THE FORGE

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Editor's Desk

Welcome to the first edition of Access2books’ quarterly newsletter—The Forge. The first edition is always a challenge, but we embrace it. It’s a learning phase and our best work lies ahead of us in the not too distant future.

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The Forge

The Forge embodies us. Our premises are set on the foundations of an old forge. The remnants are embedded in the trees outside. In addition, we create dual format accessible books from popular stories but remain true to the spirit of the narrative.

We are forging links with the print disabled community and those involved in making important decisions on their behalf. This includes local libraries, SEN settings, booksellers, individuals, etc.

The Forge will help us establish a strong, enduring and successful relationship through providing information related to our work and industry and keep you abreast of current developments, work in progress or completion.

It will help you in planning and budgeting. Above all, we’ll get to know each other better. Enjoy this edition.

Joseph Nthini
Editor
The Festival Time Series is a set of eight books that cover different religious festivals. These include *Eight Candles to Light; Lanterns and Firecrackers, Four Special Questions; Lighting a Lamp,* etc. Eileen Finch talks about The Festival Time Series in this Q&A session.

**How did the Festival Time Series come about?**

I could see the books we had needed some diversity. They were the most popular children’s books but didn’t really include anything about the communities. Then I went to a meeting with West Sussex Library and they recommended two books. When I asked the publisher for a licence to publish the two books, Frances Lincoln Publishers recommended the whole series.

**Why do you think the books are so important?**

The community of disabled people who need access are diverse. I want people to get books that are interesting to them, and relate to them personally and they are loved. That sounds serious when you are talking about children’s picture books, but there is a diverse availability of content in that series.

**What is the Festival Time Series?**

They are reasons for children to read about
different faith festivals. It is a very important aspect of our community to read about. It is good to show different family activities. I’m looking forward to getting those books out and doing more that are for children, but include different family setups.

What is the main objective?

There are two objectives. What do we look like? What does this project look like? I want this project to look like it’s interesting to everybody.

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It’s not just interested in disabled people. This is about book sharing. I am interested in everybody. I want everybody to feel like they can relate to these stories. So it is about us, and what we look like, and it is about the community and their involvement and participation.

What is the current status of the books?

The Festival Time Series is available now. You can order all eight of the titles on our website.
Word Up With Alex Strick

I have always been passionate about equality and inclusion, and also a great lover of books.

Career-wise, I worked both in the disability sector and also the book world (at Booktrust) before becoming freelance in 2002. I continue to work on many Booktrust projects and resources including the ‘Bookmark’ website dedicated to books and disability issues.

I’m co-founder of a new collective called Inclusive Minds which runs events, training and projects aimed at improving diversity in books.

I also co-run a small UK organization called Outside in World which is dedicated to promoting and exploring books from around the world.

We’re currently running an Arts Council funded project collecting best practice in relation to accessible and inclusive books from around the world to share with the UK book sector.

I believe very strongly that all children have the right to access books and see themselves in books. So I work closely with writers, illustrators...
and publishers to encourage them to be as inclusive as possible.

I am also co-author of *Max the Champion*, a fun mainstream picture book which subtly features around 40 positive images of disabled people.

I am delighted to be linked with Access2Books and hope I can help this amazing organisation to develop its activities and explore new opportunities.

Alex Strick helps to promote Access2books and provides guidance and support to the project. [Editor’s note.]

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**How Stargardt’s turned grandmother into a book publisher**

Eileen Finch is a blind grandmother based in Leighton Buzzard. She was diagnosed with Stargardt’s at the age of 30.

Her central vision started disappearing along with her access to standard print but she still wanted to read to her grandchildren but there was nothing suitable on the market.

Eileen wanted to produce books of the same quality found in bookshops, the type of books children love. Therefore, she set about starting Access2books and creating children’s books in a unique format. They are in giant print with Braille and specially adapted illustrations. All the books are individually handmade.
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It took her over a year to reach publishing status. During that time, she faced numerous challenges. She painstakingly researched current provisions; obtained an IP Copyright License. She also had to obtain permission from the publishers of thirty of the most popular children’s books in the UK.

Picture: Eileen at the centre of attraction at the School of Social Entrepreneurs.

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In addition, Eileen had to figure out her way to obtain ISBN numbers. Apart from the legal technicalities of the publishing industry, she also had many other production challenges such as finding the right paper.

It was almost impossible binding books with a combination of Braille and print. She had to design and make her own binding equipment to ‘side-staple’ the spine.

Her project stalled more than once because of mistakes and lack of funding. She started off using a manual guillotine but it was heavy work and inaccurate. So, she changed to an electric one.

Each time the project stalled, she got positive feedback about her work and prototype books.

She eventually launched the not-for-profit project ‘Access2books’. Her books are ordered by
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schools and community libraries, individual orders and charities.

Eileen is a graduate of the Lloyds sponsored programme at the London School for Social Entrepreneurs. She was recently invited to exhibit her work at the Lloyds’ Charity Event held in Loosely Park in Guildford, Surrey.

She believes that ‘the social impact of getting the books widely available will benefit not only disabled children and adults, but could be educational for those who don’t yet understand accessible information and supportive of those professionals trying to make information available to more people.’

She aims ‘to increase the number of libraries stocking these books, make in-roads into education, expand into the retail industry and publish internationally.’

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Picture: Our accessible books on display on the shelves of Peter’s Books in store.
She has started making inroads into this arena by establishing partnerships and contacts like Paths to Literacy, WIPO and World Blind Union.

Five Facts about Access2books

In September 2014, Eileen celebrated 3 years as a publisher.

Access2books has distributed over 5000 books in three years.

Her vision is to publish 100 titles. She has published 62 books to date.

These include *The Gruffalo*, *Aliens Love Underpants*, *Giraffes Can’t Dance*, *Who’s in the Loo*, etc.

She runs Access2books with her partner Mike O’Sullivan and a team of part timers and volunteers.
Access2Books nominated for a PwC Award

Access2books made the top 5 of the PwC Social Entrepreneurs Club Awards. We were nominated in the Social Impact category. The list of nominees’ included:

Rainmakers Worldwide: they provide transformational experiences for young people or adults in the UK. These are people from challenging and marginalised backgrounds. They help them to support themselves though a unique blend of empowerment, education, enterprise and employment.

Sky Badger: it is an internet based charity that is dedicated to finding adventure and help for disabled children and their families. It connects them with charities, opportunities and existing services most families don’t even know exist.

Enabling Enterprise: their intention is to work in partnership with top businesses, including PwC, to bring the world of work into the classroom via challenge days, projects and trips.

Picture: Eileen Finch sharing a joke with Mark Graham from PwC.
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to those businesses.

Access2books: transcribes, produces, publishes and distributes dual access books with Braille, giant print [75 point] and specially adapted pictures for people who happen to be blind or visually impaired. Have distributed over 5000 books in about two years.

Building Lives: they transform unloved, disused community spaces into bespoke training academies with deprived communities. They offer free paid apprenticeships. In collaboration, they’ve established 10 training academies across London which helps secure more than 50 local people per year.

The inaugural Social Entrepreneurs Awards recognise club members for their excellence in two categories.

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These are social impact and sustainability. The winner of each category walks away with £5000 helping them to extend or expand their projects.

The winners also receive an award trophy. The trophy is made by Cr8 using recycled items. Cr8 is a social enterprise. They design and create bespoke products. They provide homeless people and people who are at risk to gain work experience and qualifications. This helps them with the opportunity to get back to work.

The event was held at the Brigade Bar and Bistro. It was started by chef founder Simon Boyle. His Beyond Food foundations offers work experience, catering skills and qualifications for people at risk of, or who have experienced homelessness.
Unfortunately, we didn’t win the prize. It went to Rainmakers Worldwide.

However, the nomination taught us that we are on the right track and that we are doing many things right. We have the opportunity to grow and learn from our experiences.

From our humble beginnings, this was a major coup for us because our initial goal was to publish a few books but we have exceeded our expectations by far.

The extra publicity was fabulous for our project and so was their endorsement. It rubberstamped our credibility and reinforced our social presence as a force to reckon with in the future.
In the Spotlight

My name is Sue Hendra, I’ve been writing and illustrating children’s books for almost twenty years and I love my job. I’m ashamed to say that it wasn’t until I met the team from Access2books that I considered how children or parents with sight impairments enjoy picture books together.

Surely picture books are the way that most children under five enjoy sharing stories with their parents or carers. Personally, there’s nothing I like more than snuggling up with my little girl and enjoying a picture book, it’s blissful. In doing this we enjoy being together, going on a journey and through that journey learn and make sense of the world around us.

The Access2books team showed me popular picture books in Giant print and Braille versions. Enlarging text and adding braille wasn’t all that was different about these books. It struck me that enlarging parts of the illustrations is a clever way to help tell the story for someone with a sight impairment. Making picture books accessible to all adults and children can only ever be a good thing. I am fully in support of, and excited by, the work that Access2books are doing. Look out for my interview in the next edition of this newsletter.
Eileen’s Corner

Welcome to my column and our first newsletter, hope you like it enough to read it again.

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Writing this is a very open, awesome task (awesome has definitely become more popular since the Lego film, hasn’t it?).

As this project is about access and sharing for children and adults who can’t read the usual publications, I’ve chosen to write about me and having sight impairment. I have some frustrating and very funny experiences of this, and others have some odd experiences of me too.

I was diagnosed with Stargardt’s (progressive loss of central vision) around 1985, I was 31 with 3 children: 6 months to 6 years old.

I don’t look any more blind today than I did then. Although people now look over their shoulder when I’m talking to them because, unknowingly to me, I’m looking over their shoulder!

I have to say ‘I am looking at you, I can’t see properly, so I look in the wrong place’. If you
spend time with me, then you’d know I can’t really see! I was worried and upset when I first got diagnosed, but within a year I learnt about accessible equipment, and talked to people who had sight impairments and were blind.

Through experience, I soon got new strategies for work and play, and became a little less worried and got on with my life.

I have since found out that I was lucky to be 30 years old when I acquired my sight impairment. The older you are the more difficult it is to change, like use a computer to read or accept the situation and put your attention on different activities.

Over half the disabled population have ‘hidden conditions’, like I have. So, if the condition can’t be seen, and people you meet aren’t told - it’s confusing.

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My white stick is the best message, but I don’t use it all the time. No wonder I confuse people!

Everyday situations illustrate how confusing being disabled can be. For example, when an air steward was bending at my knee, giving me ‘hands-on’ familiarity with the safety kit, she dropped her pen and I picked it up!

This is because I use the vision I have, which is peripheral, and if I’m not looking at something, I can probably see it. Needless to say I couldn’t see any surprised look on the steward’s face, but my partner told me afterwards.

So, it is noticeable how confusing being disabled is to people who don’t have experience of it. They want to assist, don’t want to offend, and get confused when, for example, you behave like you have any vision. It, of course, helps if I reassure, say it is okay, tell them I have no central vision but use my peripheral. It can be
embarrassing all around.

It is obviously difficult when you look like you can see but say that you can’t! I remember when I first got a white stick. I thought I had to tap it on the walls as I walked through town to make sure I knew where the edges were!!! I personally didn’t need to do that but thought I should. Can you believe that? Painfully, I can believe it because I did it.

I had a friend once who was a beginner at wheelchair use. And she had a similar story. Her new friend, also a wheelchair user, asked her one day, ‘why have you always got that blanket over your legs?’ You can guess, she thought wheelchair users had to do that! Well, excruciating disclosure, as these stories are, they are good examples of our expectations of disabled people. If you become disabled, you may play out your expectations.

Well, I don’t do that anymore and even though people get confused, and I do too, we laugh and learn a lot at the same time.

My grandchildren are fortunately quite matter of fact about my sight. If I do something they don’t expect they would say, how do you do that? They started this project off for me. They are lovely and very matter of fact about my sight or lack of it.

Aidan (7 years) says, ‘Nanny can’t do that because she can’t see’ (maybe we are talking about driving). He sometimes asks what I can see. Phoebe (6 years) often says ‘Nannie, you’re blind’, in a sort of dramatic telling me sort of way.

Evie is 3. I was amazed when she bought a video of Frozen Round to watch on the TV because ‘Nannie can’t see my DVD player’ (I told her I can’t see the screen about a month ago).
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All of the grandchildren including Ryan, 3, and Maisey, 1, love my magnifiers and white stick. I think they are very lucky to have a ‘blind’ Nannie. It’s good for them to be themselves around a disabled person and good for me to hear them.

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*shadows?*

Maybe it would be better if people asked me? But they are only likely to be a little interested in passing, and it is personal and embarrassing. It would probably be better if we had a better grasp of the facts around disabled people, rather than the myths.

There are many people who want the books we make, but the beliefs are usually the opposite of the facts. Most of us can see. 6% have no vision and 89% will probably read large print, maybe with a magnifier (not needed with our books).

Over 90% of disabled people will acquire their conditions, rather than be born disabled. Our experience of ‘disability’ will vary greatly depending on your starting point: age, beliefs, and race, social or economic situation.

So for me, being 30 when I got diagnosed, my

Picture: Phoebe and Ryan bonding over Nan’s handmade book, Shark in the Park.

In a conversation about this article, my daughter, Kayleigh, said she is often asked ‘what I can see?’ and she says, ‘I don’t know -
start point included educated, professionally trained, confident and entrenched habits. I notice that people I meet who are sighted feel sad that I can’t see, or some think of me as slightly ‘heroic’ because I engage in everyday activities like go out on my own, cook dinner and lead a project.

People with sight will often say they’d rather have anything happen to them other than go blind. Well for me, I’d choose to have my sight back, but I wouldn’t give up the experience I’ve had, I’ve learnt such a lot.

I have heard from those who were born blind say that they would not choose to have sight because they are quite settled in living in the world with their experience and learning. I guess just like most of us.

This all sounds a bit up and lively and I need to balance this with a reality check. I get really angry, upset and rejected, when I repeatedly ask for access, for example, the bank, and don’t get it, or when I want to talk about access to information for my supermarket card.

As I’ve been a customer of both these places for 30-40 years, and becoming disabled isn’t that unlikely, I get to feel like a problem, which I am not: it’s their lack of access.

However, I have a lot of people around me a lot of the time; this helps a lot as they do things for me when I ask: read this; what is that; can you do this for me, can you find this.

And all so often, I do something silly – like put salt in my tea, slice food badly and cut my nails! Lucky miss! Walk into dustbins, cross the road instead of asking for assistance.

So, after this most unusual article, I hope you’ve got to know me better.
I hope you feel able to write to our project and tell us anything you like that would help us or others. Or raise any question to discuss the work we do and the community we serve. I also hope you enjoy our first newsletter. Eileen

Contributors required

If you would like to contribute to our upcoming issues or be a part of our focus groups, please get in touch with us. All the contact details are in the side panel.

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