

Interview with Kate Sullivan of Little, Brown
by Jennifer Bertman



Kate Sullivan works as an assistant editor at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers and the commercial young women's series imprint Poppy. Her current projects and authors include The A-List: Hollywood Royalty, Darren Shan, Jen Calonita, and Ash by Malinda Lo, an empowering retelling of Cinderella. Prior to working at Little, Brown, Kate was an editorial assistant at Walker/Bloomsbury Children's Books, where she worked on many nonfiction and fiction picture book titles. She is primarily looking for novels that make her laugh aloud on a crowded subway, show a cynical or quirky worldview, are smart without being boring, or have strong, defiant characters (who may or may not have a penchant for monstrous behavior). Fun fact: Kate grew up in Brussels, Belgium (thank you, United States Air Force).

How did you come to be an editor? Describe for us the path that led you to your current position with Little, Brown.

Well, I was a shy kid hidden behind a book all my life. Growing up as an Air Force brat, we didn't have many TV options, and my mom didn't believe in televisions in her kids' rooms. In a big family like mine, a book was my escape from the noise of the household. My mom would force me to attend diplomatic cocktail parties but as soon as she turned her back, I'd hole up in the corner of the party with my book. So, it was inevitable, really! I just knew that I needed a career in what I loved. It wasn't until college when I realized that more than books, I loved books for young readers in particular. I joked to a friend that I wanted to throw my college's English department for a loop by writing my senior thesis on Roald Dahl. But then, I actually did it. After finishing my thesis, I met my now-best friend online. She got me an internship at Walker, where I even picked a picture book manuscript out of the slush pile that got published. I was hooked. Subsequently, I temped as Andrea Pinkney's assistant at Houghton Mifflin for a summer, got my full-time assistant position at Walker/Bloomsbury in 2005, and then was swept away by Little, Brown!

What is a typical day-in-the-life like for you as an editor? Or if there's no such thing as a typical day, what activities consume your working hours?

Definitely no such thing. Some days could be filled with writing catalog copy, or like today, I could be swept up in author visits. Joanna Philbin and Jen Calonita came in, so the whole day was chatting with them about books, marketing, and more. I guess the best thing to know about an editor is that we both are the originator of content at a publisher when we acquire it, but we also supervise all other aspects of the book, from reviewing contracts, copyediting, giving input on design or marketing plans, to deciding production specifications.

At my desk, I'm usually working on one or more of the following things: emailing my existing authors about their books, marketing plans, ideas, edits, families, feelings; emailing agents about their authors; talking with agents, both to receive their pitches and let them know whether or not I'm deciding to move forward with a project they've brought me; deciding how to pitch a book I've acquired to sales, or a book I want to acquire to our publication committee; searching the office for free brownies and sandwiches because I forgot to eat lunch; running costs for the production of books; reviewing proofs for mistakes; reviewing design ideas for covers and interiors; doing market research; fulfilling marketing needs like catalog copy, galley copy, reviewing ads, asking authors to participate in our efforts; staring lustily at the galley of *Catching Fire* that's on my desk but I haven't had the time yet to read; discussing special production specifications to a book; checking the Amazon and Barnes and Noble listings of our books to make sure they got the info right . . . the list goes on. And then I go home or go to the gym where I read my submissions and do my edits.

What is your favorite part about being an editor? Your least favorite part?

Book lust is by far my favorite part of the job. Reading a book you just love. Discussing an edit with an author who just *gets it*. Brainstorming with the author for the perfect solution. Or meeting other book-lovers who are as excited as I am to discuss the themes and motifs of a novel we just read. Hearing an idea or a point of view about a book that I had never thought of before, and being totally blown away by this great new way to look at it.

My least favorite part is the time commitment. It's massive. I'd argue, in fact, that it's comparable to investment bankers' schedules. Only, I'd like to think this was slightly more fun than investment banking, but I'm biased.

Could you share with us any info on upcoming projects you're excited about?

Two I'm super excited about right now are *The Thin Executioner* by Darren Shan and Malinda Lo's second novel. *The Thin Executioner* is Darren's first non-series novel ever, and it is just stunning—based loosely on Huckleberry Finn, but with all of Shan's trademark action and gore. It's intelligent and yet unputdownable. He said recently to a group of librarians, "If you want to tell a positive message to kids you have to slip it in behind a wall of blood and guts." I laugh every time, but there's truth to it!

As for Malinda, she's the author of a retelling of Cinderella we have coming out this fall called *Ash*—it's romantic and beautiful and thoughtful and has a lesbian twist. Her next one is actually an adventure, and when I got the draft in I tweeted all weekend as I read; I couldn't put it down. It was so different from her first book, and yet an utter home run. That's a wonderful feeling for an editor, when an author takes a risk and knocks it out of the park.

How has this economic recession affected you in your role as editor, and/or at Little, Brown as a company? Do you have any advice for writers and illustrators who might be worried about what this recession means for them and their careers?

Houses have to do a better job of tightening their lists. I'm wary to give advice, though, on a subject where strategy will vary widely from house to house and even editor to editor.

Do you work with unagented authors and illustrators?

No, I don't. And I would not recommend to any new writer that they ever go into a publishing situation without an agent. They are vital elements to the process these days, and often the writer's best champion, if they're doing their job. I cannot recommend agents highly enough! They're the best. I promise you, that if you ever get a contract from a publishing house without having gotten an agent first, you will take one look at that thing and say, "I wish I had an agent."

How many submissions do you receive in a week on average? What qualities make a submission stand out to you in a positive way? In a negative way?

Since Little, Brown does not accept unsolicited manuscripts, my submission pile is manageable. Right now, I have about 10 that I must read—all from agents, and all novels. When I get a submission from an agent I read it start to finish—no shortcuts. The agents I know consider who to send their clients' work to very carefully, so if they've sent me something they believe is right for me, then it's worth my time. If it isn't right for me, then I'll write them a detailed letter about why, and next time they'll be closer to having the perfect one—or be able to give good feedback to their client about what needs to change. As for unagented, I have about 10 from attendants of conferences I've been to recently, all of which are small partials.

Positives: I can't put it down and almost miss my subway stop. I laugh out loud. I want to be the main character. My heart beats fast with romance or action. The quality of the prose takes me away.

Negatives: Of course, there are a million negatives, but I'll list the two that stand out. Authors who do not follow submission guidelines (don't do that to yourself!). Romantic relationships that mirror Edward and Bella to a T. I loved it in *Twilight*, but now I'm ready to move on from that "he acts like he hates me because he really can't resist me" trope already. Or the "he stalks me because he loves me" angle. Let's invent the next romantic trope, what do you say?

Have you ever acquired a book from your slush pile?

As an intern at Walker, a book I picked from the slush got published! Nothing since, though.

You have worked on a number of series. Do you have advice for those interested in developing a series?

Of course! The biggest is: Only write book one. Perfect it. Rewrite it and hone it for years if you have to. Series generally aren't bought when all of the books are written; they're bought when an editor receives the first book and loves it. They'll take it on faith that you can write the rest just as well. So take the time to get that one right, and make sure that it will stand on its own even if it doesn't get turned into a series. In all likelihood, though, if you have a genius concept, compelling characters, and a well-written first sample, it will.

I've often heard that it's a no-no for a writer to pitch their idea as a series, that they should focus on selling the first title first. Would you agree with this? Why or why not?

This is such a tough one because many publishers, like Poppy, are actively looking for new series. They can be extremely lucrative. I think the reason you hear this advice is not because it's a bad idea to do a series, but because usually burgeoning writers pitch the series angle a little too hard, rather than pitch the concept or the writing. That can be overwhelming for an agent or an editor to hear, right out of the gate, "I've got 12 books planned in this series and I've already written four!" That doesn't tell me a writer is committed to their craft, and it certainly doesn't focus my attention on how great the content is first, either. Instead it gives me several negative impressions: this writer probably has unrealistic expectations, and would rather write in quantity rather than quality.

But my ears *totally* prick up if an author sits down and says, "here's the concept:" and launches into a very well-thought out outline and says they've worked on revising it for four years. If at the end of all that they say, "I think this concept has series potential, and while I haven't written anything beyond number one, I have outlined two more." I'm more likely to listen. The series angle is the gravy, not the main course. I would rather a writer have a well-honed book number one than to have already pounded out the whole series.

Do you have to be an established author to sell a series idea, or is it possible for someone unpublished to break in this way?

Every series writer has to start somewhere. Cecily von Ziegesar's first book was *Gossip Girl*. Other authors whose first book turned into or was planned as a series: Lisi Harrison, Melissa Marr, Stephenie Meyer, Cassandra Clare . . . the list goes on. In fact, I'm having a harder time thinking of well-established authors who later moved into series, rather than the other way around.

Which fictional character would you take to the prom and why?

Can I take a Transformer? I'd like to see one of them dressed in a tux.

What do you like to do in your free time?

Read YA books, go to concerts occasionally, bike in the city, and watching cartoons with a loosely-based animation club. Yes, I even put "watching cartoons" as the answer to this on my juror questionnaire. I'd like to think it was the reason I didn't get picked.

What are some of your all-time favorite books (excluding those you've worked on)?

BFG, Matilda, Figgs & Phantoms, 1984, Infinite Jest, Graceling, World War Z, Frankenstein, Mrs. Piggle Wiggle, His Dark Materials, Snow Crash, Geek Love . . .

Are you open to accepting submissions from attendees of our upcoming fall conference?

OF COURSE! Only middle grade and YA queries, please. Specific submission information will be provided at the conference.

Jennifer Bertman volunteers for the RMC-SCBWI as the Managing Editor of Kite Tales newsletter. She has an MFA in creative writing and works as a freelance copyeditor and proofreader for a variety of publishers. She is currently revising a middle grade mystery and keeps a blog at <http://writerjenn.blogspot.com>.