

SKETCHY DETAILS

Mike Barry's 2018 Maurice Saxby Creative Development Program Journal



DAY 01 - MEET THE FAMILY

After a chilled out flight from Sydney to Melbourne, I decided to kill some time in the city by leaving my luggage in the back of a taxi. As 5pm - and the official Welcome Drinks - loomed, I then began frantically Googling headshots of my fellow **Maurice Saxby Creative Development Program** mentees before rocking into the Marriot like I owned the place.

Within minutes, I found myself surrounded by, and even involved in, conversations about writing, traveling, parenting, tweeting, eating, reading... and it was hard not to be struck by the overall warmth of this group. This was going to be great.

DAY 02 - WHY BUYERS BUY BOOKS

On a day when the weather was described by emerging author/creative tour-de-force **Nat Amore** as being 'reasonably bearable' (she's another soft Sydney-sider like me), we were lucky enough to visit two of Melbourne's most iconic, kid-focused bookstores.

Between **Angela at Readings Kids** and **Michael at The Little Bookroom**, my fellow mentees (or *Mintees*, as legendary 'editor to the stars' **Helen Chamberlain** accidentally called us in an amusing group text one time) and I learned all about the preferences, pitfalls and processes of building the glorious, diverse collections within each of these independent stores.

DAY 03 - LITERALLY LITERARY

I'm not sure if it was the calibre of articulate company I was keeping or simply the densely populated bookshelves lining every wall of my generous host **Pam Horsey's** house, but a sudden, growing awareness of how many books I've read vs how many actually exist was, at this early stage of the trip, threatening to overrun me. Such foolish insecurities were banished, however, by today's unforgettable visit to legendary literary estate **Dromkeen**.

We were warmly welcomed by our host **Bernadette Joiner**, as well as prolific, completely magnetic Australian writer and illustrator **Mark Wilson**. He had no shortage of entertaining and insightful tales to share with us about his adventures through the publishing industry. He was generous and encouraging, hilarious and kind, and would not allow any of us to conclude our visit without recommitting to a path of self belief.



STAYING AT PAM'S: SO MANY BOOKS.

DAY 04 - ACCESS ALL AREAS

Erica Wagner (Publisher) and **Susannah Chambers** (Editor) at Allen & Unwin hosted a truly wonderful session this morning, centred around one of the **great mysteries of the world** - what actually happens inside a Publisher's office.

Two Things Everyone Else Probably Knows But I Didn't:

- i) The Publisher (the person, not the company) is the one who takes a manuscript/book/idea on, and becomes its advocate within the Publisher (the company, not the person).
- ii) The Editor, with oversight from the Publisher, then does all the work with the Author of turning the thing into an actual book.

Another **great mystery of the world** is how we managed to then find ourselves spending the afternoon drinking tea and talking creative processes with the incomparable **Shaun Tan** (not a typo - really happened). He even had a look at *Action Tank* and asked me about my process (not a typo - really happened). After partially blacking out from excitement, I fortunately regained my composure in time to pop off a group selfie and hear Shaun's final thoughts on the storytelling power of contradiction between text and image.

DAY 05 - ABC (ALWAYS BE CURATING)

A publisher is a Curator, which is to say it's not just whether they like your work, it's whether your work fits within the goals of their overall list. Today's terrific session at Penguin Random House with Editor **Amy Thomas** and Publisher **Lisa Riley** revealed a wealth of insight into this curation process, and also featured a crash course in both the creative and commercial considerations to think through when submitting work to a publisher.

The afternoon saw us hit up (quietly) the Victorian State Library Children's Literature Archive. Among some other memorable moments, I found myself nervously turning the pages of a 200 year old picture book, hoping against hope it wouldn't disintegrate in my hands, because then I'd have to make it look like my fellow mentee **Ashleigh Hardcastle** did it which would be a real shame because I was growing quite fond of her but the fact is if it's between me and her then obviously it's got to be her.

DAY 06 - BUT IT'S SUNDAY?

Today was the CBCA Family Fun Day at Abbotsford Convent. I should mention it was also a Sunday, which confused me, since my understanding of being a writer is that it's about wearing pyjama pants all day and definitely not about getting out of bed on Sunday.

Nevertheless, it was an excellent event. I painted many faces and lucked into an awesome conversation with NYT Bestselling author, **Adam Wallace**. As I suppose I am hoping to, he emerged from self-publishing roots, meaning he seemed to know everything I wanted to ask before I asked it. He's my new favourite everything.

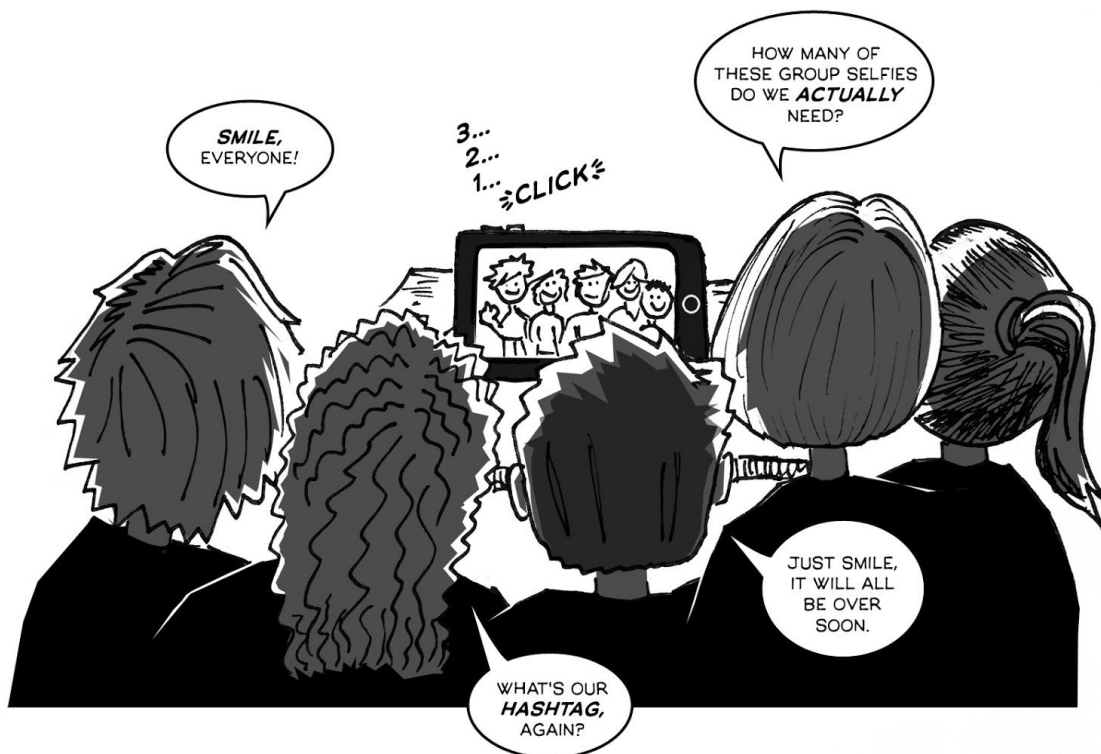


SO, TO SUMMARISE, EVERYONE WANTED TO BE SPIDER-MAN.

DAY 07 - DRAWN CONCLUSIONS

What a treat to spend the morning with brilliant illustrator (and former Maurice Saxby mentee) **Lucinda Gifford**. Not only is she responsible for the visual effectiveness of Barry Family favourites such as *The Cat Wants Custard*, she was also cool enough to let me direct her in a series of totally staged group selfies. She's pumping out consistently gorgeous projects in a prolific manner, and the only thing that impressed me more than her work ethic was her openness in answering our questions.

We then paid a visit to Scribble, the children's arm of Scribe Publishing. The level of production on their books is astounding, as they pair an authentic 'modern kid' worldview with spot varnishes, pantone swatches, and an all-round commitment to immaculate design. I learned many useful things, including the fact that it's much harder to sell international rights for books that have rhyming text.



US, EVERYWHERE WE WENT.

DAY 08 - NEW THINKING

Today we sat down with **Alexandra Yatomi-Clarke**, the inspiring founder of Berbay Publishing. As the driving force behind a boutique, independent publisher, Alexandra explained her philosophy by drawing some useful parallels between books and food: Kids may naturally gravitate towards 'junk', but it's important they discover the enjoyment of experiencing 'nutritious' books, too.

I loved her vision for her line, and the focussed, entrepreneurial energy she brings to all aspects of her business. It's not hard to see why authors want to stay with her once they find her.

As part of the program, each of us had been assigned a mentor, and my afternoon was spent in the company of the phenomenal **Nicki Greenberg**.

She welcomed me into her workspace and we chatted about comics, drawing, pitching and creativity. I was honoured that she had not only read *Action Tank*, but had also made thorough notes on it. She offered some new strains of critique, sharing aspects and insights on the story I'd never encountered before, and while I was excited at the time, it has only become clearer to me with time what a rare and valuable gift that feedback has been.

DAY 09 - SERIOUS PLOT DEVELOPMENTS

We scored front row seats at the opening session of the Melbourne Writers Festival Schools Program, putting us up close and personal with **Maxine Buneba Clarke** as she interviewed **Dimet Divororen** about her novel *Living on Hope Street*. Several things really spoke to me about the way Dimet crafts her stories, but most memorable was that her characters almost always emerge from a single line of text ('The refugees moved in while Mr Bailey wasn't looking' was one of several potent examples).

I then attended a fascinating panel about open-source storytelling with **Lance Botchin**, author/illustrator/designer of the spectacular books *Aquatica* and *Mechanica*. Although he has spent unspeakable amounts of time painstakingly assembling his photo montage creations, he has chosen to now make it easy (and quick) for others to take his elements and build their own stories, thanks to an intuitive online tool. His visual aesthetic is truly inspiring, but I have to admit it was his generosity that had the most impact on me.

We reunited and left Federation Square full of inspiration, and after a series of misunderstandings with a Japanese film crew (I'm pretty sure **Maura's** now gone viral in Tokyo), we raced off to our next destination.

You may think that after enjoying very informative sessions with three separate publishers in the space of a week, we might have heard it all, but our afternoon with **Jane Pearson** from Text Publishing was packed with new levels of helpful details and advice. I noticed how prepared she was, but I also noticed a few things about us (the mentees)...

- i) We were asking better questions.
- ii) We were getting better at talking about our work.
- iii) The others were totally doing a silent count down to the moment when I inevitably whip out a copy of *Action Tank* and pitch it. Bless them for not teasing me about it.

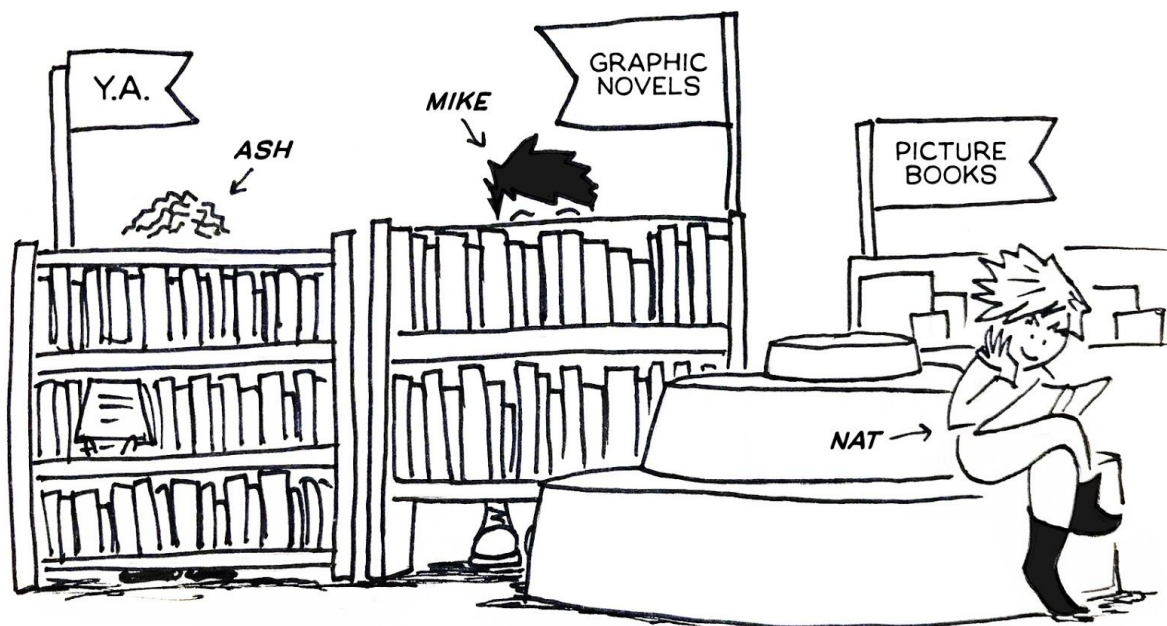
We completed this epic day with an evening at Ford St Publishing, where I ate my weight in Haribo lollies and got CBCA winning authors **Cath Crowley**, **Fiona Wood** and **Simmone Howell** to sign my copy of their CBCA award winning collaborative novel *Take Three Girls*.

DAY 10 - JOHN MARSDEN EATS A CROISSANT AND OTHER STORIES

Today we once more attended the Melbourne Writers Festival Schools Program, highlighted by a very inspiring and illuminating morning with fearless author, educator and total legend **John Marsden**. We sat around a cafe table with him, asking questions, listening to his advice, and generally trying not to seem starstruck (definitely failed). Anyway, if anyone needs me I'll be spending the next decade unpacking the power in even his throwaway comments.

Although, actually, I do see I made a note here in my... notes... about a specific thought he shared: 'Take something you don't fully understand, and by writing about it you will inch towards the truth, and get closer to understanding why people are the way they are.' Yeah, it was pretty much all perfectly formed, off-the-cuff morsels like that.

We also sat in on a session with **Jessica Townsend** - author of smash hit fantasy series, *Nevermoor*. She was very humble and very cool, but the capability of her 13 year-old interviewer certainly stole the show.



**ALL IN OUR SECTIONS:
MAURA'S VIEW, WHEN SHE ENTERED
'READINGS KIDS' ONE AFTERNOON.**

DAY 11 - THE END AND THE BEGINNING

To complete our incredibly thorough, two week, 360 degree masterclass in the children's publishing industry, we stopped by the office of **Clare Forster**. She is the highly respected literary agent to many of the Australian authors and illustrators you've read and loved, so it was very cool to get her take on the role, value, and mission of a successful author/agent relationship.

As the session with Clare came to an end, so too, we all suddenly realised, had our time together. The Maurice Saxby Creative Development Program, with its incredible hosts (Pam, Helen and Suzanne), its amazingly talented mentees (Nat, Ash, Maura, Maggie. I was also there), its army of experts (please re-read my entire journal) and its hard-to-hashtag name (#MauriceSaxby? Or maybe #MauriceSaxbyCDP2018? Or maybe #MSCDP?) had been an action packed, mind expanding experience none of us would ever forget.

We all stood around in the street playing a real life game of “**no, you hangup**” until we could resist the call of our actual lives no longer. Hands were shaken. Hugs were exchanged. Details were swapped. Futures were directed. Lives were changed.

Thanks for everything,

Mike Barry

Sydney, 2018

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