

# All Stories 2021 evaluation report

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## Programme evaluation overview

The All Stories mentorship programme set out to improve diversity in children's books by helping underprivileged writers from underrepresented groups work on their craft and develop their manuscripts with a view to submitting their work to agents and editors. Based on the feedback from the mentees and mentors, plus the achievements of the mentees, the goals have been successfully met.

The programme was funded by Arts Council England and the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society, with support in kind from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (offering a free year's membership to each mentee).

The programme offered 14 mentorships to writers from underrepresented groups who'd have otherwise been unable to access support due to a lack of financial means. All 14 places were filled, with each mentor being paired with either their first or second choice mentee. The mentees represented the full range of underrepresented groups and resided across the UK, from Aberdeen to Cornwall.

All 14 mentees fully committed to the mentorship for the duration of the programme, meeting with their mentors regularly and attending the webinars unless prevented by illness or work.

All 14 mentees feel they have significantly benefitted from the mentorship programme and some are ready to submit their work to agents; the ones that don't but have this as an aim have a clear forward timeline and progress goals in order to reach this stage.

It is also worth noting that one of the 14 mentors had to pull out of the programme just before the mentorships began due to ill health. Fortunately, another mentor also connected with the writer's work and took them on as a second mentee.

## Progress and quality of the mentorships

Each mentee completed an initial evaluation form, mid-mentorship feedback form and final evaluation form in order to ensure the progress and quality of the mentorships could be assessed. The mentors also completed a mid-mentorship feedback form. I had originally planned to request feedback from the mentees and mentors every two months, but decided that this would have been too demanding on top of their writing/work commitments.

The initial evaluation form asked the mentees to state their goals for the mentorship, which varied from completing half of a first draft manuscript to having five manuscripts ready to submit to agents. I feel that this was a positive and somewhat unique aspect of the programme – it offered the mentees an opportunity to develop their work no matter which stage they were at in their writing and there was no set goal that they had to achieve by the end of the mentorship.

The mid-mentorship feedback forms were very useful in order to receive candid feedback from the mentees and mentors. These meant I was able to tailor the mentorships midway through the process to ensure the mentees got the most out of the programme. Specifically, I added the following:

- A drop-in webinar for the mentees to give them the opportunity to ask any questions they had, large or small.
- A catch-up webinar for the mentors to enable them to raise questions and share experiences of how their mentorships were going and ideas for the future.
- Three agent webinars at the end of the programme to give the mentees the chance to understand what agents do, how to write a query letter and establish an initial relationship with 8 different agents.
- A page on the All Stories website to showcase the mentees and their work, which will be promoted to the industry when the second year of the programme launches in April.

Some of the questions on the initial evaluation form and final evaluation form were the same so that I could assess the progress of the mentees in certain areas, as follows:

- **How confident do you feel as a writer on a scale of 1-10?**

All mentees felt more confident by the end of the mentorship in varying scales – the largest leap was from a 4 to a 9 out of 10.

- **How well do you think you know your writing strengths and weaknesses on a scale of 1–10?**

All of the mentees were slightly more aware of their writing strengths and weaknesses by the end of the mentorship, apart from one whose score went down by one point. The largest leap was from a 4/5 to a 7 out of 10.

- **To what extent do you feel you are meeting your writing ambitions on a scale of 1–10?**

All of the mentees felt that they were meeting their writing ambitions more by the end of the mentorship in varying scales – the largest leap was from a 4 to a 9 out of 10.

- **How knowledgeable do you feel about the children's book industry on a scale of 1–10?**

Most of the mentees felt they knew little about the industry initially, but they all felt they gained knowledge by the end – the largest leap was from a 1 to a 7 out of 10.

- **What do you want to learn/have you learnt from the mentorship?**

All of the mentees felt they had learnt various skills and techniques by the end of the mentorship. The benefit of gaining knowledge of the industry was mentioned a lot.

- **How confident are you that you will be able to achieve the above (future) goal(s) on a scale of 1–10?**

Most of the mentees were more confident – the largest leap was from a 6 to a 10. However, there were 4 mentees whose score had gone down.

- **How regularly are you planning to/did you write during the mentorship?**

Almost all of the mentees were able to maintain the writing they planned to do and in some cases exceeded their expectations and spent more time writing than they'd planned.

- **How confident are you that you'll be able to keep to a regular writing routine during/after the mentorship on a scale of 1–10?**

Mainly the mentees were confident about this, but there were a few who felt that without the support of a mentee they may not be able to maintain this routine.

## Impact and outcomes of the programme

The most important factor in assessing the impact of the programme is the work the mentees produced during their mentorships. While not all of the mentees achieved the goals they set out in the initial evaluation, those that didn't still felt satisfied with the progress they had made (and acknowledged that their original goals were too ambitious).

The mentees produced the following work:

- Three polished picture book manuscripts and others that are close to final stages or in development.
- Completed a first draft MS and redrafted this several times, improving the pacing and making sure that every scene earns its place.
- Two manuscripts ready to submit and two more that are almost there.
- Completed a brand new picture book MS while reworking two other (already written) picture books that needed improving. Finalised a non-fiction children's proposal.
- Achieved a manuscript that's in good shape to send to agents/publishers.
- A good first ten chapters, with a better idea of where the story is headed and a stronger sense of each of the characters. Plus a synopsis that is shaping up well.
- The first full draft of a novel that has a solid structure.
- One story ready to be submitted and three others almost there.
- Transformed a 30,000 word WIP into a 50,000+ word finished manuscript by going through three different drafts.
- Completed a draft of my YA, several replots later.
- Finished a draft manuscript.
- Completed a third of a book (12 chapters/22K), worked a lot on plotting and mystery structures, and implementing structural changes and chapter edits across the first 10 chapters.
- Undertaken in-depth character-work, and as a result redrafted much of the novel, including an exciting twist and ending, and also a new opening.
- Completed a first draft MS and working on the second, going far beyond initial goals while developing much greater confidence as a writer and an understanding of how to build upon areas that have been challenging in the past.

By the end of the mentorship, three of the mentees felt ready to submit their work to agents and four more planned to do so within the following few months.

During the mentorship the mentees also achieved other successes in connection with their writing:

- Won the Writing Magazine Picture Book Prize
- Shortlisted for the Salariya-Stratford Picture Book Prize
- Shortlisted for the Winchester Writers' Picture Book Prize
- Shortlisted for the WriteMentor Children's Novel Award
- Longlisted for the WriteMentor Picture Book Prize

- Shortlisted for Guppy Books' Middle Grade Competition
- Highly Commended in the FAB Prize
- Shortlisted for the FAB Prize
- Shortlisted for the Stylist Prize for Feminist Fiction
- Two runners-up in the Golden Egg Award

The programme also impacted the artists, creatives and specialists working within it. Many of the mentors reported that the mentorships enriched their work and gave them the opportunity to learn and grow as editors and as allies to creators from underrepresented groups. The in-house editors who presented webinars relished the opportunity to encourage and engage with writers from underrepresented groups.

The programme also made an impact on the children's publishing industry and beyond. The All Stories launch was featured as an [online article](#) in the industry's main trade magazine, *The Bookseller*. When the mentees were announced, *The Bookseller* published a [special feature](#) about the programme both in print and online, and *The Observer* ran an [article](#) about improving diversity in children's books (albeit with terrible click-bait headline at first). All Stories was included in the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's latest [Reflecting Realities report](#) as one of the organisations making space and creating opportunities for creators of colour.

Hundreds of editors, agents, authors and illustrators in the industry have supported the programme by helping to promote it on social media, including the children's laureate, Cressida Cowell, and award-winning authors including Patrice Lawrence (the All Stories patron), Alex Wheatle, Juno Dawson, Serena Patel, A.M. Dassu, Cerrie Burnell, Simon James Green, Jane Elson and Michelle Harrison. I have also had many people in the industry contact me out of the blue to say how much they admire and welcome the programme.

## Public engagement

All Stories was reliant on developing public engagement in order to reach the aspiring writers who were eligible and might have benefitted from a mentorship.

The programme received 71 applications. One of these was ineligible. The applications came from writers based all over the UK – I could not see any geographical bias. The number of applications was a little higher than I was expecting, especially in the first year, when comparing it with the number of applications similar mentorship programmes tend to receive. I believe this reflects the work that was done to secure promotional support from various organisations including 60 libraries/library groups across the country, regional writing agencies and other writing and arts groups.

The website has had over 6000 unique visitors and over 120 people are signed up to the mailing list.

The original launch tweet had 302 retweets, 96 quote tweets and 253 likes. It had 254K impressions and 2,827 engagements. The All Stories social media accounts, started from scratch last March, currently have 1,050 followers (Twitter) and 575 followers (Instagram).

Developing public engagement was an ongoing process and various activities contributed to this, including regular social media posts, #FridayFavourite book recommendations and securing free sponsorship of [Pen to Print's Write On! magazine](#). Each mentee was featured in an article for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' Words and Pictures online magazine, helping to build their profile and that of the programme.

## Potential improvements

While the programme was successful, there is always room for improvement in any project of this kind. I have identified the following areas for potential improvement, influenced by feedback from the mentees and mentors:

- Offering more webinars on the craft of writing (the majority of the webinars were focused on the publishing industry and pitching work)
- Extending the mentorship period to allow mentees more time to develop their work and allow for illnesses or other issues the mentees might experience
- Focusing on specific age groups/genres so that the webinars can be more targeted and the mentees will have more in common
- Encouraging the mentees to further engage with each other by posting more regularly in their online private community including a weekly check-in.
- Reaching more people from underrepresented groups who are interested in writing for children.

I took on-board these aspects when planning the second All Stories programme for 2022–2023. The mentorships will be focused on writers of middle grade and young adult fiction only; the plan is that the following year will be aimed at picture book creators and the programme will then alternate year by year. The mentorships will run for nine months instead of six and there will be more webinars on the craft of writing. I also plan to dedicate more time to developing the online private community and encouraging the mentees to interact with each other.

The 2022–2023 programme will also offer additional development activities in order to reach and encourage aspiring writers from underrepresented groups, including writing for children workshops, writing groups and 1-2-1 feedback sessions.

## Appendix A: Anonymous feedback from mentees

“I’ve really enjoyed being part of the first All Stories cohort. It’s been great, helped me feel like I’m a ‘proper writer’ and reminded me that there are others out there in a similar position to me (sometimes it can be a bit of an uphill struggle when you’re trying to do it on your own and not knowing if you’re just missing out, or missing by a mile). All Stories has definitely been a very positive experience that I would recommend/sing the praises of in a heartbeat. Thank you!!!”

“Loved the webinar/chats. Thought there was a really good range of speakers and topics. I especially like it when someone from an under-represented background who has succeeded in publishing gave the talk. I also loved seeing/meeting all the other mentees, even if it was only virtually.”

“My mentor was invested and constructive and so knowledgeable. Having an experienced mentor challenge your writing can be tough and tiring but ultimately you are both striving for that improved manuscript.”

“The industry-related webinars have been great and have given me a strong overview of the current publishing industry.”

“I’ve been able to really find my authorial voice and have renewed confidence after a long period of illness and self-doubt. I’ve also been able to send off numerous short stories to journals and competitions, with one being published.”

“I was able to fine-tune my storytelling abilities and re-learn story building blocks. I developed a greater knowledge of the industry and other avenues for income, which will help me build a career as a writer. The most important thing for me is that I have learned that mentorships and creative writing schemes are accessible to those with chronic illness.”

“In the past, I had finished full manuscripts before, but never had a ‘feeling’ – a real sense – that this is the story I want to tell. For years I had been copying other peoples’ styles and hadn’t found my voice. I found my voice here, through All Stories.”

“I did not have any knowledge at all about the industry. The webinars gave me a lot of insight in a very structured way. If I was not in All Stories, I would never have had the chance to hear from authors, editors and publishers ‘in-person’.”

“I really feel I am a part of the All Stories family and have comradeship. All of us 14 mentees are at different stages of our writing journey but it is really good to have allies to go along with on the journey.”

“I was very fortunate to be paired up with [my mentor]. Her warm personality and her genuine interest in my development is encouraging. To be coached, mentored and have the undivided attention of [my mentor] is absolutely fabulous and priceless.”

“I’ve learnt how to make my stories commercially attractive with the messages/themes of the stories. I also know more about the agent and author relationship. And when it comes to opportunities to remember my worth.”

“I have had a wonderful experience as a mentee, and I'm grateful to have been chosen. The mentorship has opened doors to opportunities and contacts which I wouldn't have access to if I hadn't been part of All Stories.”

“It was far beyond my expectations. I knew I'd be getting feedback on my writing, but I didn't realise the extent and depth with which I'd be working on it.”

“My mentor is super kind, and it was evident she cared so much about my work. She asks all the right questions, she's patient and she constantly pushed me to be better and think outside the box. It's been such a privilege to benefit from her expertise.”

“It's been a valuable experience and has definitely contributed to my growth as a writer. I'm far better and more knowledgeable than I was six months ago. I loved every aspect of it!”

“I have loved the mentorship and all the industry webinars. It has exceeded all my expectations and I have loved being involved. I also feel I have much greater confidence in my voice as a writer and understand how to build upon areas that I have found more challenging in the past.”

“Each of my mentorship sessions has been wonderful. The warmth, enthusiasm and support provided by my mentor has really elevated my creative process and confidence. I am much more comfortable in tackling writing challenges. I have loved the content and delivery of all the webinars too. The session focusing on character development was a highlight. It was highly detailed and informative whilst also being very enjoyable.”

“I really appreciated my mentor's adaptability, empathy and knowledge regarding the mentorship session content. I feel that my mentor developed memorable, fun and highly engaging writing experiences that have definitely enhanced my creativity. Thank you.”

“I think the mentorship has greatly improved what I have written and I will be taking a lot of what I have learned with me in order to finish it to the standard needed to approach agents. The content was flexible and tailored to whatever was needed at each stage, enabling me to tackle many aspects of my story and my writing. I was also juggling a lot of other things and going through a difficult time in my personal life and the mentorship fitted in with everything, so I couldn't be happier!”

“I have a draft manuscript for a story I only ever thought I would write many years down the line! At times I didn't think I would finish but my mentor was great. She gave the advice and encouragement I needed to get going and finish. She is a superb mentor, she had so many suggestions and helped develop my ideas, she kept in touch and was so understanding when I had 'writer's block'.”

“From the seminars to the 1-1 time with my mentor, I've been blown away by just how much I've been able to learn, how supportive the other mentees are as a group, and how much the mentorship has inspired me to continue my writing journey.”

“I really feel like [my mentor] gets the story that I'm trying to tell and it's been amazing to have someone to bounce ideas off of, and who challenges me to really think about what I'm writing (especially with dialogue).”

“I loved the seminars and how diverse they were in terms of content and the subject material. As someone who had very little knowledge of what publishing looked like, they’ve really helped demystify the industry and made it much less terrifying. My chats with [my mentor] have been invaluable. As someone with a real fear of sharing my work, I was terrified to be edited but her suggestions have challenged me in the best way and I’ve felt so inspired and comfortable working with her since day one.”

“I have become a more confident writer and know so much more about the writing industry and writing world. I have a much deeper understanding of story structure and feel I have developed more in the last few months with All Stories than I have in seven years of writing by myself.”

“The seminars have been amazing, and by following the guests on twitter I have expanded my knowledge of children's writing even further and even have published authors following me!”

“My mentor has also been a great source of information and I feel I can ask her and Catherine any questions I have about the industry, which is very reassuring to know that I have them in my corner.”

“The mentorship has been even more than I had expected. My mentor has been such a source of inspiration, comfort and positivity, and has helped me and my MS grow and develop in ways I wouldn’t have imagined before this. The webinars have been incredibly insightful and eye-opening, and making friends with the other mentees has been a big bonus.”

“I have learnt so much from my mentor, and the way she approaches a story, which has given me important tools to improve my process, which will help me sustain my writing career beyond the MS we are working on at moment.”

“My mentor is brilliant and I have learnt a lot from her, and we worked really well together. She has given me more confidence in my writing ability, and helped me with lots of the things I find difficult, and given me resources to help too.”

“The content is perfect for those of us starting out, and my experience with my mentor has been fantastic. This has been a phenomenal experience and I look forward to continuing to work on my writing, and make All Stories proud.”

“I have grown in confidence as a writer with the kind attention of my mentor who has been encouraging and reassuring at each step. I have felt she believed in me and that made me believe in myself more. I have a useful and much deeper understanding of the industry and how it works and what routes could be available to me as a writer. Thank you for the opportunity!”

## Appendix B: Anonymous feedback from mentors

“The mentorship has been run brilliantly. I have felt brilliantly supported. Everything has been so well thought-through, from the website to the organisation’s stance on inclusivity, to the breadth of speakers and the very high calibre of the entries.”

“I’m hugely enjoying being part of this year’s mentorship – discovering new talent, working closely with my mentee and partaking as a collective with other freelancers/industry experts.”

“I appreciate your All Stories updates and the material you’ve shared in conjunction with the programme – e.g. the CLPE report, reminding us of the overarching goals and reasons for the mentorship. It’s nice to be part of a team too!”

“I love the fact that we can be flexible with our mentee, which allows us to work with them in a way that feels most useful and supportive for them. It’s great to be able to attend the webinars to meet the other mentees, as this helps to feel part of the wider organisation and be working with others in a team.”

“I have really enjoyed the webinars I’ve been able to attend and felt that the guest speakers have been incredibly supportive, encouraging and inspiring; they’ve shared their wealth of knowledge and experience so honestly and openly, and have encouraged the mentees to ask any and all questions. I’ve also loved seeing the mentees beginning to find their confidence in this environment and offer questions and comments.”

“Catherine has been brilliant at keeping us all in touch and on track, checking in with us and sharing news and information.”

“I feel honoured to be part of this wonderful mentorship scheme, where it really feels like we are making a difference to so many terrific writers. It is a joy to work with my mentee and to see her understanding and inspiration strengthen her story each time we talk.”

“Catherine is a master at organisation. Her communication and management of the programme has been outstanding!”

“It was great to select a shortlist of mentees from such a large pool, and the organisation/admin/communication has been superb. The talks are brilliant and it’s been great to have access to them as a mentor, so we’re aware of what the mentees are thinking about, etc. My mentee has been hardworking and responsive, and is quite experienced and confident, which helps. We’ve had some very wide-ranging and in-depth conversations, and I feel I’ve been able to impart quite a lot of direction and information even through initial interactions.”

“I’m really enjoying working with my mentee and feel like the support from All Stories has been great.”

“I’m blown away by how wonderfully the programme has been organised. I think it’s an amazing programme and I’m really excited to be a part of it.”

“Being an All Stories mentor has been a highlight of the last six months for me. From the point that I first read and connected with [my mentee’s] brilliant manuscript – and then requested to be

paired with [my mentee] as her mentor – it has been a fascinating, fulfilling and genuinely fun half a year of editorial sessions. Mentorships like All Stories are doing the work to help break down the barriers so often put in the way of people from traditionally underrepresented communities, and I’m looking forward to reading all the submissions and finding my new mentee for '22/23!”

“Being part of the first All Stories programme has felt like a real privilege. Not only in joining my mentee on her writing journey, but also in seeing how all the mentees have learned from the varied perspectives on the publishing industry provided by the seminar speakers that Catherine carefully curated over the course of the programme.”