

Sensitivity Reader or Censorship?

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‘Sensitivity reader’ is not a term I use. All authors need to be sensitive in the way they present stories. I prefer ‘researching with respect’ or co-writing when it is a culture with which I am not familiar. By culture, I would also include sport and gender.

Co-Writing:

I’ve co-written ‘F2m: the Boy Within’ (Ford Street) the YA novel about transitioning gender, with transguy Ryan Kennedy. In ‘Hijabi Girl’, where my co-writer is a Moslem librarian, I’ve relied on my co-author’s experience of that culture, but also had to learn about Aussie Rules football.

Yes, I have published books where the subject has been an area in which initially I was not an expert. But I’ve always researched before and during writing. Often I’ve used participant-observation research of ‘going and doing’, in order to write authentically.

Deferring to a co-writer from that culture means vocabulary and attitudes are appropriate. But I use two types of readers for checking: an expert and a naive reader who would be reading purely for enjoyment. With a children’s book, it would be a child of roughly the appropriate age and interest level, who is reading just for the story.

My expert reader, and sometimes there’s more than one, would check on facts or attitudes. But the term ‘sensitivity reader’ seems superfluous when professional writers are aware of the need for accuracy and authenticity.

### ***Censorship?***

***Often vocal niche groups use this ‘sensitivity’ term to censor views which conflict with their own. And a writer may need the freedom to create a character whose political or religious views differ or are atypical, for reasons of satire or to provoke thoughtful discussion. Banning or intimidating by labelling or ‘taking over’ the use of certain words is not the solution.***

Antarctic Scientific Accuracy?

I was a 2001 Australian Antarctic Division expeditioner and our polar supply ship was beset in the ice for weeks. I continued to write. The ‘boffins’ and ‘tradies’ helped plot and subsequently checked the manuscript to ensure the scientific terminology was correct. On ‘The Polar Bird’

were Antarctic authorities ranging from icebergs , penguins and moss to tradies who could fix anything. Not forgetting the met ( meteorology) guys etc. So I paid attention to their advice on terminology, science and plotting possibilities for *Antarctica's Frozen Chosen*, my YA novel. I checked to ensure the genetic mutation travelling from animal to human was scientifically accurate. In an early draft, I mistook types of fishing, long line and net. I've got the right one in the final draft. My experts verified it for me. And I'm grateful.

Antarctica has a vocabulary of its own and even an Antarctic dictionary developed from those who are on the base for long periods of time. And it has accepted terms. For example, 'the frozen chosen' refers not to an icy-pole but those chosen to work in Antarctica, and is the reason for my novel's title.

I was nervous about getting the science right due to climate- change interest. I was working in Antarctica not as a scientist, but as a mainstream writer. After publication, I was apprehensive about the reactions of the scientists and support staff ... or the boffins and tradies if I use the correct local terms ... and that I was infringing on their private area. Luckily, they delighted in showing my 'fiction' but based in Antarctic possibilities, to their families.

Dieso, the expedition mechanic, said 'Oh, I'm on the front cover of the picture book 'Antarctic Dad' . I'm a legend!'

I said, 'I know you're a legend, but this is a fictional character.'  
'I'm a legend,' he repeated. As far as he and his family were concerned, *that* front cover illustration was him.

Participant observation matters. Going to a place and then writing about it authentically gives depth to a story. Sequel, *Outback Ferals* has belatedly become amazingly popular because it has the theme of a pandemic threat. Eco-warrior 21 year old Kyle was the same young scientist from *Antarctica's Frozen Chosen*.

The 'Outback Ferals' setting is recognisably Darwin. My son works there. But it wasn't only his checking; we ran it past some of his colleagues.

Faction?

As a professional author, it is part of your obligation to check. And the difference between fiction, non-fiction or factual writing, and what I call faction is relevant. I write in all of those fields. Non-fiction is verifiable facts. And fiction is where the writer may use a real setting, but creates concentrated, fictional characters who face recognisable challenges.

I mentor aspiring writers of memoirs and non-boring family histories. I suggest to them that sometimes faction may be an option rather than writing a history. Why? To make it dramatically more interesting.

But you can't call it a history.

Faction is a feasible dramatic option. You might dramatically manipulate the time sequence and condense both that and the characters. – Faction has to be crafted too.

Occasionally I've been criticised for my fanciful writing e.g. Hippos do not eat cakes. But even fantasy needs an internal logic.

I always answer those complaints and I keep research audio interviews for a year or two after the actual book publication. 'Professionalism' is taking responsibility for what you've written. You cannot take responsibility for peoples' interpretation of what you've written. Some critics have their own issues.

Our creating of *Hijabi Girl* would make a fantastic *Australian Story* [ABC TV program] doco. About facing cultural, pandemic and other challenges. Ozge approached me to write about a feisty young girl footballer in a hijab, so her students would have a role model to dress up as for Book Week Parades.

I said 'Write it yourself, because you know that culture, I don't and you are the one to write it.' Ozge is a mad keen Aussie rules fan of Essendon. I do not follow football but I've had to learn about Aussie rules football and club colours as Ozge has a hijab in black and red to match the footy gear. Another culture.

I'm a great believer that a book *can* change things. Slowly, it changes attitudes. You enter the world of the book and you come out the other end with a bit more tolerance for a different point of view, or a different culture. So I said, 'Ok, we'll try a book series.'

That took nearly ten years. And now Larrikin Puppets are premiering 'Hijabi Girl the Musical' in Brisbane for Children's Book Week in late August. The mixing of cultures and the appreciation and the respect for other cultures is something that flows from the books and the puppetry.

We culturally checked with Ozge all the time. Illustrator Serena Geddes lengthened the cover girl's dress to make it respectful. We learned that the hijabs can be folded in different ways to indicate different things, etc.

As our cultural controller Ozge picked up things like - in our second book, we have kebabs. And she said 'We do not make kebabs at home, we buy kebabs in a shop.' But it's sort of thing that you need to know for authenticity.

Across cultures, food and clothing are important indicators and so is pronunciation. We made our character Melek, of Turkish background. And I subsequently found out that Ahmed is spelled, and pronounced in different ways depending on which culture you came through. We have a Sudanese boy in the latest stories. We made him Abdul in the end. We decided against Ahmed because there are so many variations.

We created a hijabi fashionista mother who is designing clothes for the other women and ends up designing footy club outfits including the hijabs. *Then* we found there was a real footy club that did it ... Often things that we were anticipating subsequently happened.

Our original Craigieburn Library book launch had sixty-two different languages in the audience. One girl said, 'Oh, there's a girl like me in that book. I haven't had that before.'

Our new Muslim bookseller/ distributor runs the Alligator book club. He has worldwide distribution - KL and Singapore and Abu Dhabi and Manchester and Liverpool and London. Stories cross cultures if they are authentic and fun.

Larrikin Puppets have auditioned and recorded child actor voices for the puppets in appropriate cultures. Recently the Larrikin Puppets were awarded the best live children's theatre for the year.

In the 10 years since we co-wrote YA novel 'f2m; the boy within', gender language has changed. Now it's been adapted into a comic graphic novel 'The Boy Within' by two transguys, one of whom is Ryan, my original co-writer. I'm thrilled.

Self-censorship is going on. Even very accomplished writers, will feel wary of creating a character who is not like them. For example in my *Celebrant Sleuth I Do or Die* mystery, the protagonist is the asexual sleuth who conducts weddings and funerals as a celebrant. Some readers may assume it's autobiographical. It's not.

I was asked to write a character like Quinn by someone who was in that situation. A request.

A 'sensitivity' reader or 'cultural advisor' may be used today because of the fear of not being 'politically correct' in usage of attitudes or language.

But, a professional author will always research and check facts. That is what being a professional means.

Stories cross cultures if they are authentic and fun. And if they are well written, all can learn from the insights. I disagree that only a person from that culture can write those stories. If so, we would all be writing thinly disguised autobiographies of people our own age and circumstances. As a longterm author, I have respectfully used Buddhist, Chinese, Tamil, Jewish, Macedonian and other cultural settings in my stories. I have been male, female and transgender. Not to mention having the viewpoint of a cat, dog and even a snake. In age, I've ranged from six to 60. Some of these books would not have happened without a known author initiating the projects. Of course, there's a need for a culture to write their own, but if the option is no stories being available, the initial well researched or co-written tales are a start. Others will follow.

Links

Antarctic books <https://www.hazeledwards.com/antarctic-literature-hazels-books.html>

<https://www.hazeledwards.com/antarctic-dad.html>

<https://www.hazeledwards.com/antarcticas-frozen-chosen.html>

Sequel 'Outback Ferals'

<https://www.hazeledwards.com/outback-ferals.html>

Hijabi Girl

[www.hazeledwards.com](http://www.hazeledwards.com)

<https://www.hazeledwards.com/hijabi-girl.html>

f2m:the boy within

<https://www.hazeledwards.com/f2mthe-boy-within.html>

Celebrant Sleuth: I Do or Die (On Audible)

<https://www.hazeledwards.com/celebrant-sleuth.html>

Not Just a Piece of Cake: Being an Author (On Audible)

<https://www.hazeledwards.com/not-just-a-piece-of-cake-being-an-author.html>