

Fake Family History: co-writing *f2m: the boy within* by Hazel Edwards & Ryan Kennedy

Working Writer

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www.workingwriter1.com

Despite running occasional “Writing Non Boring Family History” workshops, I didn’t expect the need to create a fake family history.

“Faking a family tree” happened while co-researching an unusual Young Adult novel with a trans- gender and punk music theme. Young Adult novels are for 13 plus readers, but often are read as “crossovers” by adults, too.

Our novel with the working title of *f2m* (female to male) was to be more than sexual anatomy. Our aim was to show the universal theme of “coping successfully with being different,” via a coming of age story, but with humor and compassion plus punk music. Our character Skye who transitions to Finn is 18, a legally significant age for driver’s license and hassles about IDs.

Gender transition is an unusual subject, but it’s advantageous when a co-author has experienced the medical and psychological process. Research time was reduced, but facts like genetic mosaic were still checked.

I’ve known Ryan, my co-writer, since he was presenting as an 11- year-old girl. He’s now in mid thirties. We decided to co-write fiction, based on the sequence of medical and psychological ftm (female to male) facts.

Why We Needed a Fake History

Family history mystery is a sub- theme of our novel. I later constructed a fake family tree, to include the fictional intersex ancestor who would have been infertile and plotted the recessive gene which may have been carried into our character’s generation. So beloved Great Uncle Al who was also Alberta was created to parallel the younger siblings. This accurately portrays tendencies for intersex to run recessively in families, despite no direct line via children. But creating a fake history to fit war dates and medals was a challenge.

Process

A brief but candid W. I. P. (work in progress) log was my way of keeping track of medical, literary, and technical challenges before we forgot the details of genes, dates, sexist terms, fake family history trees, electronic glitches, and the embarrassing moments. Ryan is New Zealand based so we worked electronically, with him emailing me a raw, first draft chapter weekly, usually on a Sunday night. Then I would work on this version, before returning it to him later in the week. We used tracking, but also color coding for bits which needed later fixing. In the last month, we were Skype-editing and exchanging daily on the 70,000 word draft.

How Autobiographical?

f2m; the boy within is fiction.

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Although Ryan plotted the original sequence, based on his earlier private online diary kept during treatment, I structured the initial synopsis as part of the book proposal for the publisher. We knew it would be likely to change drastically, before the book was published. It did.

At our Melbourne meeting mid 2008, we decided to collaborate on a novel, which was NOT autobiographical.

We explored novelization via email and webcam, how to date label attachments, and later how to use Skype keyboarding to record our novel problem-solving.

Simultaneously, we recorded our typed Q and A on Skype as a legitimate part of our collaborative plotting.

Which Pronoun?

Working together, the pronouns were the first challenge for me. It's so hard to start saying "he" when you are used to saying "she" or "her." My compromise was to use Ryan's name more, rather than the pronoun. Now, I have no problem with "he" and "his" and I think of my co-writer as a thoughtful male with keen observation skills from "reading" others in gender roles.

Early on, Ryan corrected my use of pronouns with the fictional female character Skye who changes to Finn.

Feb 9th email:

Skye is a "he"! Even in early transition. —Ryan

Ryan sometimes asked for sequencing scenes of what to write next as I monitored the story as a whole and balanced the characters and themes. I also handled the business aspects such as the initial book proposal, synopsis, and contract negotiations. Our complementary roles worked well. I've had several co-authors on nonfiction and fiction projects, but Ryan was the most astute electronically. And since I'm hopeless at formatting, that was a great advantage. He also created the book trailer and later ebook. We were both involved in the subsequent documentary by Kailash Studio on reactions to our novel subject.

Challenges of Compiling a Fake Family History

A curious "naming" coincidence occurred:

As I started to construct a fake family tree for Finn's past, I realized how many minor characters we hadn't named and that it was important to get the consistency of surnames, birth dates, and inherited and genetic possibilities. If there were an earlier ancestor who was intersex (and infertile/unable to have biological children) it would need to be medically accurate.

And the business fortune could be inherited only down the male line.

I suddenly realized we hadn't given the Gran character a named husband nor surname. Randomly I'd chosen SMITH as the family name, since it was generic and historically there had been various kinds of smith crafts. The great grand- father's name was William Smith and so Gran's maiden name would be Smith. We'd called her Bev, because initially I'd called the three siblings A, B, and C. And the nephews D and E. Then it hit me.

My co-writer Ryan's real grand- mother's surname had been Schmidt. And all through the book, we'd been stressing that it is NOT autobiographical. Had the ex-German Schmidt family chosen a generic English approximation of their name as did

many migrants? I'd have to check with Ryan as his grandmother passed away some years ago. We changed the fictional surname to May.

How Many Drafts?

Across a year, possibly 40 drafts, and eighteen months of concentrated work. A co-author in another time zone means you are fresh at different times. Despite this we realized that the birthday cake would be stale before Dad's 50th party, since extra chapters had intervened since the cooking. Finn suffered fatigue from injections not yet given, and we had to monitor who acknowledged Finn's male name. Getting the medical details and terminology right required lots of checking.

Eligibility?

Recently I attended the Barbara Jeffries Literary Awards where the entrants must be books of fiction which portray an Australian woman positively. So far only female writers have submitted, but males are encouraged.

Regardless of the quality of our writing, I don't know if our book *f2m* would be eligible. Ours is fiction, not autobiography.

Of the co-writers, one is female, and the second is male but used to be seen as female. The central character was presenting as a woman at the beginning of the novel, and a legal male by the end. Some may challenge our claim that this novel is fiction, saying it must be autobiography, because of the medical history of Ryan.

We disagree.

But *f2m; the boy within* should provoke a literary discussion anyway.

Australian Hazel Edwards OAM is co-author of f2m: the boy within. Of her 200 books, Writing a Non Boring Family History is the most popular at her online bookstore: www.hazeledwards.com/shop/category/non-fiction. She co-wrote Trail Magic; Going Walkabout for 2184 Miles on the Appalachian Trail with her son. He wore out 2 pairs of boots.