

Life in the Literary Bubble: The 2018 Maurice Saxby Creative Development Program

By Ashleigh Hardcastle

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I am an emerging Perth-based writer who enjoys reading and writing contemporary fiction for young adults.

My novel, *Say I Can Stay*, is told from the perspective of a 15-year-old girl called Olive, who is forced to face her fear of change when Salima, a Muslim refugee from Syria, moves onto her farm in the WA Wheatbelt. The two girls develop a hesitant friendship against a background of Islamophobia and small-town mentality.

PROLOGUE

In 2018, five lucky Australian writers were selected to take part in a grand literary adventure, known as the Maurice Saxby Creative Development Program (MSCDP).

Run by the Children's Book Council of Australia (Victorian Branch), with the assistance of The Copyright Agency Cultural Fund, the MSCDP offers emerging children's writers and illustrators a two-week mentorship in Melbourne. The program matches the five winners with an established author/illustrator to provide feedback on their work and introduces them to various aspects of the publishing world.

I was one of the lucky ones. This is my story.

CHAPTER 1: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Having soared into Melbourne from Perth on the red-eye, the first day of my grand literary adventure began with the somewhat daunting task of navigating peak-hour trams on two hours of sleep. I somehow managed to make it to my Airbnb accommodation – a glorified shed in Richmond – where I had a short nap in the hope of bringing my functioning back up to a human level. Instead, I woke with a headache and the niggling sense that, at just 27 years of age, I was perhaps getting too old for red-eye flights.



The first day whizzed by and before I knew it, it was time for stop one on the program – a meet and greet at the Marriott Hotel. It was here that I was introduced to some of the superstars behind the program: Pam Horsey, Helen Chamberlin, and Suzanne Thwaites. I was also greeted by a previous participant, Rebecca Green, who spoke fondly of her experience of the program in 2016.

Most exciting, though, was meeting the four talented writers I would be sharing this adventure with: Nat Amooore (Sydney), Maura Finn (Melbourne), Mike Barry (Sydney), and Maggie Jankuloska (Melbourne). We chatted over drinks, swapping details of our current projects and marvelling at how fortunate we were to have been selected to take part. It was invigorating to be surrounded by people who shared a passion for writing for children, and it was clear I'd be in good company for the next two weeks.

After the meet-up, I headed straight back to my shed for some much-needed sleep!

CHAPTER 2: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SHELF

As you might imagine, I'm no stranger to bookstores. I've spent many an hour holed-up in the YA section of my local stores, scouring the shelves for intriguing titles to add to my ever-growing 'to-read' mountain. But our visits to specialist children's bookstores in Melbourne on Day 2 of the program opened my eyes to the inner workings of these outlets and dispelled some false assumptions.

Readings Kids

First off, we met with manager Angela Crocombe at *Readings Kids*, a 'speciality children's and young adult bookshop that...welcomes families and people of all ages who enjoy children's and young adult literature' (<https://www.readings.com.au/kids-shop>).

Angela gave us a behind-the-scenes tour of the store, showing us how they select books two to three months in advance from the selling sheets provided by publishers. She spoke about what helps children's books sell, including shelf-talkers, short-listings/awards, and eye-catching covers (note to self: orange is over-done!). She explained that the bulk of their sales happen in October and November for Christmas, so this is not an ideal time for a debut book to be published because they're focusing on the big titles.

Before heading to the next store, the other participants and I chatted with our marvellous chaperone, Helen Chamberlin, over lunch. I got a laugh when the waiter brought out my Coke Zero and asked who had ordered the 'black poison' (only in Melbourne!).

The Little Bookroom

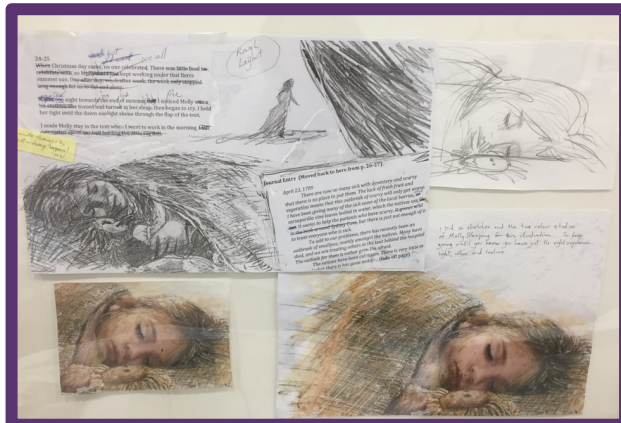
Next, we met with Michael Earp at *The Little Bookroom*, a ‘thriving shop and events space...bringing authors, illustrators, publishers and readers together in a welcoming, respectful, inclusive community space’ (<https://www.littlebookroom.com.au/>).

Here, Michael spoke candidly about the challenges authors face in getting their books noticed. The key, he said, is to get to know the staff of your local bookstore in a ‘non-pushy I’ve-got-a-book’ kind of way, because staff recommendations are vital. With a history in book-selling, he was also able to give us a sneaky-peek into the strategies of sales reps.

CHAPTER 3: GETTING THE PICTURE

Dromkeen

‘Built in 1889, Dromkeen was once...home to the world famous Dromkeen Picture Book Art Collection. Today...guests to Dromkeen are able to visit our Tea Room, browse in the galleries or wander around the beautiful gardens’ (<https://www.dromkeen.com.au/>).



After joining fellow mentee, Nat (who was by now my-new-best-writerly-friend-and-Google-Maps-guide), for a traditional Melbourne breakfast, we were picked up and whisked off on a scenic drive to Dromkeen by the wonderful Pam Horsey. We were met by owner Bernadette Joiner and author/illustrator Mark Wilson, whose picture books were on exhibition in the gallery. Mark spoke openly about his work and his creative process as we stood in awe

of walls lined with his original artwork. The highlight, for me, were the displays showing the progression of his work from a rough sketch to a finished piece.

While we lunched in the picturesque dining room, we had a chance to read the gorgeous picture books our fellow mentee, Maura, had previously had published. This inspired further sharing and, over the next couple of weeks, the rest of us swapped manuscripts amongst



ourselves. It was exciting to see the diversity of our writing and inspiring to realise I was in the company of such amazing talent.

That night, I holed-up in my shed and did some last-minute preparation for my mentoring session the next morning. I was a restless combination of excited and terrified at the prospect of meeting the award-winning author Kirsty Murray in person.

CHAPTER 4: MEETING THE GURUS

Mentoring Session

My nerves about meeting Kirsty Murray (<http://kirstymurray.com/>) were completely unwarranted – she was incredibly warm, supportive, and generous with her time and knowledge. We'd already been in touch by email and phone, and she'd sent me extensive feedback on my manuscript prior to the meeting, so I was worried we'd run out of things to talk about. Not a chance! We met for breakfast and talked all-things-writing for over two hours, until my head was spinning and I couldn't wipe the grin off my face.



We problem-solved structural issues, plot flaws, and character weaknesses in my manuscript, then moved on to discussing the industry more widely. We talked about the pros and cons of getting an agent, when the right time to submit to a publisher might be, and how to improve my online presence, amongst a range of other topics. She suggested a tonne of resources I should check out and explained bizarre concepts such as 'public lending rights'. I left the café with a sizeable motivation boost and pages of hastily-typed notes I would later need to decipher.

Allen & Unwin

After my meeting with Kirsty, I raced off to meet the other mentees at Allen & Unwin, 'Australia's leading independent publisher' (<https://www.allenandunwin.com/>). There, we were greeted by Erica Wagner (Children's Publisher), who asked us about our projects and gave us each a chance to practice the one-sentence pitches we'd been working on. She



showed us some of their recent publications and described the roles of publishers, editors, and designers.

Erica explained the 'Friday Pitch', a weekly window in which they are open to unsolicited manuscripts. They generally receive around 30 to 40 a week. One staff member reads all submissions and takes them to a weekly meeting, and the author will hear back within two weeks if the publisher is interested in taking it further. However, this is far from the end

of the road. Four people will then look at the manuscript and at least one has to love it enough to fight for it. They noted that they can only take a certain quota of children's books, so they often have to turn down good work.

Shaun Tan

After lunch, we zipped across town to meet the incredibly talented author/illustrator, Shaun Tan (<http://www.shauntan.net/>). I was excited to meet the man behind my favourite picture book, *The Red Tree*, and was not disappointed. The guy's a genius – what else can I say? He spoke about his creative process and the joys and challenges of collaborating with other creators. He stressed the importance of paring back the text to the bare necessities, and said that the pictures and the text should each tell a story in isolation (they may or may not tell the *same* story). He gave the impression that he enjoys creating stark contrasts between words and pictures.



On my request, he shared the birth-story of *The Red Tree*, stating that he had started out simply illustrating different emotions to see what they would look like, intending to write a book without a story-arc. 'But the happy emotions were boring!' he said. He stated that he had received criticism about the book's ending early on, as the character shows little agency in her recovery. However, he opted not to change it, stating that the story reflects his own experience of depression.

My head buzzing with all the information I'd acquired over the past few hours, I headed off to meet a Melbourne-based friend for dinner and a glass (or three) of wine.

CHAPTER 5: BOOKS, NEW AND OLD

Penguin Random House

This morning we met with Amy Thomas (Editor) and Lisa Riley (Publisher) at Penguin Random House, 'the international home to nearly 250 editorially and creatively independent publishing imprints' (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/>). After introductions, they showed us some of their current catalogue and spoke about their submissions process. While they do take unsolicited manuscripts, they indicated that having an agent can help. They also



sometimes discover new work through the CYA and SCWBI conferences, and recommended getting involved in these.

They spoke about the importance of achieving an authentic young person's voice that feels natural and original, and encouraged us to avoid being too overt with messages/morals in our narratives. They said they are always looking for diverse characters, humour, and strong female characters.

The State Library of Victoria

After lunch, we gathered outside the State Library with the lovely Suzanne Thwaites, who introduced us to children's librarian Juliet O'Connor. Juliet lead us through a literary labyrinth to show us samples from the Children's Literature Research Collection. 'Australian and overseas children's books published during the last hundred years or so are the main focus of this collection. ...international children's books are selected to record important changes in the global children's book environment and to counterpoint the trends in Australian children's book publishing' (<https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/search-discover/explore-collections-theme/childrens-books/childrens-literature-research-collection>).





Afterwards, we had a sneaky tour of an old-fashioned catalogue room and took a ride in the 'elephant lift' (which, thankfully, did not break down half-way up), before perusing the 'World of the Book' exhibition.

That evening, Pam treated us to a delicious home-cooked meal. We sat, surrounded by shelves overflowing with books, and discussed all things writerly whilst enjoying the best vegetarian lasagne I've had in my life. She very nearly acquired a new boarder that night!

CHAPTER 6: A CITY IN A DAY

Given today was our only full day off, I was torn about how to best spend the time. There were so many things to see and do! I eventually settled on checking out the op-shopping scene in Brunswick. Suffice it to say, it was better than Perth's and many hours were spent rifling through jeans and bric-a-brac. Between today's efforts and the tonne of books I'd already bought, I was beginning to wonder if I'd need a private jet to get everything home.

CHAPTER 7: MEETING FUTURE FANS

CBCA Book Week Family Fun Day

We spent our Sunday helping out at the various stalls on offer at the Family Fun Day, held at the stunning Abbotsford Convent. While some of the mentees certainly displayed more talent for entertaining children than others (there's a reason I only write for ages 13 and up!), it was a great day and I enjoyed seeing and hearing stories being shared in all their forms.

CHAPTER 8: PRETTY PICTURES

Lucinda Gifford

We convened at Helen's house on Monday morning to meet with author/illustrator and previous MSCDP mentee, Lucinda Gifford (<http://lucindagifford.com/>). Lucinda showed us some of her sketch books and the top-secret projects she is working on at the moment, describing how she uses a combination of drawing, painting, and Photoshop to create her final illustrations. She spoke about the varying amount of directions she's been given by authors when illustrating their books and we learned that it's common for the author and illustrator to never have direct contact, which came as a surprise to me! She also shared tips

on managing school visits and discussed the pros and cons of getting an agent. Lucinda was generous with her knowledge and inspired us all with her incredible creative output since completing the program a few years ago.

Before leaving Helen's place, we all lined up to take shameless selfies with the spectacular 'Cicada' model, gifted to her by Shaun Tan himself.



Scribble



After breaking for lunch, we headed to Scribble, 'a vibrant, eclectic list of illustrated books for children by brilliant writers and artists from around the world' (<https://scribblekidsbooks.com/>). There we spoke with Kate O'Donnell (Project Editor) and Stephanie Siriwardene (Editorial Assistant). As we perused their recent publications, they explained that they specialise in publishing picture books with a

design focus. As such, their books can be best described as beautiful, with a European feel. They spoke about the importance of selling rights overseas and showed us examples of their books that have been translated. They explained that they are open for unsolicited submissions in the month of June and, when considering these, they look for diversity, a philosophical take on the world, and an authentic world view through the eyes of a child. They hope to expand into Middle Grade soon.

CHAPTER 9: THE BEAUTY OF BOOKS

Berbay Publishing

This morning we met for coffee with Alexandra Yatomi-Clarke from Berbay Publishing, a boutique children's publisher which 'brings depth to beautiful children's picture books that

are unique and eclectic, topics that are poignant and imaginative and artwork that is simply stunning' (<http://www.berbaybooks.com/>). Alexandra spoke of her passion for bringing together local and international creators, stating that they look for unique manuscripts that fall 'outside the box'. The advantage of boutique publishers, she said, is that you get real passion about your book.

Alexandra said they have recently started publishing board books and junior fiction, and plan to expand into YA in the very near future. She explained the importance of knowing there will be lots of 'firm sales' for a book (e.g. through book clubs) because book stores can return books to publishers if they don't sell. She also emphasised the need for authors to help build their own profile, through social media and other platforms.



After meeting with Alexandra, we had the rest of the day free. I spent the afternoon op-shopping (yes – again!) and getting tragically lost (note to self: ALWAYS use Google Maps, even when you're 110% sure you know where you're going, because the fact is – you don't).



Later, I headed off for another incredible dinner at Pam's place (AKA 'The Book Mansion'). I then returned to my shed to work on a short memoir to submit to a competition, managing to finish a very rough draft by the early hours of the morning. The longer I was away from home, I noticed, the more I was drifting back into the night-owl routine of my teenage years.

CHAPTER 10: THE LONGEST DAY THAT EVER EXISTED

Today was the most jam-packed day of the program, and began at the Melbourne Writer's Festival. We met for the compulsory dose of caffeine before heading into our first session.

Demet Divaroren: Living On Hope Street

I did a happy-dance when I found out we'd be seeing Demet Divaroren speak, because *Living on Hope Street* is one of the best contemporary YA novels ever written.



Demet began by speaking about the development of her writing career. As seems to be relatively common amongst authors, *Living on Hope Street* was her first novel to be published but her third to be written. She said one of her earlier books was shortlisted for the Vogel Prize and everyone told her 'You've made it!', but then it was rejected by publishers. 'Something was missing,' she said, explaining that she then had to adjust her expectations and learn to deal with rejection, telling herself that 'Each rejection is one step closer to publication.'

She spoke about how she develops authentic, relatable characters. For her, a character's voice comes to her first, usually with a single line (e.g. Kane's 'When Dad broke Mum, he did it with the best intentions'). Then she begins to ask questions (Why does he think that? Why is he like that?).

She started with three main characters, but the number of perspectives given in *Living on Hope Street* kept growing as she realised certain characters needed to have their own voices in order to become more than a label. 'I hate labels!' she said.

In relation to writing characters from other cultures/backgrounds, she said she begins by focusing on the emotions of the character and only then considers other details. She asks herself 'What does he/she want? How does he/she feel?', and looks for a point of emotional connection with the character.

For me, this was one of the most informative sessions of all those we attended in the two weeks.

If you haven't read *Living on Hope Street*, I highly recommend it. Grab a copy here: <https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/childrens/young-adult-fiction/Living-on-Hope-Street-Demet-Divaroren-9781760292096>.

Creative Careers

Can you have a day job and still be a writer? Yes, you can! Blogger and activist Carly Findlay and children's editor and author Melissa Keil spoke candidly about how they balance work and writing. They pointed out the benefits of a day job, including:

- If you write full-time and depend on this for your income, the pressure can take some of the joy out of writing

- A day job can provide a source of ideas/inspiration
- Writing can be lonely and a day job provides social connection

Other thoughts I took away from the session were:

- It's normal to look back and cringe at bits of your early work
- Your story is never going to resonate with *everyone*, but it will resonate with the people who need it



Text Publishing

After leaving the writer's festival, we raced off to meet Jane Pearson (Editor) at Text Publishing, an 'independent, Melbourne-based publisher of literary and commercial fiction and non-fiction' which prides itself on publishing 'books that make a difference to people's lives' (<https://www.textpublishing.com.au/>). Jane spoke about the importance Text places on fostering relationships with authors, which includes consulting the author on every single editorial suggestion (all of which are marked in pencil on a hard copy of the manuscript, old-school style).

Jane encouraged us to submit our YA and middle-grade manuscripts into The Text Prize in 2019. 'But only if you're confident it's ready,' she cautioned, as the prize is highly competitive. While there can only be one winner, she noted that short-listed works are also often accepted for publication.

She explained their submissions process. Unsolicited submissions (the first three chapters, in hard copy) are read by two people every Friday afternoon, with a three to four month turnaround. Alternatively, if your manuscript is submitted via an agent or through another author's recommendation, it is seen by the entire team and a reader is allocated. She spoke about the importance of the pitch letter, because that informs how the book will be pitched to the rest of the team by the initial reader. For a book to progress to the next level, an editor, a publicist, and a marketer need to be on board.



An Evening With... At Ford Street Publishing

We spent the evening at Ford Street Publishing, drinking wine, mingling, and listening to four fabulous writers speak about their work.

First up, we heard from the engaging George Ivanoff, 'a Melbourne author who's written more than 100 books for kids and teens, including...the interactive *You Choose* series' (<http://georgeivanoff.com.au/>). He spoke about his writing career and how he tackled various projects, including using a giant whiteboard to map out all the possible pathways in his interactive novels.

Next, we heard from a panel of three amazing female authors – Cath Crowley, Simmone Howell, and Fiona Wood – who collaborated to produce the award-winning novel *Take Three Girls* (<https://www.panmacmillan.com.au/9781742612744/>). I was excited to hear their discussion, as I was two-thirds of the way through their book and loving it! Thankfully, they didn't give any spoilers.

The three authors spoke about the joys and challenges of writing a book collaboratively, and I had fun guessing which character each of them had written before the big reveal. The biggest challenge they faced in writing the book, they said, was just trying to get all three of them in the same room at the same time. As a result, the book took six years to write!

When they do school visits, they speak to students about feminism. They said they are often surprised by how few students are willing to call themselves feminists, until they explain what the term actually means without all the connotations society pins onto it. They said they are amazed by how difficult schools are finding it to get boys to read the book, purely because of its bright pink cover, and expressed hope that one day we will live in a world where boys aren't afraid to read pink books. Amen to that!

After the presentation, I took my copy of *Take Three Girls* up to be signed and thanked Fiona Wood for writing a character who is what I like to call 'quietly queer' – we need more of them! For too long, the only LGBTIQ characters we have seen in YA fiction have been in books that centre on their coming out story. As a teenager coming to terms with my own sexuality, I would have loved to have accidentally stumbled across Ady's character in *Take Three Girls*.

You can read more about the authors here:

<https://www.cathcrowleyauthor.com/>

<http://www.simmonehowell.com.au/>

<https://fionawood.com/>

CHAPTER 11: FANGIRLING

Today brought with it another visit to the Melbourne Writer's Festival, where I would be meeting one of my childhood idols – the incredible John Marsden. I woke feeling like I might

vomit from a combination of nerves and excitement (thankfully, I did not) and my fellow mentees had to kindly remind me that John would not be quizzing me on my work or standing in judgement over my worth as an author (cheers, guys!).

John Marsden & Alice Pung

First up, we joined excited high school students in a session with John Marsden and Alice Pung. For those of you who aren't familiar with John Marsden's work, you should be! Check it out here: <http://www.johnmarsden.com.au/>. Alice Pung is the award winning writer of several books, including the YA novel *Laurinda* (<https://www.alicepung.net/>).

The two authors spoke about the importance of developing complex characters. For both of them, the voice of a character is what comes first. If a character doesn't have a strong, authentic voice, they aren't going to work. They both put bits of themselves and people they know into their characters, but they rarely construct a character based on a single person.

Alice spoke briefly about her admiration of John's work, saying she identified strongly with Lee from *Tomorrow, When the War Began*.

John mentioned that he has, at times, been criticised for writing about dark subjects like familial violence, juvenile detention, and mental health issues. In response to this, he points out that he does not just write about dark topics – he writes about people who are finding their way through difficult circumstances and trying different ways of dealing with them.

John Marsden

After the presentation, I had a brief moment to get myself together (or to get even more nervous, as it were), before we were swept off to meet the big guy himself. For coffee. I HAD COFFEE WITH JOHN MARSDEN!!!

Actually, as it turns out, he's more of an orange-juice-and-croissant kind of guy. But that's beside the point.

John told us he had once heard there are four kinds of writers: the bricklayers, the architects, the water colourists, and the oil painters. He, at times, has been all four. He explained that, for him, writing is about taking something you don't fully understand and getting to some level of understanding by delving inside the characters' heads. He linked this to his experience in a psychiatric hospital, where he met a girl who didn't speak. The



memory of her stayed with him long after he left, and one of his characters developed from his attempt to understand her silence.

When it came to question time, I jumped in. I knew he'd recently received criticism for his portrayal of the foreign enemy in the *Tomorrow* series, which was written more than 25 years ago. I explained that I had recently been feeling overwhelmed by all the discussion around cultural sensitivity, and this had affected the character development in my current novel. I asked if he had any advice about writing characters from different backgrounds/cultures.

'Be bold,' he said. 'Be brave.' He pointed out that if we all only wrote from our own perspectives, literature would be pretty boring. He said there will inevitably be some people who disagree with our work, and we need to be ready with our counter-arguments (such as 'Writing is about developing empathy'). He spoke about his picture book *The Rabbits* (illustrated by Shaun Tan), which recently celebrated its 20-year anniversary. He said he has had some Indigenous readers criticise it heavily, yet just recently he was met by a group of Indigenous fans from a remote community who had all bought copies and were eager to have them signed.

I could easily have quizzed John all day, but unfortunately he had to race off to another event. Before he could escape, though, I got him to sign my yellowed copy of *Letters from the Inside*, which is one of my favourites (even though the ending drives me mad!).

'I was surprised that one got published,' he said with a twinkle in his eye as he handed the book back to me.

Jessica Townsend: Nevermoor

In the afternoon, we joined a room full of enthusiastic school kids for a presentation by Jessica Townsend, award-winning author of *Nevermoor: The Trials of Morrigan Crow* (<https://www.hachette.com.au/jessica-townsend/nevermoor-the-trials-of-morrigan-crow>), which is hailed as being the new *Harry Potter*. Being a huge HP fan and not having had a chance to read *Nevermoor* (though it *is* sitting in my gigantic to-read pile), I'm yet to be convinced that this is a fair comparison. However, I'm somewhat more willing to be persuaded after hearing Jessica speak.

Jessica shocked the audience with her admission that it took a decade to write the first book in her series. She seemed pretty confident that it won't take so long to write the next eight, however! She shared some tips with the audience, including:

- Write for the love of writing – don't worry about pleasing readers or trying to write what will sell
- Finish something! Write until the end
- Avoid reading your reviews on sites like Goodreads. Those sites are for readers, not authors
- Getting the right name for a character helps to find their voice

Drinks & Nibbles

That evening, after racing around the city trying to find the perfect thank you gifts for our wonderful hosts, we headed to Suzanne's house for drinks and nibbles with the MSCDP committee members, mentors, and former mentees.



Not usually big on small-talk, I was surprised by how easily conversations flowed. It seems children's literature attracts all the nicest people! The night came to an end too quickly and, knowing that tomorrow would bring the end of our program, I wasn't quite ready to go back to my shed. And so it was that I saw in the arrival of our final day chatting with Nat over wine and hummus. While we were talking, I had the privilege of being the very first person to hear the plot of her next book, which I am now itching to read and will continue to nag her about until I can!



CHAPTER 12: TYING UP LOOSE ENDS

The final day began with hash browns (to soak up the wine) and coffee (to compensate for two weeks of sleep deprivation). I spent my morning finalising and submitting another short memoir, before heading off to our last event.

Curtis Brown

The last stop on our journey was a visit that we hoped would answer a burning question: to agent, or not to agent? We'd heard a lot of perspectives on agents over the past two weeks, but we were yet to speak with one directly. We convened on a suburban street at the address provided and approached a grey garage door, unsure if we were in the right location. It felt like we were creeping into a speakeasy, rather than meeting with a representative from Curtis Brown, 'Australia's oldest and largest literary agency' (<https://www.curtisbrown.com.au/>). However, when the door slid back to reveal a spacious office, our fears were quelled.

We were greeted by agent Clare Forster, who outlined the benefits of having an agent, including:

- They help to refine the work prior to submission to publishers

- They negotiate between the author and publisher
- They are better able to encourage competition and higher returns
- Manuscripts submitted by agents are more likely to be read quickly by publishers

Clare explained that some writers get an agent at the beginning of their careers, and others when they've had a few books published. If submitting to Curtis Brown, she encouraged us to show our dedication in our covering letter by outlining any past publications, programs we've participated in, and awards we've received. A good blurb, solid synopsis, and strong sample chapter are also essential. It's important we know where our book fits into the market and that it's appropriate for the audience. She discouraged us from having a book professionally edited prior to submitting to an agent or publisher, as the publisher will usually want to do another edit.

After leaving Curtis Brown, we said goodbye to fellow mentees Maura and Maggie, who lived locally and would therefore be returning to their 'real lives' immediately. Mike, Nat, and I – the three interstaters – headed into the city for one last meal together before our flights home. During the tram ride, it became apparent that one member of our party had crossed the line from hungry to hangry, so the pressure was on to find food fast! As we sat slurping giant bowls of laksa and tom yum, it hit me just how much I was going to miss these guys (hangry-ness and all). I had found my literary family, and now I had to say goodbye.

EPILOGUE

As my plane left the ground later that night, my head felt on the verge of bursting with all the new information I'd acquired and I was a muddy puddle of emotions. I was sorry the program was over, but glad to be going home. I was inspired and excited to continue my work, but disillusioned by the knowledge of the challenges ahead. I felt sad to be leaving my literary bubble, but happy to know I'd made some amazing new friends – even if there would soon be an entire continent between us!

The MSCDP had been an incredible ride and, though the program had come to an end, I knew that for me – for all five of us, in fact – it was really just the beginning of a much greater journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the MSCDP committee members, particularly Pam Horsey (AKA 'Professor McGonagall'), Helen Chamberlin (AKA 'Yoda'), and Suzanne Thwaites (AKA 'Joy'), for all the time, energy, and passion you have dedicated to this amazing program. Without you, none of this would have been possible!

Thank you, also, to the fabulous Kirsty Murray for going above and beyond what was expected, sharing your infinite wisdom, and pointing out the good, the bad, and the ugly in my manuscript. I couldn't have asked for a better mentor!

A massive shout out to my fellow mentees (or 'Minties', as we became known) for being so amazingly you. Meeting you all was the highlight of the program and I sincerely hope we keep in touch. I can't wait to see your books on the shelves in the not-too-distant future!

To Rebecca Green, Katie Flannigan, and the other past mentees who took the time to join us throughout the program – it was lovely to meet you, and I look forward to seeing where your journeys lead.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Copyright Agency for supporting my participation in this program with an IGNITE Grant. The Copyright Agency is a not-for-profit rights management organisation that ensures artists, writers and publishers are fairly rewarded for the reproduction of their work. The agency's Cultural Fund provides grants to creative individuals and organisations for a diverse range of projects which aim to enrich Australian cultural life. Their support is greatly appreciated.