



School: School of Creative Industries

Researcher: Steve Voake

Project Title: Series Fiction: Capturing and holding the attention of emerging readers

UOA: 27 - English Language and Literature

Research Statement

Voake's research explores friendship, empathy and acceptance. Voake's series fiction, aimed at 7- to 9-year-olds, makes use of humour and strong characters in order to inspire a love of reading for pleasure, encouraging young children to expand their reading to include illustrated chapter books. A leading expert on children's books notes that Voake's attention to critical language and the shaping of his stories allows his books to "capture and hold the attention of emerging readers".

The *Hooey Higgins* series, including *Hooey Higgins and the Storm* (2014) and *Hooey Higgins and the Christmas Crash* (2014) examine the power of friendship, as well as exploring the writing of slapstick comedy for young readers. While slapstick is traditionally seen as a form of 'low' comedy, it has classical origins as well as being associated with the *commedia dell'arte* of the medieval and early modern period. Comprising pratfalls and mishaps, its humour is primarily derived from a carefully choreographed tension between control and its subsequent loss.

Voake's observation, during school author events, of young reader's responses to slapstick elements in the *Hooey Higgins* books led him to an exploration of the process and effect of deliberately building a narrative around an extensively researched list of established tropes of physical comedy. The resulting book, *Hooey Higgins and the Storm*, pits two well-established characters against a storm in a way that encapsulates slapstick's core motif of resistance and inevitable surrender: a random and violent external force becoming the perfect — and farcical — foil against Hooey and Will's unshakeable belief that they are always just an original thought or an invention away from solving any given problem or situation.

In the *Maxwell Mutt and Downtown Dogs* series (2016-2019), Voake explores more complex themes, looking at how individuals cope with hardships, and examining the possibility of overcoming preconceptions and prejudices to make new friends. The series examines the ways in which choosing risk and adventure over safety and comfort may ultimately lead to a better outcome, as well as exploring how the

preservation of hope in the face of adversity may result in the achievement of a stated goal, despite overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary. The more lyrical style of writing in *Maxwell Mutt and Downtown Dogs* (when compared to the *Hooey Higgins* books) reflects the more dramatic events and intense emotions of this series – the characters have a lot to lose and have to struggle to find a place for themselves and their friends in a hostile world.

Voake's collaboration with illustrators plays an important part in his practice and research. The comedy inherent in the *Hooey Higgins* illustrations, created by Emma Dodson, adds to the slapstick of the story. Meanwhile, Voake worked with illustrator Jim Field on the *Maxwell Mutt* series in order to highlight the lyrical aspects of the writing and create a seamless combination of illustration and prose.

Voake's books are hopeful and accepting. His stories show that it is possible to understand someone else's perspective, and that even old enemies or adversaries can become friends. At the end of the day, his characters discover friendship, self-knowledge and acceptance, finding a space they can call their own. Voake's writing for young readers encourages empathy and tolerance, making the case for a more inclusive world.