

Collaborating across new media and gender: Co-writing *f2m: the boy within* social media online & the case (study) of a controversial YA novel

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Novel Collaborating Online

Gender transitioning, with a punk music setting was always going to be controversial. Especially in this internationally 'first' YA novel with a trans co-author Ryan who had transitioned from female to male (ftm). However we did not expect the speed of social media which made 'f2m: the boy within' a fascinating case study in online collaboration techniques. These included Skype plotting, webchats, guest blogs, book trailer and Twitter, by the co-writers in different countries, and the YA readers and reviewers.

Authors are not solo creators. Professionally, they may work at home, but are linked internationally, by new social media.

Introduction – novel collaborating online

This paper is written from Hazel Edwards' author viewpoint, since the expedient speed of social media has become an electronic revolution comparable to the Industrial Revolution in terms of the impact of intellectual property change. Diversity of media, challenge of quality control and the resilience of creators are highly relevant.

Best known for the classic picture book *There's a hippopotamus on our roof eating cake* which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, Hazel Edwards collaborated for her 200th book, on a YA novel, *f2m: the boy within*. Co-author, New Zealand-based Ryan Kennedy lived as a female until his transition to male at age twenty-seven. Ryan works in information technology (IT) and is a passionate environmentalist and punk musician. This is his first book. Family friends collaborated on-line for over a year on 40 drafts on the 70,000-word novel, which is medically accurate but not an autobiography. Since the February 2010 print publication by Ford Street Publishing, social media has influenced reviewing YA fiction. The Edwards-Kennedy online literary process has become as timely as the topical, little-understood and formerly taboo subject of gender transition. This paper hopes to humanise rather than sensationalise the process and to stress the 'coming of age' of the fictional character but also the electronic 'coming of age' for professional 'book people' in new ways of fast evaluation via social media.

Diversity of media

Novel process

Across a year, two continents, and forty drafts, Ryan Kennedy and I co-wrote *f2m: the boy within*, internationally the first YA novel by a trans ftm co-author. There is one other transgender YA novel *Parrotfish* and an excellent mtf (male to female) novel *Luna*. But ours is a first.

I kept a log of our process. Our original 70,000-word novel is published in conventional print format by Ford Street (www.fordstreetpublishing.com). We plotted on Skype and exchanged weekly versions by email. Once the book trailer made by Ryan appeared on Youtube, hits escalated. Instantly the YA bloggers reviewed, commented and guest blogs appeared from Argentina to outback Western Australia, from USA to suburban Melbourne.

Speed of social media

The speed of social media in connection with this book has been an education. Although my author web site (www.hazeledwards.com) is updated monthly, as a result of *f2m: the boy within* I've learnt, 'fast' about the relevance of social media for book authors. Usually print reviews months after any release or launch are the norm. Now some of the reviews and guest blogs were up as soon as the book was available. The same day! The other issue for authors is bookshops or online distribution and whether readers buy e-book formats, or

buy conventional print books online from the publisher, the distributor or later as e-books , Ipad, Kindle and POD (print on demand). All changing.

This speed of e-comment contrasted with our careful research, since August 2008, when I met Ryan who was now acknowledged as male and looked so much happier. That's when we decided to write the book together. We used the medical sequencing of his online journal, but *f2m: the boy within* is 'not' autobiography. While writing the novel, I had kept a log of the fictional challenges we'd had to solve, like choosing an apt title, creating a fake family history, genetic research, and our plotting on Skype progress.

The formerly taboo subject matter is surprisingly topical so that has also attracted the social media comment. Our aim was to humanise and tell a good story, neither to sensationalise nor to write propaganda. But the media was attracted to the subject matter and this hastened the process of reviewing the novel.

People mean different things by terms such as 'social media'. So setting aside the novel subject, let's look at the online process.

Facebook

I had avoided Facebook as a time-waster and irrelevant, as I was not seeking a romantic partner. But as an author, I discovered there were ways to publicise quickly around the time of a book launch or release. One entry (especially with a photo holding the book cover) could be sent to relevant people with one 'tap'. But I also had to learn the security controls, fast. Horrified at invitations from strangers and floods of their daily trivia news, I learnt to transfer one news item about a book-review so it could be used several times across media. Found out from my computer savvy daughter that visitors would only see what I put there, not the flood of trivia from elsewhere about what a stranger had eaten for breakfast. That was a relief.

Once our book was listed with various news items on our publisher's site, it was easy to copy these onto my Facebook profile.

BookTrailer <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WqD-E04PNc>

A book trailer is a mini movie. Ours was a special challenge to have a text oriented one, rather than sensationalising gender visuals. Our cover with the symbolism of the Russian dolls and personalities within has been significant. This 'book trailer' has probably been one of the most valuable online ways of drawing attention to the book, since it links with a synopsis to the publisher's site. I occasionally check on the number of hits and find that others have also lifted it onto their sites.

Twitter

My first Twitter was about our book launch once I learnt how to register and get 'another' user name and password! I had to ask Ryan (who is an IT expert) how to do it. The economy of the words is a discipline. But surely my tweet would be buried in all those superfluous words. Then I learnt about re-tweeting when someone else passes on your news.

Blog

I decided earlier against having a blog as it was time consuming. A professional author needs to write words, which are paid, not 'freebies' unless they are strategic publicity. But a guest blog on high-ranking sites was part of my test case across a month around the release date to see how the book title could be spread. The challenge was that each had to be different; both in title, opening phrase and angle. These were monitored on Google Alert which list new blog entries with your key words.

Re-usable visuals

Apart from the book cover in low and high resolution, it was necessary to have a co-author photo. We used the book launch one, as we were physically in the same country and everyone wanted to see what Ryan looked like now.

Book cover launch cake



Order a cake online based on the jpeg cover of your book. Quick and provides a focus for the launch, a PR photo and great food.

Hot seat in super- clubs-plus web chat

As a guest author in the 'hot seat', I answered 200 questions in an hour, with the help of two fast keyboard assistants. These questions came from 1000 students in Singapore, USA, China, New Zealand and nationally from around Australia.

This is a safe web site for students, but most had also looked through my website and read about my other titles. There was a 24% spike on the Google Analytics on that day from visitors to my website.

Most were younger students who asked questions in connection with the 30th anniversary of my picture book *There's a hippopotamus on our roof eating cake*.

But I have done other web chats with adolescent students about specific books and hits on my site and interest in the YA novels always follows. Sometimes the book is introduced, other times it is discussed in detail with well-prepared and analytical questions. The ability to speak via web cam with the author makes the novel more immediate for readers.

Radio podcasts

Podcasts have become a significant resource-enabling repeat listening at convenient times. My web master linked the national radio interview podcasts with us as co-authors to my 'news' site. However some community radio stations have their podcast up only for a month, bloggers can vanish, and the transitory nature of electronic references is an important variable.

The speed of copy and paste means controversial material can be read out of context and although the original article or comment might have been delicately and logically crafted, third or fourth hand readers see only an out- of- context sentence.

Challenges of quality control

Our research

Apart from Ryan's experience and his diary, we'd researched gender, genetics, punk music and genealogy. We'd had the manuscript read by 'naïve' (just for the story) as well as 'expert' readers who were familiar with gender and medical issues. We'd carefully reworded 'potentially insulting' phrases like 'used to be a girl and was now a man' to 'presented as a girl'.

But often our 'reviewers' knew little of the work to get the pronouns right and misquoted.

Downside of fast responses

- No control over ignorant comments below guest posts
- Inexperienced reviewers may have exceptional technical skills, which place their content high on search engines

- Speed of negative as well as positive contents...no need to justify
- Comment on controversial issues like transgender without reading the book.
- Haste with which extracts are forwarded to other sites, sometimes out of context.
- Setting up a Google Alert with our book title had mixed results. Our title is *f2m: the boy within* to indicate f2m also being the process by which we wrote. But ftm on Google can attract some strange entries. It is also a family tree history program.

What are the dangers and benefits of social media learning?

Discussion about this novel is an imaginative way to begin a unit on gender which could include analysis of social media such as blogs, Twitter and websites in influencing opinion on topical issues. The speed of prejudice and ignorance as well as the speed of well-researched data should also be compared.

What evidence is there for that opinion? The speed of re-tweeting or linking to blogs does not make an opinion piece valid. Check the sources.

What have I learnt as a mainstream author?

- Importance of e-tags and titles.
- Visuals.... our recent co-author photo was vital, in varied resolutions.
- Need to vary the angle of guest blogs as they travel and are fast captioned.
- Update my website with links for recent radio podcasts such as ABC Life Matters
- Young bloggers link to each other, fast.
- Add the publisher and distribution link, so interest will result in sales of the book.
- Need fast access to a synopsis of the book, with the right pronouns, such as:

Synopsis of *f2m: the boy within*

School-leaver Skye plays guitar in her all-female Chronic Cramps band. Making her name in the punk/indie scene is easier than FTM (female to male) transitioning: from Skye to Finn, from girl to man. Uncovering genetic mysteries about family heritage tear the family apart. Trans gender identity is more than injections and surgery, it's about acceptance. Going public, Finn sings ftm lyrics on TV. With a little help from bemused mates and family who don't want to lose a daughter, but who love their teenager, Finn is transitioning.

What didn't work?

- Social media can be very time consuming.
- Keeping a list of guest blogs, radio podcast and online reviews on a master file, which also had our co-author contacts, publisher and distributor links and a photo of the two of us, became a job in itself. So I just kept a generic list of 'online links', which could be sent as an attachment. Others were linked from my website.
- Educators are apprehensive about the topic.

Transitioning gender is one of those subjects, which starts alarm bells for teachers, so they tend to avoid it, even if gender is on the curriculum. The online resources exist. Use them judiciously.

Why might sharing a YA novel (as a class serial or on the latest electronic device) be a way of introducing the subject of gender?

Because fiction can explore emotions such as prejudice and apprehension and can evoke sympathy for a trans character, and even provide humour and entertainment en route.

A novel offers the opportunity of seeing things from another's perspective, just for a few hours.

How have reviewers reacted to the subject?

The speed of online response has been so much faster.

One reviewer Jo Burnell wrote:

Hard topics covered with humour, but the difficult reality is not white-washed.

Punk rock scene vibrates throughout the pages allowing the reader to enter into not one, but two new worlds.

Comment on The Great Raven review site:

But you can safely read F2M and hand it to your teen children/grandchildren. Really. The topic is controversial, but the handling of it is absolutely fine.

However online reviews can also vanish or links go dead.

Resilience of creators

What were the challenges in writing this novel?

Getting the pronouns right, both in the blurb and when I was talking to Ryan.

It's so hard to write simply about a complex subject without making it sound trite or banal. How do you move from her to him in a short, simple sentence, when many trans guys claim they were always their perceived gender? So they didn't change, just the world perceived them differently.

So I used neutral terms like 'teenager' or adolescent' or used the character's name at that point of the story.

Ryan explained it in this way.

Being the transgender half of the writing team, it was up to me to bring my trans perspective and make the transition story real. It would take years of research for a non-transgender person to write this kind of story while accurately reflecting what we feel and experience during transition. At the same time I didn't want to 'represent' all trans people by presenting only one way to transition. This is just one possible way to transition and not the correct way or the only way. It's a fictional character's experience based loosely on my own.

I was just as committed to presenting an accurate version of the punk scene, as I was a transgender character. It's a culture that's often misrepresented. On the musical side there's everything from pure noise bands to skilful musicians, and everything from those who've had many music lessons to self-taught artists. The fans are diverse and welcome diversity, and there's a culture of questioning and equality. I found it a great setting to explore my identity and I am dismayed when punk is portrayed as being wild for the sake of wild. Its rebellion is usually focused towards social change. Some rebellion is healthy. Transgender people are gender rebels.'

Serendipitous responses

- Online collaboration in our co- writing attracted educators and computer page editors. Because we mention using Skype to plot, the Skype people even contacted us as 'novel' users to feature in a profile.
- Fake family tree for the genetics of the plot, meant genealogists were interested in family history angle.
- Difference between fiction, faction and autobiography. Most want to know 'how autobiographical?'
- 'Coming of age' novel relevant to all adolescents.
- Choice of title. f2m also looks like 'texting'

But the most significant came from a trans person, “Thank you for taking the reader into my world. If a book like this had been around when I was younger, many lives might have been saved.”

Conclusion

Three key learnings:

- A subject may be controversial but look at how it is written and utilise social media positively to explore and evaluate a range of views.
- Educators and authors need to learn new media processes so the quality of content can be evaluated as well as linking books and youth
- Controversial subjects such as gender transitioning can be introduced via well researched fiction as part of ‘coming of age’ stories.

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Literary Life - <http://bookworm-megs.blogspot.com/>

<http://content.boomerangbooks.com.au/perpetually-adolescent-blog/>

RADIO podcasts

Weds Feb 17th <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/lifematters/stories/2010/2821278.htm>

ABC Life Matters 'f2m;the boy within' interview. Segment begins at 31.51 mins

ABC Perth PODCAST <http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2010/03/08/2839979.htm?>

March 19th (Fri) Radio RTR FM 'f2m;the boy within' Morning Program PODCAST
<http://www.rtrfm.com.au/stories/type/interviews/category/arts/1926>

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Other Resources

Genre Flash:

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~sincoz/images/Genre%20Flash%204a.pdf> Summer 2010

Process of writing f2m online using Skype Bright ideas - <http://slav.globalteacher.org.au/>

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UTS (University of Technology Sydney) Connect Alumni Magazine April 2010

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