for a cookbook. The publisher didn't like my image of prawns, so I was moved into children's books. That's probably one of the best things that ever happened to me. I've found once you are in the industry, it's so hard to leave, it's a fantastic place to be.

Who has been the most influential person in your career?

I met so many brilliant people in toddler groups on my maternity leave. They all have really interesting jobs, are creative thinkers and were hugely supportive. I was looking for a better balance for my family and they helped me decide to set up my new business. It's been a challenging time over the past year but I love doing what I'm doing. Chance meetings turned into something life-changing for me.

How has the industry changed since your first job?

A handful of authors and titles are responsible for the bestsellers - not much has changed there. However, a larger number of children's publishers are taking greater risks. There's far more variety out there.

There have been changes in how children and books are being put together. Events in schools, bookshops or those such as the Bath Children's Literature Festival create an audience, and when they are supported by local bookshops it sells the books too. It's a way to promote books when reviews are challenging to receive, there's little bookshop space in the large retailers, and not enough libraries.

What's the biggest challenge in your job?

Initially it was signing authors and illustrators. When you are starting out there is no track record and those I wanted to work with had the ability to work with other, established publishers. My previous experience as a children's publisher helped me, starting out is a challenge. Now, because of the way that we work by offering people complete flexibility on timings, our responsiveness and the very collaborative nature of a small team, contributors are returning to work on more titles for us.



What's the best piece of book-related advice you've been given?

Make the big mistakes early on. I've made a couple and of course mistakes can be costly. We've seen an entire book cycle through now and I've learnt a lot in a short space of time.

What are the most interesting things you're seeing at the moment in the industry?

The growing movement to publish more diverse voices, which was long overdue, and the recognition that children's books can offer more. There's room for fantastic storytelling and ideas to help support children as they grow to look after each other and our world.

What do you think might be the next big thing?

It's such a tough question but that answer will come from the children themselves. I'm excited watching the youngest children grow. With topic-based approaches in learning, there's a really strong foundation for some very inspiring books.

How are you coping with working from a home environment?

I'm more productive: time is so precious when you're working around school hours that not having a commute is perfect. My husband also works at home, so I'm currently based in the kitchen. The only downside is that I can wheel my chair to the fridge too easily.

How do you think the industry will come out of the Covid-19 crisis?

Obviously I hope in a better place. It's important to question how we do things and adapt and share that knowledge with others to become stronger as an industry. I hope working at home and more flexibility is here to stay, there are so many brilliant people who find the juggle a challenge. Finally, as an independent, I'm a passionate supporter of small businesses and it would be fantastic if people continued to support them.

What do you most like doing when you're not working?

Catching up with friends. I miss brunches, drinks and dinners, and I'm very much looking forward to those days returning.

What are you reading now?

With the mix of home-schooling and running a business, the only books I get to read are the Oxford Reading scheme. They have been brilliant helps in teaching my daughter to read, and she really enjoys them, which is so important. I hope she continues to share my love of books.

How do you like to read: on screen, on paper, or do you listen to audiobooks?

For myself and my children, it's all paper. We love visiting libraries and bookshops and the process of choosing a book. We are lucky to have the brilliant Mr B's and the Beaufort Bookshop locally - the whole shopping experience with a lively pre-schooler is transformed.

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