

All Stories 2022–2023 evaluation report

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Programme evaluation overview

The All Stories programme was established in 2021 with the goal of improving diversity in children's books by supporting and encouraging underprivileged writers from underrepresented groups to work on their craft and develop their manuscripts. The 2022–2023 programme expanded from the first year to include outreach (such as writing workshops and groups) in addition to offering mentorships. From the success of the programme and the feedback from the participants, the goal of supporting people at all stages of their lives to design, develop and increase their participation in high-quality creative activities was achieved.

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) and Pen to Print (offering free sponsorship of their *Write On* magazine).

The programme offered ten mentorships to writers of middle grade and young adult fiction from underrepresented groups who'd have otherwise been unable to access support due to a lack of financial means. All ten 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.

All Stories also offered five in-person and three online workshops (including one that was BSL-interpreted), providing attendees with an introduction to writing children's books, each presented by an award-winning author – either Patrice Lawrence or Jane Elson. All Stories offered writing groups for the attendees following the workshops, providing the initial support to establish the groups. This resulted in three in-person writing groups and five online writing groups, helping to build supportive communities for the writers and improve access to cultural opportunities.

Progress and quality of the mentorships

Nine out of the ten mentees fully committed to the mentorship for the full duration, meeting with their mentors regularly and attending the webinars unless prevented by illness or work. The tenth mentee began the mentorship but disappeared soon after, despite many attempts to contact them, and so their place was offered to another writer.

All of the mentees felt they have significantly benefitted from the mentorship programme. One has already secured an agent and a book deal, a result of winning Faber's Imagined Futures Prize. A further six feel ready to submit their manuscripts to agents.

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.

The initial evaluation form asked the mentees to state their goals for the mentorship, which varied from completing a full first draft to revising the complete manuscript to be ready for submission, along with query letter and synopsis. This continued to be 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 helpful in order to gain candid feedback from the mentees and mentors. As in 2021, I used the feedback to tailor the mentorships midway through the process to ensure the mentees got the most out of the programme. Specifically, I did the following:

- Started a WhatsApp group for the mentees to help them connect with each other and build their own community.
- Began the remaining webinars half an hour before the official start time in order to give the mentees a chance to chat and develop relationships with each other.
- Held a webinar for the mentors to discuss their experiences so far, ask questions and make suggestions for the future.

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?**

Most mentees felt more confident by the end of the mentorship, in varying scales, while one felt the same level of confidence and one felt slightly less confident. The largest leap was from a 5 to a 9 out of 10.

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

Most mentees were more aware of their writing strengths and weaknesses by the end of the mentorship, apart from one whose score stayed the same. The largest leap was from a 4 to an 8 out of 10.

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

Most 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 3 to an 8 out of 10. Two mentees' scores went down, although they said this was due to external factors, such as starting a new job.

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

All of the mentees felt they knew more about the industry by the end of the mentorship. The largest leap was from a 5 to an 8 out of 10.

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

Each of the mentees felt they had developed as a writer by the end of the mentorship. Many of them mentioned the benefit of working with a skilled editor and gaining honest, constructive feedback.

- **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 slightly more confident, however, there were three mentees whose score had gone down. One of these was due to a better understanding of the challenges of getting a book deal, and two were due to external factors, as mentioned above.

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

Many of the mentees found the mentorship gave them the accountability and motivation to write regularly and often. Some are now using a writing journal, which they have found very helpful (and recommend to others).

- **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?**

Most of the mentees were confident about this (giving an 8 out of 10 or higher), but there were a few who felt that external factors would make it difficult.

Progress and quality of the outreach activities

The outreach activities certainly encouraged and supported people from underrepresented groups to write for children, with over 200 participants in the workshops and writing groups. The in-person workshops, offering an introduction to writing for children, were held in libraries in Essex and Thurrock (intended as a trial with a view to expanding these across the country in future years).

All workshop attendees who responded to the request for feedback said the session encouraged them to think more seriously about writing for children. They all rated the usefulness of the workshop as at least 6/10, with over 50% rating it 10/10. Over 90% of attendees said they would consider applying for an All Stories mentorship in the future.

All workshop attendees were invited to join writing groups that All Stories established following the workshops. This resulted in three in-person writing groups and five online writing groups. Some of the groups have grown significantly since, such as the Tendring Community Writers group, with 68 members. All of the writing-group members said their group encouraged them to write more and 83% said they would consider applying for an All Stories mentorship in the future.

All Stories worked in partnership with Metal (Essex) to offer local writers the chance to receive 1-2-1 feedback with expert editors Lucy Rogers and Libby Hamilton, as part of their Essex Writers House programme. The writers chosen for the sessions found them very useful, gaining insights into both their work (and how to develop it) and the publishing industry.

It is important to note that the outreach activities did come with challenges. Two of the six planned workshops in Essex libraries had very low sign-up numbers, which seemed to be a result of a combination of factors: overestimating demand, people's fear of socialising post Covid-lockdowns, and a heatwave. To ensure the funding for these was still utilised and people still supported, these two workshops were cancelled and replaced with a workshop at Stanley Arts (South Norwood) and another online workshop, this time with BSL interpretation, which had been requested by a participant.

One of the mentees disappeared early in the mentorship period. Their mentor and I tried contacting them through various means, but didn't get any response. Thus we offered their place to another writer, whom the mentor had previously shortlisted, to ensure someone else could benefit from the opportunity and the place didn't go to waste.

Two expected events that were in partnership with Metal (Essex) did not go ahead due to difficulties in attracting participants – the careers event for sixth formers and the networking dinner. I am hopeful to be able to offer these in the future.

Impact and outcomes of the programme

The most important factor in assessing the impact of the mentorship part of 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:

- Completely rewrote their manuscript from scratch and completed a full edit.
- Completed one YA novel and began reviewing another YA manuscript.
- Redrafted their manuscript twice, made a plan and character study, revised their query letter and synopsis twice.
- Redrafted a full manuscript.
- Completely reworked and restructured their novel.
- Transformed their manuscript from a rough first draft to one ready to send to agents.
- Replotted their novel.
- Completed their manuscript.
- Completed half of their work-in-progress novel.
- Reworked and developed the early chapters of their novel.

By the end of the mentorship, six of the mentees felt ready to submit their work to agents, while one mentee had already secured an agent and a book deal.

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

- Won the inaugural Faber Imagined Futures Prize
- Highly Commended Text for the FAB Prize
- Shortlisted for the Searchlight Best Novel Opening Award
- Shortlisted for the Golden Egg Award
- Short story published in *Dark Matter* magazine
- Reached the final of Write Mentor Children's Novel Award
- Shortlisted for the Bridport Short Story Prize

The programme also impacted the artists, creatives and specialists working within it. The mentors felt the longer time frame (nine months instead of six) gave them the opportunity to further support their mentee and help them develop their craft. Many of the mentors reported that the standard of submissions was higher this year, and all of them said they have greatly enjoyed being part of the programme and seeing their mentees grow. Some specifically commented on how rewarding the programme is, and how supported they felt in their work. The in-house editors who presented webinars were delighted to be asked to be part of the programme and very grateful for the opportunity to connect with and encourage writers from underrepresented groups.

It is best to measure the impact of the outreach programme using the anonymous responses provided by the participants. As noted in the previous section, everyone who responded felt

they'd benefitted from the workshop and/or writing group. Their feedback was extremely positive, such as:

- “Thank you for organising these free workshops for underrepresented children’s writers. They are a fantastic resource and I thoroughly enjoyed the session and took a lot away from it.”
- “I found the workshop very creative and insightful. I have used the skills learned in my writing and see it more clearly now.”
- “It was great, thought provoking, engaging. At the end of a working day my brain was frazzled and I had a slow start, but the exercises prompted me to come up with ideas and be imaginative.”

Further feedback can be found in appendices C and D.

The workshops also impacted the presenters, who relished the opportunity to work with people from underrepresented groups. Jane Elson said: “Facilitating creative writing workshops for Catherine Coe’s All Stories was a highlight of my career. They were meticulously organised and as a dyslexic workshop leader, I felt Catherine went out of her way to support me in every area that I might find a challenge. We reached sectors of the community through these workshops that would not have otherwise had a chance to join in such an activity. At the end of the programme of workshops, I felt so many of the participants had grown as writers and that I had grown as a workshop leader. I thank All Stories and Catherine Coe for this opportunity.”

The programme continues to make an impact on the children’s publishing industry and beyond. The All Stories 2022–2023 launch was featured as an [online article](#) in the industry’s main trade magazine, *The Bookseller*. This was followed by another [piece](#) when the mentees were announced. When the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education’s latest [Reflecting Realities report](#) was launched, All Stories was invited to the event as one of the organisations making space and creating opportunities for creators of colour. In addition, Literature Wales requested input and advice (including an interview) from All Stories when creating their Professional Writer Development Programme for children’s book writers (Representing Wales). Literature Wales have invited me to talk to the participants in their programme in September 2023.

Hundreds of editors, agents, authors and illustrators in the industry continued to support the programme by promoting it on social media, including high-profile authors such as Cressida Cowell, Joanne Harris, Kit De Waal, Piers Torday, Juno Dawson, Patrice Lawrence (the All Stories patron), Serena Patel, Hannah Gold, A.M. Dassu, Cerrie Burnell, Simon James Green, and Katherine Woodfine, and celebrities such as Miranda Hart. I have also had many people from the book industry contact me to ask if they can be involved or support it in any way (including publishers and literary agencies), which will be invaluable in the plans for the future.

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 or workshop and writing group.

The 2022–2023 mentorship programme received 43 applications. The applications came from writers based across the UK – including England, Scotland, Northern Island and Wales. The number of applications was lower than for the 2021 programme (71), but this could have been due to only inviting applications from writers of middle grade and young adult books in 2022–2023 (the plan is to support picture books and young fiction writers in the 2024 programme). I continued to build relationships with various organisations across the UK in order to ask for their help to promote the programme, including 70 libraries/library groups, regional writing agencies and other writing and arts groups.

The website has had over 8000 unique visitors and over 160 people are signed up to the mailing list.

The original launch tweet had 164 retweets, 57 quote tweets and 215 likes. It had 108K impressions and 1874 engagements. These numbers are a little lower than the first launch of the programme in March 2021, and I believe it was mostly due to less usage of Twitter (with people spread across more social media platforms) and because it wasn't a brand new programme this time. The All Stories social media accounts, started from scratch in March 2021, currently have 1361 followers (Twitter) and 711 followers (Instagram).

Various activities contributed to the development of public engagement including regular social media posts, book recommendations and free sponsorship of [Pen to Print's Write On! magazine](#). Each mentee wrote 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 All Stories programme.

Potential improvements

While the programme was successful in its aims, I have identified the following areas for potential improvement, informed by experience along with feedback from the participants of the activities:

- More discussion with mentees before they start the mentorship in order to identify possible challenges, such as time or personal issues.
- Creating a WhatsApp group for the mentees from the start.
- Preceding each mentorship webinar with a half-an-hour chat for the mentees, encouraging them to build relationships and sense of community.
- Choosing locations for outreach activities carefully so that they are as successful as possible (and avoiding any cancellations). I plan to do this in the future by inviting libraries and other community spaces to apply to host a workshop, which would involve the applicants providing information on estimated numbers, interest within their community and previous experience of events.
- Building the visibility of All Stories, especially online. To do this, I hope to include a digital marketer/social media specialist on the All Stories committee (see below).
- Running All Stories 2022–2023 was a test of my own resources, since the programme was expanded and I was working with many more partners and contacts in different locations. If I want to continue and further expand the programme, I will need to bring in people to share the workload and responsibilities. I plan to create a small committee to run the programme in the future, which won't only help in terms of time, but will also provide different viewpoints, since I will recruit people from the children's book industry with varying backgrounds and experiences.

Appendix A: Anonymous feedback from mentees

“I had been writing for only a short while before I applied for the mentorship and I really didn’t know what a fantastic opportunity it was. I think it is a fantastic supportive programme with kind people whose only wish is to see you strive and reach your full potential. I feel incredibly proud of the manuscript that I’ve written over the mentorship. My mentor really gave me the confidence and encouragement to know that I could do it.”

“I’ve developed a lot as a writer and a storyteller over the course of the mentorship. It has been an amazing opportunity to see how the writer-editor relationship works in practice. My mentor was the perfect editor for me.”

“I feel I have been able to work with an editor who has challenged me to explore my story, try different approach to plotting and be a positive voice in my writing journey.”

“My mentor has been incredibly helpful and I really value her feedback and ideas.”

“The one2ones have been great, as has communication, the masterclasses, the community, and I have always felt so welcome and valued by Catherine and other people involved.”

“The conversations and feedback I’ve had have been tremendously helpful, have really made me think about and get to grips with my novel and what I want say, whilst still feeling positive and motivating. My mentor has been understanding and patient, whilst also encouraging me to write when I can. We also seem to have a great rapport.”

“The majority of the webinars have been really interesting, some of which I have got a great deal out of.”

“Hearing from ‘expert readers’ has been very insightful. It spotlights the fact that this is a business. I like the range of publishing houses represented and I am enjoying the fact that each session focuses on a different topic.”

“Everything is so well thought out, I feel really well supported.”

“I feel like my mentor is really invested in my story and wants me to keep going and that she believes in me. She reassures me that I will get there, even if there is still a way to go.”

“I’m really enjoying it and seeing my story coming to life makes me happy and hopeful for my future as a writer.”

“My mentor has been brilliant at guiding me through my hurdles, and I am extremely grateful for all her hard work.”

“I think giving us time to meet before the webinar started and then rejoining later was a lovely initiative.”

“I pitched my goals to my mentor at the beginning, but within the first few months, she was able to work closely with me to completely knock it out of the park, not only meeting my goals, but smashing through them and turning them into something I could only imagine!”

“My mentor is great. She is honest and meticulous. She sets deadlines which I really like but she always checks whether these deadlines are manageable with my other commitments. I know that I can reach out and ask her questions between our sessions if I need to. She always tries to say something positive, but all her feedback is always constructive.”

“I feel like I’ve come on leaps and bounds, and it’s already exceeded my expectations about what I can produce.”

“The only feedback I could give you would be astoundingly positive – my mentor was incredible, and I’m sure I learnt more about the publishing industry, my own novel and skills as a writer, and writing in general than I have in years, or from other writing courses. Every single industry professional from the webinars were so inspiring and informative, and genuinely excited to impart their wisdom upon, often asking us to keep in touch in the future when we’re ready to submit. THANK YOU. I will always hold a special place in my heart for the All Stories family, and can only tell you how much I greatly appreciate you choosing me to be a part of this incredible opportunity.”

“The connections with the agents, and the fact they want to hear from us was such an unanticipated outcome!”

“The mentorship has been an invaluable opportunity to develop my skills as a writer.”

“The content was well-structured and suited my writing goals. Speakers had different styles, but all the information they relayed felt relevant.”

“All of the sessions with agents and editors have also been brilliant. I have gone back to some of the recordings several times because there is so much useful information. I have learnt a lot!”

“It really is a wonderful opportunity and I can’t tell you how grateful (and surprised) I am to be a part of it. I am honoured and humbled. Catherine – I admire you so much for doing this, and for keeping such humanity and warmth.”

“The programme is brilliant for diverse and underrepresented writers. It’s not just the story I’m working on with my mentor that has benefited from my participation. I’m learning so much and I am continuing to apply that to all the stories I am working on. I still have so much to learn, but I can look back and already see how much the programme has helped me with my writing. Thank you doesn’t seem enough.”

“Thank you, Catherine, for all the hard work you put into All Stories. I would never be able to access editing any other way. Critique groups are brilliant but my mentor’s expertise has been incredible. I feel so lucky to have had this opportunity.”

“I enjoyed working with my editor and have learned so much that I hope to take forward with me when working on future projects.”

“My mentor has been so generous with her time and advice. I don’t feel she could do any more. Really appreciate her giving up her time to help me.”

“Thank you for taking a chance on me and giving me this opportunity. It’s been a long time since I’ve done something just for me, and everything I’ve learnt over the mentorship is mine forever and I will be able to apply that knowledge to my other writing.”

“This has been an invaluable and insightful experience.”

“It has been a highly enjoyable and educational process that I would recommend to any aspiring author!”

“During the mentorship, my mentor and I have completely reworked and restructured my novel, transforming it into something incredible and a story I am super excited to start working on and bringing to life! I’ve learnt a lot about the successful structure of a YA novel.”

“My mentor has worked at a style and pace which suits me and her feedback has been detailed and constructive. Online meetings have been positive and, along with her very clear suggestions, have contributed to my progress in taking my book idea forward.”

Appendix B: Anonymous feedback from mentors

“It’s been another very inspiring mentorship on all levels and I’m in awe of your incredible energy, insight and drive. It’s been so wonderful to see how the mentees have challenged themselves and developed through the year.”

“The content of the webinars is very high and the speakers are some of the best in the business, so I feel these offerings are top quality and a wonderful opportunity for the writers. I do think the writers benefit more when they can attend live. Communication from Catherine has been clear and organised, and overall the experience has been a real pleasure and a privilege. I’m so impressed by the All Stories programme, and proud to be involved with it. I’m able to see the impact it is having already, which is so exciting and rewarding.”

“It’s been such a positive experience for me and for my two mentees (hopefully!). I do find it useful to be at the webinars (as much as I can alongside other work) so that I know what our guests have spoken about and hear any questions my writers have asked.”

“I think your support is fantastic. I know if there are any issues or more complex questions that arise that I struggle to answer, you will be on hand. It’s great to be part of this wonderful scheme!”

“I found it really helpful to have a longer timeframe this year. It meant that my mentee and I could take our time to really dig into the work, but also to explore theory and examine who she is as a writer and what her aims and goals might be.”

“I’ve loved being part of the All Stories mentoring team. My mentee is so talented and it’s been brilliant to see her grow in confidence, and help her get to the heart of her story. Also Catherine is so organised and supportive – it’s a brilliant initiative and I’m really proud to be part of it.”

“This has been a very worthwhile project to be involved in and my mentee’s writing has come on leaps and bounds in a relatively short time, to the extent that her manuscript is now ready for submission to literary agents. She has committed to the programme wholeheartedly, making the most of our sessions and attending the excellent webinars on offer. The programme is very well run and the communication from Catherine Coe has been excellent from start to finish.”

“I have thoroughly enjoyed being a mentor for All Stories for the past two years. The scheme is a much needed and rewarding programme for writers from underrepresented backgrounds and Catherine runs it all with amazing organisational skills and is really supportive of all the writers and mentors. The writer I’m working with this year has said how much she is getting out of the mentorship and that her writing has made excellent progress. She couldn’t have had this level of editorial help without the All Stories programme.”

“I do think the mentorship is really well organised and thought through.”

“All Stories has from the start felt thoughtfully and carefully organised. Communication has been excellent throughout, Catherine is receptive to feedback, objectives and deadlines have been clearly communicated, and I’ve felt in very safe and capable hands. Working with my mentee has been hugely rewarding – it’s been a privilege to take part in such a worthwhile project. The standard of writing has been very high indeed.”

“All Stories is an incredibly well-run initiative with a clear sense of what is expected of each mentor, at every stage of the process. There were plenty of opportunities to share feedback or check in with the other editors if required.”

Appendix C: Anonymous feedback from workshop attendees

“Patrice Lawrence was incredible, so inspiring. The time went so fast, we could easily have had longer with her and Catherine too to discuss in more depth. This was more a taster workshop but worth every moment.”

“A really good fun session, with some great ideas and tools. Thank you!”

“Lovely atmosphere, really encouraging, efficient with time & yet lots of engaging exercises.”

“It was great, thought provoking, engaging. At the end of a working day my brain was frazzled and I had a slow start, but the exercises prompted me to come up with ideas and be imaginative.”

“Brilliantly put together. Very relaxed and easy going. Allowed us to get creative from the start!”

“I found the workshop very creative and insightful. I have used the skills learned in my writing and see it more clearly now.”

“The workshop was a bit too fast paced. I struggled to keep up.”

“The author was wonderful and provided a lot of useful tips and information, though I think it would have been helpful to explain more about approaching agents. All she noted was it was difficult to get published.”

“I think in hindsight, I would have preferred to attend the live stream event. But I did appreciate having the opportunity to attend the recorded session and getting a chance to interact with Catherine and the other people in the workshop.”

“I would have liked more on picture books. Also my character is an animal so lots of the prompts did not apply.”

“Firstly, thank you for organising these free workshops for under-represented children’s writers. They are a fantastic resource and I thoroughly enjoyed the session and took a lot away from it. I am working on writing a YA right now and it was really valuable to look at developing certain character’s motivations, their likes and dislikes and even to think about the music they might listen to in order to have that character more fully formed in my mind’s eye. I have downloaded the worksheets and will use them again for each novel I work on. I liked hearing about All Stories and the initiatives they are offering and look forward to the writing groups as well. Thank you very much again for all that you are doing, it is very much appreciated.”

Appendix D: Anonymous feedback from writing group attendees

“The initial sessions incredibly helpful, thank you.”

“I found the advice very useful and informative.”

“I think [the writing group] was a wonderful thing to arrange. When I started writing, I had no idea that groups like this existed or how important they would come to be. However, I am quite certain would not have had the confidence or know how to form one by myself. Thank you for setting this up.”

“[I learnt] how to give effective feedback, and I learned where my work was falling short. This has helped me prevent these issues before they have a chance to arise in future works.’

“Thanks so much for running these. It’s been a great support for me and I really look forward to the sessions.”

“Have loved being part of the group. Two of us were picked for All Stories mentorship. We have tried to pass on as much of what we have learned as possible. Meeting once a month has helped us all stick to our goals.”

“[I learnt] wanting to write and be a writer isn’t something to be ashamed of, rather it’s something that should be embraced and nurtured.”

“The group helped me to get an insight into my stories.”

“I found my critique group motivating, inspiring, and encouraging.”

“I learnt a lot about writing for children of all ages.”

“Appreciate capacity and resources is always going to be an issue, but infrequent check-ins by the facilitator could be really helpful. Nothing onerous, maybe once every six months. Signposting to events, writing tools and wider resources would also be great, but again I understand that takes time.”

Good to have a support network as I try to complete my first manuscript – it’s a long, lonely road!”

“It helped me become more confident about sharing my work; giving feedback on other writers’ work helps me to reflect on what is and isn’t working in my own stories.”