RAISING VOICES 2022

Evaluation

children's books ireland
every child a reader

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every child a reader

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Children's Books Ireland is the national charity and arts organisation that champions every child's right to develop a love of reading. Our mission at Children's Books Ireland is to inspire a love of reading in children and young people on the island of Ireland, and to champion equitable access for all to excellent books. We share our expertise and enthusiasm with the adults who guide and influence young readers, and encourage schools and early childhood settings to build a positive culture of reading and reading aloud. We support and promote authors and illustrators and connect them with their audiences through our work.

Continue the conversation with us at **www.childrensbooksireland.ie** where you will find more reviews, articles and up-to-the-minute news.

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Introduction

Writing about the Pathways project in the UK in September 2021, Dylan Calder and Emily Jost argued that 'representation matters in children's publishing because it affects all children's feelings of belonging, inclusion and mutual, empathetic understanding; their ideas about themselves and each other. The staggering lack of diversity in every level of the children's books industry and canon … reinforces and continues to perpetuate a state of exclusion'. According to research conducted by BookTrust UK, 11% of children reported that not finding books they can relate to stops them reading (Nov, 2022). It is clear that the issue of representation matters in all aspects of creating, publishing and reading books.

In Ireland, progress has already been made towards making the literature sector (and the arts in general) more inclusive. In 2019, the Arts Council published its Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy and in 2021 a post was created for a Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. In April 2022, Cúirt International Festival of Literature and NUI Galway presented Breaking Ground Ireland, celebrating 80 writers and illustrators from ethnic minority backgrounds, including Irish Traveller writers from the island of Ireland. In 2021, Words Ireland, representing seven literature organisations, surveyed artists and workers in the literature sector in relation to barriers to entry and progression. They organised a webinar series on diversity and inclusion and adopted a Charter for Inclusion. In the same year, Skein Press and *The Stinging Fly* launched the Play It Forward Fellowships to amplify the voices of writers who have traditionally been underrepresented in Irish literature and publishing, echoing Skein Press's own purpose when it was founded in 2017. The Irish Writers Centre developed programmes like UpLift, the Lacuna Bursaries and dedicated places on programmes like Evolution to support writers and leaders from underrepresented backgrounds to thrive in the sector. Poetry Ireland and Maynooth University's Poetry Critics of Colour programme is also of note.

These are just a few examples of the work being done in the literature sector in Ireland. The Raising Voices Fellowship builds further on this work through supporting aspiring writers and illustrators who make work for children and young people and whose voices have been underrepresented in literature due to background or identity. Its aims are to break down barriers to publication, progression and inclusion, and to increase diversity and representation in the Irish literature sector.

The Fellowship was led by a group of literature organisations: Children's Books Ireland, the Dublin Book Festival, Illustrators Ireland, Publishing Ireland and the Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig.

Raising Voices was funded by the Arts Council's Capacity Building Support Scheme

Selection

A public open call was held for applications for Raising Voices. All of the partner organisations (Children's Books Ireland, Publishing Ireland, Dublin Book Festival, Illustrators Ireland and Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig) promoted the call through their networks and a concerted effort was made to contact partner organisations which would help the call reach as wide an audience as possible.

The Raising Voices Fellowship was for writers and illustrators who:

- make work for children and young people including fiction, non-fiction (including creative non-fiction) and poetry in English or Irish
- have a complete manuscript or picturebook/illustrated book outline
- come from backgrounds or communities that are underrepresented in children's and young adult literature or whose identity is traditionally underrepresented
- have not yet been published or secured a contract with a publisher or agent
- live permanently in Ireland or Northern Ireland

94 applications were received for Raising Voices. Children's Books Ireland carried out an initial eligibility assessment with reference to applicants' application forms and work samples provided. Of the eligible applications, a longlist of 22 applications which showed most promise and representing a wide range of applicants were judged by external readers. They were:

- Ashwin Chacko, illustrator and member of Illustrators Ireland
- Dr Pádraic Whyte, Associate Professor and Co-Director of the MPhil in children's literature at Trinity College Dublin
- Celine Kiernan, author and illustrator
- Máire Zepf, Irish language author

The readers discussed and assessed the application forms, biographies and work samples provided. This resulted in a shortlist of 8 which were discussed by the representatives of the Raising Voices partner organisations before selecting the final 6 fellows. During this process, there was an emphasis on the programme being as representative as possible, and it was noted that very few applications were received from artists from the Travelling community, with a recommendation to redouble efforts to encourage applications from Travellers in future years. Additionally several of the ineligible applications were from artists creating work for an adult audience, which emphasises the need for such programmes for all underrepresented voices across the literature sector. A final observation was that many more applications were made by authors than illustrators; in future years, project partners Illustrators Ireland will redouble efforts to encourage these applications.

Four writers (Conor Bredin, Carol McGill, Kate Moore and Jen Wallace), all working in English, and two illustrators (Nene Lonergan and Aileen Swansen) were selected as the inaugural Raising Voices Fellows to receive a comprehensive programme of creative and practical supports. It was made clear from the outset that each Fellow would be free to write their own biography and would not be under pressure to disclose any information that may have been contained in their application. The Raising Voices Fellowship began in February 2022 and ran until November.

The Fellows

Conor Bredin is a primary school teacher at Rush and Lusk Educate Together National School and has been writing stories ever since he was in Junior Infants himself. Conor is currently writing a children's fantasy novel, but also enjoys working on picturebook manuscripts. Conor applied for the Raising Voices Fellowship because he believes that every book needs to have LGBTQ+ characters, and those characters need to have their own stories that have nothing to do with their identity. He hopes that his time with the Raising Voices Fellowship will make him the best author he can be, and help him spread the message that diversity of all types is to be celebrated.

Nene Lonergan is a Thai-Chinese artist living in Ireland, currently studying animation at the Limerick school of Art and Design. The best part of her childhood was the nights spent on the staircase with a tower of borrowed comic books. Her intention with her comic style art is to create works that inspire such feelings in other people. Nene applied to Raising Voices in the hope of finding some guidance in improving her craft and honing her skills. Her aims were to meet other creatives, immerse herself in the children's books community and create some collaborative projects in the future.

Carol McGill lives in Dublin, working fulltime in the charity sector and writing whenever she can find the time. Passionate about the power and value of storytelling, she has been writing seriously since she was fifteen but has seldom been able to put her creative work first. She has been published in *Sonder Magazine*, *Crannóg*, *Ropes* and *The Ogham Stone*, among others. In 2020 she founded the Morning Coffee Writing Competition in association with *Sonder Magazine*, as a fundraiser for the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. She hoped Raising Voices would give her support with her young adult novel manuscript and help her discover a new sense of community.

Kate Moore is a writer from Tralee, County Kerry, now living in Cork. She has been writing and telling stories since she was five years old. Her writing tends to revolve a lot around queer themes and social issues, exploring inter-personal relationships, both good and bad. Kate applied for Raising Voices as an unmissable opportunity to learn and grow as a writer while receiving guidance and support. She hoped to get knowledge of the industry overall including funding streams and other opportunities and was especially looking forward to receiving mentorship from an experienced novelist.

Aileen Swansen is an illustrator from Kerry, living in Cork. Aileen enjoys colourful and naive styles of illustration and is inspired by themes of curiosity and humour. Aileen applied for the Raising Voices Fellowship for the opportunity to connect with other creatives like herself. She says that freelance work can be isolating and nearly impossible to thrive in without a community of peers and mentors. Aileen also wished to learn more about children's publishing in Ireland. Her intention from the Fellowship was to work on her own book and create a portfolio to find a literary agent.

Jen Wallace is an author and mother from Cork who loves stories. She works in both verse and prose and likes to weave stories from a child's perspective, full of wonder, deep wisdom and questions about the world. Her perspective is an autistic one and is informed by her years of working with children. Jen applied for the Raising Voices Fellowship in the hope of securing support and guidance in moving towards publication and learning to navigate the children's literature world. Her hopes for Raising Voices were to co-create and learn with the Fellowship of writers, artists, mentors, contributors and facilitators.

Understanding barriers in the literature sector

In order to create the Raising Voices programme, Children's Books Ireland looked first at the barriers to inclusion in the literature sector in Ireland. The research carried out by Heather Maitland on behalf of Words Ireland in 2021 was invaluable. There were 545 valid responses from writers and illustrators to the survey which formed the basis for the final report. 11% of these which were 'aspiring' (not yet published and not aiming to earn income from writing or illustration that year) with a further 27% 'emerging' (not published, but actively seeking to publish and trying to earn some income from writing or illustration). These artists were not just creators for children and young people, but we can assume that the same barriers apply given the representation of this cohort within the respondents. 42 respondents to the writers' and illustrators' survey (10%) stated unprompted that they faced discriminatory attitudes from those working in the literature and publishing sector. This in itself shows the need for programmes like Raising Voices, to foster talent from minority and underrepresented groups and to provide a welcoming path into the sector.

The Words Ireland survey asked aspiring and emerging writers and illustrators to think about the career development opportunities that they didn't apply for and say what stopped them.

The most frequently cited factors that stopped aspiring and emerging writers and illustrators applying or competing for opportunities were:

- I felt this kind of opportunity was not meant for me (43% of those from underrepresented groups compared to 33% of those not identifying as part of underrepresented groups)
- I didn't feel ready for this kind of opportunity (40% compared to 29%)
- I didn't have time (39% compared to 10%)
- It cost too much (34% of all respondents)
- I didn't know this kind of opportunity is available (33% of all respondents)

As a result, we ensured that the description of Raising Voices was very clear and invited applicants to self-identify as being from a minority or underrepresented group of any kind rather than asking them to tick particular boxes. We reached out to a wide range of partner organisations to promote the programme to particular communities, and we made it clear that applicants did not have to show a publication history in order to be eligible. We made it clear from the outset that there would be no costs associated with the programme and that stipends and expenses would be paid when Fellows attended events.

The following are some further barriers which were identified in the research:

Low income from creative work

There was a good deal of evidence which highlighted many issues around low annual earnings from all sources, but the level of income from creative work was shockingly low. The median gross income earned by emerging, mid-career and established writers and illustrators from their creative work in 2019 was €500. This means that half of them earned less than this. The median for mid-career and established writers and illustrators who might be expected to earn a substantial portion of their annual income from their creative work was €2,000.

Actions:

For Raising Voices, we ensured that stipends were paid to the Fellows while they were attending key parts of the programme, like the week-long residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre. We provided travel and accommodation for those who needed it when attending events away from home, and all tickets for events were provided free of charge. There was no cost to the Fellows for any aspect of the programme. We ensured that mentors and guests for the bespoke speaker series were paid a fair rate for their work, plus travel expenses where required.

Time pressure

25% of writers and illustrators stated unprompted that time pressures are a barrier to their career development.

Actions:

A week-long residency was included in the programme so that Fellows could have uninterrupted time away from home for their creative work.

Closed networks and cliques

33 respondents (8%) stated unprompted that they believed that the literature and publishing sector is closed to new entrants. An emerging writer/illustrator from an underrepresented group said, 'The literary world is often like a closed book. The same people doing the same talks about the same people.'

Actions:

Raising Voices aimed to connect the Fellows with the children's literature community by giving them various access points to meet either with individuals or with groups of influential and knowledgeable people. We did this through one-to-one mentoring; a residency with other artists at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre; a bespoke speaker series limited to the Fellows and featuring funders, artists and other sector professionals; attendance at sector-specific events such as the Children's Books Ireland Annual Conference, ProperBook professional development events, Publishing Ireland Trade Day and Dublin Book Festival.

The programme

The programme included:

- Mentorship with an experienced writer or illustrator to provide creative and practical professional development support
- A week-long residency for the group at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig in early October 2022, with a mentor to work with the group for the week
- Bespoke speaker series – six one-hour online events that were co-programmed with fellows based on their needs
- A detailed critique from an editor or art director suited to the fellow's practice
- Bursary information clinic with the Arts Council
- Attendance at events including Children's Book Ireland's International Conference and ProperBook publishing information events, selected relevant Publishing Ireland training courses as well as the annual Trade Day, children's/family events at Dublin Book Festival and Illustrators Ireland Open and Social meetings
- Opportunities to connect with their community of practice – other writers and illustrators at all career levels – at Children's Books Ireland's online Artist Coffee Mornings and other social events
- Ongoing connections with the partner organisations
- A showcase event as part of Dublin Book Festival
- A copy each of the *Children's Writers' & Artists' Yearbook* and a year's membership of Children's Books Ireland
- Professional headshot photography shoot and digital image
- Additional creative writing masterclass for our writer Fellows with established and award-winning writer Sarah Webb and Senior Editor at Walker Books, Gráinne Clear

Project partners

There was a feeling that the range of project partners enabled a richer Fellowship programme with a variety of valuable supports.

'The Raising Voices project was very exciting for Dublin Book Festival to be part of. The proposal came at a time when we were considering doing something similar but had failed to get funding and our resources were tight. I believe having so many different partners allowed us to pool resources and therefore help make the project possible.

The idea of selecting participants from underrepresented communities and giving them the opportunity to receive mentorship and time to work on their craft is crucial to help introduce diversity into Irish publishing. This is the reason Dublin Book Festival engaged with the programme and to be in a position to offer such an opportunity is of huge importance to us.

The management of the project by Children's Books Ireland's Programme & Events Manager Aoife Murray was excellent, with regular updates and consultation. I would like to see participants from different cultures/ethnicities for 2023.'

Julianne Mooney Siron, Dublin Book Festival

Some of the partners were involved in the showcase of the Raising Voices Fellows at Dublin Book Festival, with Dr Éimear O'Connor, Director at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, attending and Joanna Smyth presenting the showcase as a representative of Publishing Ireland.

'The event on Sunday was fantastic. What a brilliant group of advocates for the entire Raising Voices project. They were absolutely brilliant.'

Dr Éimear O'Connor, The Tyrone Guthrie Centre

'What a special project and a lovely group of people – and all so talented!'

Joanna Smyth, Publishing Ireland

Impact

The Fellowship programme achieved its aims in breaking down barriers to publication, progression and inclusion, and increasing diversity and representation in the Irish literature sector for those who have been underrepresented. Project partners, mentors and fellows all agree that there has been significant impact achieved with many commenting that the suite of supports that were offered as part of the programme went over and above other mentorship programmes. The Fellowship has considerably increased the confidence of the participants individually and collectively.

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Julianne Mooney Siron, Dublin Book Festival

'The showcase event was fantastic. What a brilliant group of advocates for the entire Raising Voices project. They were absolutely brilliant.'

Dr Éimear O'Connor, The Tyrone Guthrie Centre

'I didn't know anything about the other authors and illustrators in Raising Voices and it was a wonderful surprise to hear them all talking on the final night about what they all achieved. Raising Voices is a uniquely important project bridging the gap between established Irish writers and illustrators and new talented writers and illustrators. Irish children's books are in very safe hands for the future. I can't wait to see next year's batch of talent.'

Chris Judge, Mentor

'I firmly believe that an opportunity like this must come at a specific time in a person's creative journey, and I think it is a testament to the application and selection process that these artists were at the perfect time in their creative lives for this Fellowship. This experience will, I have no doubt, help them grow as artists and encourage them to make strong and meaningful decisions in their careers to come.'

Celine Kiernan, Mentor at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre

'I was impressed with the suite of supports in the Raising Voices programme, from the week in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, to time with editors, registration for the Children's Books Ireland International Conference and the public reading, along with the [mentoring] sessions themselves. I have mentored in other schemes where the programme was confined to a series of workshops.'

Catherine Ann Cullen, Mentor

'I think Raising Voices does an excellent job of not just providing writing support, but support in how to be a writer – whether that's availing of residencies, speaking to publishers or glimpsing our often-opaque industry from the inside. Delighted to have been involved and looking forward to working with them again!'

Dave Rudden, Mentor

'Seeing and hearing the culmination of the six fellows' work in the showcase at the Dublin Book Festival, I was blown away by the quality of the work of each writer and artist, and reminded, over and again, of how deeply necessary it is for underrepresented voices to be uplifted and shared. As a queer neurodivergent mother myself, I was moved by the different stories for all ages created with such unique eyes and talents.'

Moïra Fowley Doyle, Mentor

'I am very grateful for this opportunity. As Fellows we all agreed that we didn't realise the extent of what was included in the programme when reading the list. I had never heard of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, for example. The Fellowship has been instrumental in my career. We are always told at art college that it is practically impossible to make a career out of art, but this programme has made that goal more achievable.'

Nene Lonergan, Fellow

'This opportunity seemed specifically for me as a member of an underrepresented community (LGBTQ+) and it was very much in my wheelhouse. I really wanted to work with a mentor and an editor. It definitely promotes unheard voices and even as a group we are all so different and our books will be found in completely different shelves in the library.'

Conor Bredin, Fellow

'The fact that Children's Books Ireland not only exists but is also putting active and focused effort into increasing diversity and representation in children's books is so wonderful. They understand the importance of this.'

Carol McGill, Fellow

'I felt that the opportunity was unmissable and almost too good to be true. I applied as I am an early career LGBTQ+ writer and usually explore queer themes in my writing.'

Kate Moore, Fellow

'The showcase was a highlight for me. I am very nervous sharing unfinished work. I did a lot of preparation work and asked others for presentation tips. It went really well for me and all the Fellows. It was a moment of connection for us all and was nice to share what was achieved during the year'.

Aileen Swansen, Fellow

'Overall this helped promote huge personal growth. As an autistic writer I found it difficult to access the children's literature industry and the Fellowship has given me the supports and connections to do that'.

Jen Wallace, Fellow

Outcomes to date from Raising Voices

Kate Moore

Kate Moore received a Kerry County Council Arts Bursary based on work written during the Fellowship. This is the Further Arts Education bursary towards the creative writing MA at University College Cork (2 years part time, valued at €1,200 euro).

Aileen Swansen

'Through the Fellowship, I have gained a new found confidence in my creative abilities. After meeting Peter Donnelly, Celine Kiernan, Steve McCarthy and Paddy Donnelly to name a few, I realised a lot of writers and illustrators in the picturebook world have a background in animation. So, I decided to up-skill with a certificate to help update my portfolio: the Level 5 certificate in cartoon animation with Cork College of FET. Recently, I gained an internship at the Animation Dingle festival through Jam Media Studios. As their Social Media Executive, I developed a strategy, wrote posts and liaised with industry people (Aardman Studios, Disney, Cartoon Saloon). After a long creative hiatus, I'm now updating a portfolio for submission as well as working on scripts to submit this summer. I also learned a lot about Arts Council grants and will be applying for the Agility Award after college.'

Jen Wallace

Jen Wallace has a début middle-grade novel being published with Little Island Books in 2024. In December 2022 she won one of two Bursaries for Writers who are Carers (with Greywood Arts, the Irish Writers Centre and the Irish Writers Union). She received mentoring with Niamh Boyce, coaching with Marie O'Halloran and editorial service with Sally Vince. She has a chapter book out on submission and is booked into the Tyrone Guthrie Centre for a residency later this year.

Conor Bredin

'Since the Fellowship ended, I took everything I learned and actually wrote a complete picturebook manuscript. I made so many connections through the Fellowship that I was able to reach out and ask agents, publishers, illustrators and writers for their thoughts on my manuscript, improving it beyond measure. I've now submitted it to many agents and publishers (using the *Children's Writers' & Artists' Yearbook* I got through the Fellowship), and I eagerly await to hear back from an agent or publisher!'

Nene Lonergan

As a direct result of the Raising Voices editorial critique, Nene was commissioned to create the cover illustration for *The Lonely Book* by Meg Grehan, published by Little Island Books. She now has an agent, Philippa Milnes-Smith at The Soho Agency, who also represents established Irish author-illustrators Chris Judge, Steve McCarthy and former Laureate na nÓg Niamh Sharkey. Nene's work was included in the *HOME* Comics Anthology organised by the Dublin Comic Arts Festival and did two live readings and a panel for the same event. She is part of the mentorship program run by Minding Creative Minds; Tracy Sayers is her mentor. Her illustrations have been exhibited in the LSAD 2022 Christmas Exhibition (Crescent Shopping Centre, Dooradoyle, Limerick) and the TUS Through Our Eyes Exhibition (TUS Athlone, Westmeath).

Carol McGill

'The Fellowship was key for me in getting my manuscript ready for submission and sent out to agents. Publishing is intimidating from the outside and without the guidance of my mentor I think my book would still be living in my laptop. The visit to the Tyrone Guthrie Centre allowed me to prioritise writing in a very busy year. The award overall gave me new confidence and a support network entering this professional space. During the Fellowship I also received an Agility Award from the Arts Council, allowing me to dedicate more time to writing, which has had a huge impact on my ability to create.'

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Conor Bredin

Conor Bredin writes middle-grade fantasy for children and young adults

'This opportunity seemed specifically for me as a member of an underrepresented community (LGBTQ+) and it was very much in my wheelhouse. I really wanted to work with a mentor and an editor. It definitely promotes unheard voices and even as a group we are all so different and our books will be found in completely different shelves in the library.'

There was a general sense of disbelief for each of the fellows when they received news of their selection. Conor was delivering a maths grind to one of his primary school students and while she was working on solving a maths problem he scrolled through the email he received from Children's Books Ireland. He assumed it would say he was unsuccessful and was bowled over by the news, trying to contain his elation while he continued with delivering his maths lesson.

The mentorship dimension of the programme was viewed as excellent by each of the Fellows. Conor said, 'Children's Books Ireland have done a stellar job of matching mentors and mentees. It was very exciting to work with Dave Rudden. I had met him before either of us had started writing. Working with Dave has been the best part of the Fellowship for me. We met in person for every session. He helped me reconcile if my novel was a standalone book or part of a trilogy.'

Conor really enjoyed the online speaker session with Aoife Dooley, 'and the session with (Arts Council Head of Literature) Sarah Bannan was excellent. It is nice to have a better sense of the Arts Council'.

When the Fellows met as a group for the first time, Conor said 'It was like a family reunion' and he refers to the Fellows as his 'writing family'.

He explained that conference was 'amazing, to meet so many authors and illustrators that I admired. I had interviewed some of them on the podcast I produce but never met in person!'

Conor shared a highlight of his experience at Annaghmakerrig; 'I had finished all that I had planned to do by Wednesday. Nene and I found a fairy walk in the grounds with mushrooms. The sway of wind through the trees and the atmosphere provided a lovely little reset for me. I was delighted as the scene I was stuck with writing happened to be in a fairy ring!'

Members of the group have gained so much from the Fellowship. Conor explained that 'I now feel there is a next stage in my career as a writer in getting my book unlocked and the process furthered. It is very exciting'.

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Nene Longergan

Nene Lonergan is an Asian (Thai and Chinese) illustrator influenced by Japanese cartoons and comics

'It is great that Raising Voices is specifically promoting underrepresented voices. This is a good signal for society and where we are headed. I was surprised that there were not more artists of colour on the progamme but hopefully this aspect will develop further. It was a great week for me. I got the work experience I applied for on Monday and the email about the Fellowship on the Tuesday. I started jumping up and down, told my housemate, then another and my third housemate turned on our bubble machine to celebrate!'

Nene's mentorship with Chris Judge has given her increased confidence for art college: 'In college, you get critiqued so much, it was different to be supported and guided. I felt emotionally beaten up by college so it was nice to be believed in by Chris. His brief for a comic and the Fellowship programme pushed me back into gear.'

She summed up the speaker series overall saying it had 'great variety and an interesting mix of Arts Council, authors, illustrators and publishing agents. It included the creative and business sides. It was interesting how Louise O'Neill and Aoife Dooley had completely different approaches to their practice, showing there is no one right way'.

When the fellows met as a group for the first time, Nene observed that 'we were all surprised that we got on so well as we came from different backgrounds'.

As Nene explained: 'the Children's Books Ireland Conference was a wonderful experience. It helped to demystify the creative process. It was strange to see famous authors and illustrators walking around as normal human beings. It felt like an induction into an almost secret world of children's literature. I needed this Fellowship to feel confident to attend.'

She said the group got on so well that 'we worried we wouldn't get work done at Tyrone Guthrie as we would chat so much. It is lucky that I draw while I talk! I am very grateful for this opportunity. As Fellows we all agreed that we didn't realise the extent of what was included in the programme when reading the list. I had never heard of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, for example. The Fellowship has been instrumental in my career. We are always told at art college that it is practically impossible to make a career out of art but this programme has made that goal more achievable'.

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Carol McGill

Carol McGill writes poetry and fiction for young adults through modern day retelling of historic tales with an LGBTQ+ theme

When I saw the spec for Raising Voices, although I wasn't expecting to get it, I was just so impressed that Children's Books Ireland are doing this. The organisation is just incredible, such a blessing and it really shouldn't exist as it is so cool! We Fellows all feel this. The fact that Children's Books Ireland not only exists but is also putting active and focused effort into increasing diversity and representation in children's books is so wonderful. They understand the importance of this.'

Carol was at work when she received the email, 'I had to run outside to ring my Mum. Some colleagues passed me in the corridor and asked 'Why do you look so happy?' It was great fun.'

She said having a mentor has been incredible. 'We have been meeting in person throughout. Moïra Fowley Doyle said that she devoured my book when she was reading, which is the dream. She suggested I cut one character completely and it was good advice. In our last meeting, we went over my cover letter and synopsis line by line. It is amazing to be ready to submit to publishers.'

She said 'the advice from the speaker series was very helpful. Louise O'Neill gave amazing advice to enjoy your manuscript as yours before it gets published and before further input, as you can get so caught up in wanting to get published you can miss this opportunity.'

The way the group connected has become part of the strength of the Fellowship for Carol: 'We are good friends. It is nice to be walking into this professional space for the first time with friends.'

Carol said that the Children's Books Ireland conference 'was a joy with so many heroes in the room. I got to talk to author and publisher Siobhán Parkinson about how much I loved Amelia when I was twelve years old. There was a great focus on diversity, particularly with the speakers from Scotland. I felt very supported.'

She felt Tyrone Guthrie was a 'dream experience. I was very busy with work and struggling to find time to write on occasions. To have a whole week in such an incredible place was a dream come true. We enjoyed the wonderful food and swam in the lake.'

RAISING VOICES

Kate Moore

Kate Moore creates realist queer fiction and drama for young adults in an Irish setting.

'I have been writing for years and when I saw the ad on Twitter, I felt that the opportunity was unmissable and almost too good to be true. I applied as I am an early career LGBTQ+ writer and usually explore queer themes in my writing.'

Kate said, 'I remember the specific moment that I heard I had been selected. I read the email and froze at the news and then I cried with joy and rang my Mam to tell her all about it.'

She loved her mentorship. 'Sarah Maria Griffin was one of three authors that I suggested I would like to work with. We have a very similar approach. She was very generous, upfront and honest with her bespoke advice.'

She also felt that 'the industry sessions with Conor Hackett and Sarah Bannan were most useful.'

When the Fellows met as a group for the first time, Kate says: 'I felt absolute joy.'

Kate found the conference 'really friendly. There was lovely advice from presenters and attendees and I felt a great sense of community.'

She talked about how they 'travelled together in two groups – four (Jen, Nene, Kate and Aileen) and two (Conor and Carol) – to get to Annaghmakerrig. We had a few hours with author/illustrator and Raising Voices mentor Celine Kiernan each day and it was an excellent process.'

RAISING VOICES

Aileen Swansen

Aileen Swansen is an illustrator with a naïve style working in digital and traditional media.

Aileen felt she learned a lot from her mentor Peter Donnelly. 'Children's Books Ireland picked the perfect person for me. Our work styles are similar and Peter has a background in animation. It has been really helpful looking through drafts together. We haven't met in person yet but Zoom has been perfect for the mentoring.'

The speaker series was an opportunity to hear different experts in the field. Aileen enjoyed hearing 'great general advice from sales agent Conor Hackett on submitting. Writer, editor and writing coach Niamh Mulvey also gave amazing advice. Illustrator Aoife Dooley and author Louise O'Neill were great and I am looking forward to author Deirdre Sullivan this week.'

On meeting as a group for the first time, Aileen says, 'When all of us came together it was like being surrounded by a comfy blanket.'

Aileen said the 'conference was so welcoming but a bit intimidating and I wish I'd put myself out there more. I feel I have gained more confidence through the Fellowship and can go back next year to build on this.'

She said that the Tyrone Guthrie Centre 'was a life-changing experience. It made me feel like a legitimate artist. It is a really nice, supportive environment and there are lots of other artists to talk to there. It was the first experience like this that I have ever had.'

The relationship with the Tyrone Guthrie Centre has had an ongoing influence and Aileen explained, 'when we were at the centre, Dr Éimear O'Connor, the Director, had lunch with us and gave us great advice on our careers. Then she came to our showcase at the Dublin Book Festival in November. She was there early and the first person waiting for the showcase to start; it was like a family member coming to your school play. I was thrilled!'

Aileen said that the advice from Celine Kiernan has made her 'think about the future beyond the projects that I am working on. She has given me a good solid plan. The showcase was a highlight for me. I am very nervous sharing unfinished work. I did a lot of preparation work and asked others for presentation tips. It went really well for me and all the Fellows. It was a moment of connection for us all and was nice to share what was achieved during the year.'

RAISING VOICES

Jen Wallace

Jen Wallace is a writer of poetry and stories for children's picturebooks.

'[Raising Voices] was very big news. My children found me jumping around the house. It has really helped get my voice heard. Being accepted has given me huge confidence and a sense of empowerment. I have a career pathway now, when before it was all vague and unattainable'. At the outset the selected Fellows were asked by Children's Books Ireland about their expectations for the Fellowship and as Jen comments, 'It is just so rare to be asked "What do you need?" It made me sit down and look at my access needs properly. Overall this helped promote huge personal growth.'

Jen felt the mentorship with Catherine Ann Cullen was really helpful. 'Halfway through the process I had to shift my thinking and way of telling stories. The nature of the mentorship over a few months facilitated that. I want to put in place a regular mentor for myself as a result of this process.'

Jen underlines that 'the Fellowship was great for experiencing different things. I now feel supported to step into this arena that was alien to me. I went to ProperBook in Bantry (professional development for authors and illustrators programmed by Children's Books Ireland and Sarah Webb) with Kate and Aileen. This was my first time ever at a literary event or festival and I have been writing for years!'

She said that the most beneficial talks for her 'were with Niamh Mulvey and Louise O'Neill. I learned a lot about building a good daily writing practice. Aoife Dooley also shared gems with us'.

Jen highlighted 'as fellows we represent quite a span of life experience with our ages ranging from 22 to 48 years old! Meeting was lovely. Everyone is so supportive. We immediately got on, sat together at conference, went to lunch and dinner together'.

Jen found the conference experience both wonderful and quite overwhelming. 'It was amazing and we had a great welcome. We thought we could go in quietly until we saw our photos on the screen (as part of Children's Books Ireland's update). I hadn't tweaked how important the Raising Voices Fellowship is for so many people. We were awestruck when author Mary Watson came to talk to us!'

'Annaghmakerrig blew me away. I began to cry when I entered the room. It is a place for honouring the craft. I plan to go back every year. … The residency with Tyrone Guthrie was the first time in my career that I ever had a dedicated day to myself for writing! It was such a feeling and a real gift.'

Jen feels that 'we have all been given a really solid introduction into the children's literature sector. I have grown as a writer and have a clear idea of what is needed next. I am very excited about the possibilities that have opened up'.

She explained that she has a range of skills and experience as a neurodiverse writer that she would be happy to share with Children's Books Ireland. 'I can provide input on the kinds of visual supports and management strategies that help neurodiverse writers like myself. I would be very happy to talk through my ideas on how to help Fellows in future programmes.'

Mentors

The mentors' experience was also positive with many benefitting greatly from the mentoring process themselves as well as offering guidance for the Fellows. They were very impressed with the range of supports provided.

'At the start of the project I didn't fully know what my role would be but after our first few meetings we got to know how each other work. Nene is a very accomplished artist but clearly still at the early part of her career (she is still a student in Limerick School of Art and Design in her final year). Her passion for learning and understanding how the industry works was infectious and I believe I learned a lot from her myself. I believe she will be an important voice in Irish literature in the future.

At the start of the project, we discussed what she would like to achieve. She decided she would like to be able to create a comic based on her own life that she could read at the final evening of the mentorship. Over the course of the project, we met on Zoom once a month and critiqued what she was working on. It was amazing to see the leaps and bounds she took while working on them.

I didn't know anything about the other authors and illustrators in Raising Voices and it was a wonderful surprise to hear them all talking [at the showcase event] about what they all achieved. Raising Voices is a uniquely important project bridging the gap between established Irish writers and illustrators and new talented writers and illustrators.

The main observation that I took from Raising Voices is that Irish children's books are in very safe hands for the future. I can't wait to see next year's batch of talent.'

Chris Judge, Mentor to Nene Lonergan

'I'm not sure I've ever seen such a thorough and varied programme of supports, I would love to have done it myself at some stage! It was a pleasure to be involved as a Raising Voices mentor with Jen Wallace, who writes from her perspective as an autistic person. Jen was juggling many projects, but after the first session, her focus became sharper, and her confidence seemed to grow with the programme. By the end, she had two clear longer projects and a few shorter ones. It was exciting to see her chapter book Nana and Bea develop with real characters and potential for a series. Dinosaur Moon came later but it too has strong potential. It was exhilarating to be in the audience at the New Theatre to hear the great work of all six mentees and to see how they championed one another.

I was impressed with the suite of supports in the Raising Voices programme, from the week in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, to time with editors, registration for the Children's Books Ireland conference, and the public reading, along with the sessions themselves. I have mentored in other schemes where the programme was confined to a series of workshops. The guidelines we were given by Raising Voices were clear on what was expected of mentor and mentee, Aoife from Children's Books Ireland checked in to make sure all was going well, and payment was prompt! I was delighted to work on this excellent programme and would be happy to support Raising Voices again.'

Catherine Ann Cullen, Mentor to Jen Wallace

'As someone does a lot of mentorship for aspiring authors, a particular positive point of Raising Voices is that you are not so much leading a mentee as running to catch up. Taking an already strong manuscript and looking for ways to push it that extra ten or fifteen per cent is a new and interesting challenge, and one that I really enjoyed. Overall, the mentorship programme was really rewarding for me.

The structure is good, I felt very supported by its organisers, both financially and logistically, and though I was unable to attend the showcase due to work, I think Raising Voices does an excellent job of not just providing writing support, but support in how to be a writer – whether that's availing of residencies, speaking to publishers, or glimpsing our often-opaque industry from the inside. Delighted to have been involved, and looking forward to working with them again!'

Dave Rudden, Mentor to Conor Bredin

'I was delighted to take part in the Raising Voices Fellowship. It was a privilege to be asked to be part of a programme highlighting voices so often underrepresented in literature for young people.

I was paired with Carol, a young author of young adult fiction. She is a writer of great talent, with a sharp and distinctive voice. It was such a pleasure to read each section and draft she sent me. I very much enjoyed the time I spent with her story and I hope that my feedback and advice gave her guidance and strengthened her confidence in her work. I very much look forward to seeing her books on the shelves.

It was lovely to meet with her in person over the course of the Fellowship, and to be able to share support and advice, both creative and practical, that I would have loved at that stage of my career. It was a joy to talk craft, characters, and publishing with a fellow author eager for that conversation, and at the same time having these conversations were equally nourishing for my own practice.

Seeing and hearing the culmination of the six Fellows' work in the showcase at the Dublin Book Festival, I was blown away by the quality of the work of each writer and artist, and reminded, over and again, of how deeply necessary it is for underrepresented voices to be uplifted and shared. As a queer neurodivergent mother myself, I was moved by the different stories for all ages created with such unique eyes and talents.'

Moïra Fowley Doyle, Mentor to Carol McGill

'By the time I met the Raising Voices Fellows, they had already been working with their mentors and honing their projects for quite some time. As such, I was in the perfect position to see the effect that the Fellowship had had on them as artists.

My fear with some mentoring projects is that the less experienced artist will be subsumed by their mentor's voice, or in comparing themselves to a more experienced creator lose courage in their own work (artistic vision is often so fragile and the drive to create so easily deflated by self-doubt). Happily this was not the case with the Raising Voices Fellows. I found the Fellows creatively energised and enthusiastic, and all still very devoted to and focused on their individual creative vision and flair, while also having benefited from the clarity and best practices learned through working with a mature artist. I hope that I was of some use to them in our short time together, but I can say with certainty that they were of great benefit to me.

I found them inspiring and energising. It was encouraging to see how much genuine support, guidance and encouragement the Fellowship had given them, and also how much support and encouragement they gave each other. I firmly believe that an opportunity like this must come at a specific time in a person's creative journey, and I think it is a testament to the application and selection process that these artists were at the perfect time in their creative lives for this Fellowship. This experience will, I have no doubt, help them grow as artists and encourage them to make strong and meaningful decisions in their careers to come.'

Celine Kiernan, Mentor to the Fellows during their week at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre

The Future of Raising Voices

When asked for suggestions for future iterations of Raising Voices, the Fellows made a range of recommendations. Jen felt that 'it would be good to have a talk about presenting and public speaking to help prepare for the showcase'. Conor said it would be useful to hear from someone who has previously been to the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in advance of the residency as 'this takes the pressure off feeling you must create something finished'. Aileen wanted other artists to have this wonderful experience, 'keep the Fellowship going next year and give the opportunity to others'. Carol said, 'it is such an amazing scheme as it is. It might be good to meet the other fellows in person sooner as that is when everything felt more real for me!' Nene made a simple request for the next selected group: 'branded Raising Voices T-shirts for the Fellows would be great!'

A number of the fellows commented on how helpful it was to have the interviews which informed their case studies to describe and discuss their experience. Jen said it was like an exit interview; she had been looking forward to it as a way of signing off on what was achieved, and it was part of feeling supported as she had been throughout the scheme. Aileen and Carol said it really helped them to evaluate what they had got from the Fellowship and to focus on its importance.

The Raising Voices Fellowship has been deemed a success as a programme by partners, Mentors and Fellows. The impact on the careers of the six selected fellows has been described as 'life-changing', 'a dream come true' and 'an absolute joy'. There has been remarkable camaraderie between the fellows that will continue, and life-long friendships have been forged. The programme appears to have a strong structure, partnership approach and legacy dimension. All involved have commented that Raising Voices should continue and the merit of this should be clear from this report.

Children's Books Ireland is actively seeking funding for future iterations of the Raising Voices programme in order to extend its impact to a new cohort of fellows. We intend to focus specifically on writers and illustrators from backgrounds which were not represented in the pilot programme, and which continue to be underrepresented in children's literature in Ireland.

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RAISING VOICES

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