



**School: School of Creative Industries**

**Researcher: Jo Nadin**

**Project Title: A Question of Identity: Middle Grade writing that catches the heart and lifts the spirits.**

**UOA: 27 - English Language and Literature**

## Research Statement

Nadin's research explores questions of empathy and identity. Nadin wants her readers to 'try on a new life' through their engagement with her characters. Using the technique of writing in the first person, Nadin asks her readers to go on a journey with her protagonists, even if the journey is a difficult one. By travelling alongside her characters, the reader learns more about other people and about themselves, and by trying on other lives for size they have the opportunity to ask the questions 'who am I?' and 'could I be different?'

Nadin is concerned with capturing authentic voices and highlighting difficult issues, with the use of humour making it possible for younger readers to confront complex and painful situations. Author Tanya Landman describes Nadin's work as writing that "catches the heart and lifts the spirits". Rather than constructing superhero narratives or fantastic worlds, Nadin explores the possibilities that exist in the real world, creating stories about ordinary people who find their own, achievable, ways of being extraordinary.

Through her research, Nadin has gained new understandings of the potential of writing from the perspective of a narrator with a limited knowledge and vocabulary dependent on their age and experience. By 'method acting' her characters as she writes, Nadin explores their worlds, their language and their preoccupations. By presenting characters with a limited knowledge and a limited world view, Nadin can give her readers the edge on her protagonists, allowing the reader to spot potential problems or find solutions to predicaments before the protagonist comes to their own realisations.

At the core of Nadin's work is her respect for young readers, putting her young audience first and foremost.

Nadin's writing for Middle Grade (which broadly covers the 7-12 age range) is split into two main areas: books for the upper end of this age group, which deal with

complex issues and emotions, and books for younger readers, which employ humour and authentic voices to encourage a love of reading.

## Upper Middle Grade

Nadin's books for the upper end of Middle Grade include:

*Joe All Alone* (2015)

*The Incredible Billy Wild* (2017)

*Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility (Awesomely Austen)* (2020)

*Alan Turing, A Life Story* (2020)

Nadin's books for older Middle Grade readers make use of humour and lively narration in order to tackle serious subjects and complex situations. In *Joe All Alone*, Nadin was concerned with writing a 'real boy's voice'. The narrative voice and structure of the novel allowed readers to empathise with Joe and his situation. Author Jo Cotterill's review of the book stated that "is written in such a strong voice that... I felt drawn to writing my review in the same style"<sup>ii</sup>. While the novel tackles the serious issue of child poverty, Joe's voice injects humour into the narrative, allowing himself (and the reader) to bear the situation. In this way, Nadin draws the reader into Joe's story, making them cry in sympathy with his dilemmas but also making the reader laugh as they witness Joe's humour and resilience in the face of adversity.

In writing *Alan Turing, A Life Story*, Nadin was faced with the challenge of finding the right voice in which to explain complex issues to young readers. By selecting stories and moments from Turing's life that would elicit empathy and admiration in the reader, Nadin was able to bridge the gap between Turing's experience of growing up in the early twentieth century and the world inhabited by young readers today. By including practical information about the basics of computing and coding, Nadin was also able to show her readers that they could understand this area of knowledge and that they, too, could choose to learn to code and make their own discoveries.

These two books, as well as the adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* for a young audience and *The Incredible Billy Wild*, which tackles the subject of animal welfare and greyhound racing, introduce older Middle Grade readers to new worlds and new voices, allowing them to broaden their perspectives and consider new possibilities for their futures.

## Lower Middle Grade

Nadin's books for the lower end of Middle Grade include:

*Flying Fergus* series (2016-2019), written in collaboration with Sir Chris Hoy and illustrated by Clare Elsom

*The Worst Class in the World* (2020)

An important part of Nadin's process involves paying attention to children and the worlds they inhabit. *The Worst Class in the School* (inspired by *Le Petit Nicolas* series by René Goscinny and illustrator Jean-Jacques Sempé) saw Nadin capturing how children really speak to one another and how they perceive the world. While *The Worst Class in the School* is primarily a comic story for younger readers, Nadin employs empathy in order to engage readers with all the 'worst class' pupils, explaining the motivation behind some of the characters' bad behaviour and helping them to understand what motivates people to behave in certain ways. *The Worst Class in the World* and the *Flying Fergus* series engage young readers with their humour and lively use of language and affirm their experiences and perception of the world as something that is worthy of a writer's and reader's attention.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.lovereadings4kids.co.uk/book/12043/Joe-All-Alone-by-Joanna-Nadin.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://jocotterill.com/2015/10/30/joe-all-alone-review/>