Club Ed Conversations

Editing Horror, Middle Grade, and YA

Siobhán O’Brien Holmes answered questions about editing horror, middle grade, and YA novels. The transcript has been edited for typos and clarity and to remove some of the “Hi, how are you?” conversation that happens in a live chat.

Here’s a bit of information about Siobhán:

Siobhán is a freelance developmental editor who spends her life reading children’s books, watching scary films and drinking unicorn gin. She lives in Surrey, England, with her graphic designer husband and four-year-old son who wants to be a Pokémon when he grows up.

Siobhán works directly with authors of middle grade and YA genre fiction, specialising in horror, mystery, fantasy and sci-fi (or anything with a dash of magic or macabre). She has an MA in Novel Writing and an MA in Children’s Literature and is a Professional member of the Chartered Institute of Editors and Proofreaders.

She was a judge on the 2020 British Fantasy Awards horror panel and the IPNE Annual Book Awards’ YA category and reviews YA for the British Fantasy Society. She is currently on the Golden Egg Academy’s 12-month ‘Writing for Children and Young Adults’ programme where she’s working on her own middle grade novel about an amateur astronomer and her ghost-hunting parents.

**Comment from Siobhán**: I’ll do my best to answer your questions or just fangirl about horror and children’s books in general. And just to manage expectations (!), I only edit MG and YA horror, rather than adult horror. So although I’m very happy to chat about horror in general all day long (because I love it so much), do bear in mind that some of my answers here will probably reflect my kidlit specialism! I hardly ever get time to read grown-up books anymore so I’m often quite out of the loop on that!

**Question** *(Jennifer Lawler): Ahead of the chat I received this question: “If Siobhán has any horror reading recommendations (for any age group), I’d love to add them to my TBR pile!”*

*I think this is a great place to start. What are some good examples of horror that an editor (in particular) might find instructive?*

**Answer**: Oh gosh, yes! I have so many recommendations! I did make a list ahead of time so I’ll paste it below as a starter for ten. These are all really great, successful middle grade and YA horror novels, many of which have won awards or been chosen for the Summer Scares programme which votes for horror titles for libraries to recommend to their readers.

Middle grade:

Ollie’s Odyssey by William Joyce
Whichwood by Tahereh Mafi
Fearsome Creatures of the Lumberwoods by Hal Johnson
Hide and Seeker by Daka Hermon
Crater Lake by Jennifer Killick
Ghost Squad by Claribel A Ortega
The Girl and the Ghost by Hanna Alkaf
The Stitchers by Lorien Lawrence
Thirteens by Kate Alice Marshall
Spirit Hunters by Ellen Oh
Small Spaces by Katherine Arden
Coraline by Neil Gaiman
The Jumbies by Tracey Baptiste
Doll Bones by Holly Black

YA:

The Agony House by Cherie Priest
Frozen Charlotte and Charlotte Says by Alex Bell
The Coldest Girl in Coldtown by Holly Black
Daughters unto Devils by Amy Lukavics
The Final Girl / The Mary Shelley Club by Goldy Moldavsky
Rules for Vanishing by Kate Alice Marshall
Little Creeping Things by Chelsea Ichaso
The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein by Kiersten White
Harrow Lake by Kat Ellis

**Question** *(Patti Neufield): When editing for these younger age groups, how much modern slang/terminology is wise to keep in? Examples include terms like Noob, Sus, etc. Remove them since language changes so fast? Keep them because the readership will know their meanings?*

**Answer**: I’d usually recommend using slang sparingly since, like you say, it changes so rapidly. Even if a manuscript gets picked up by an agent, it could be a couple of years at least before it hits shelves, by which point a lot of that language may be obsolete.

There’s nothing wrong with using some slang and it can really help make the prose and dialogue feel more realistic, but overall I think the general child or teen mindset is way more important than the specific terminology they’re using.

Sorry, that’s not a very cut and dry answer! But I’d say try to advise against going overboard on modern slang unless it’s stuff that’s been around for ages and is unlikely to disappear any time soon.

**Question** *(JL): For a follow-up question: you mentioned having the general teen or child mindset and I wonder what, as an editor, we might want to look for as red flags that the author is not “in” this mindset.*

*I’m thinking of a book I read recently where the three-year-old child character was acting like she was five or six. It was easy enough for me to see that the actions were not developmentally appropriate, but I’m trying to figure out what clues would help me see when the*mindset*isn’t appropriate, especially for a somewhat older child character where the distinctions aren’t as great (as with toddler versus kindergartener).*

**Answer**: The best way to make sure characters feel believable to MG and YA readers is to think about what children at that age are going through in their lives. Many middle grade readers, so aged 8-12, will be dealing with friendship breakdowns, maybe first crushes, struggling at school, maybe dealing with their parents’ divorce, etc.

They’re on the cusp between childhood and teenage years and are still very much dependent on their parents, but are trying to flex their independence at the same time. It’s important to make sure MG characters are experiencing the emotions and concerns that MG readers are feeling, so they can see themselves reflected back on the page.

Here’s an example I sometimes use in a talk I give about MG and YA:

In Rebecca Donnelly’s *How to Stage a Catastrophe*, there’s a really funny secondary character called Folly King and he’s a great example of how a character can have a voice that isn’t traditionally characteristic of a young child but still feels completely natural and believable. Here’s an extract and bear in mind Folly is 12:

‘No problem’, he says. ‘I put you on the board of directors. You don’t put in money, but you get to help decide how to spend our profits. Plus you get a nominal salary.’

I don’t know what nominal means, but since I’ve never had any salary before, it’s an improvement.

‘I’m telling you, you’ve got to learn to LTN, Sid. Love The Numbers. We could make sixty-four dollars and fifty cents. And we just keep rolling all our profits back into the business until we’re making some real money.’

‘And we’re going to buy a karaoke machine for the Juicebox?’

‘That’ll be our charitable donation, to offset our taxes.’

You might read that and think that’s not a realistic child voice! But once you know that Folly is desperate to be a successful businessman like his dad and dreams of winning Zap Zapter’s Golden Bow Tie Award one day, you see why this dialogue is perfectly natural for him. He’s trying to impersonate an adult!

He’s making things up as he goes along because he thinks they sound impressive: he calls his sales ledger a ‘financial accountability solution’!

If an author’s main character is more intelligent or philosophical than the average child, that’s fine, but they need to show the reader why they’re like that. What in their background has led to this unique voice and how can you still make them feel believable and relatable as a child even if they’re wise beyond their years?

Also, there’s a quote I love by Cheryl B Klein in her book *The Magic Words* which highlights the distinction between MG and YA voice: “Perhaps the true distinguishing factor here is intensity: YA often burns white-hot emotionally, dramatically, even linguistically, while middle grade holds itself at more of a comforting simmer.”

This is a great test when trying to ascertain whether an author has that mindset right.

**Comment** *(JL): This is great! I think it is so easy for “needs to sound real” to become “needs to be a stereotype of what we think this type of character is.” We have to be careful as editors that our suggestions don’t push authors towards stereotypes.*

*In the example you’ve shown, the POV character makes a great foil for Folly becomes sort of a grounding character who stands in for most children. Also, that sense of humor! What a delight.*

*It’s also really easy for adult authors to get the slang wrong or use it in ways the younger characters wouldn’t, which makes younger readers cringe.*

*Though I don’t write or edit MG or YA, I find it interesting just to sit around listening to people talk in the real world. Authors can often capture the feel of slang/in-group talk without having to ask their teens if anyone is still saying “on fleek.”*

*For ex, an author can give a group of young characters in-jokes that capture the exclusionary feel of slang without immediately becoming dated.*

**Question** *(Erin Arcand): I know I want to focus on developmental editing of children’s literature, but in an ideal world I would focus even more narrowly and work exclusively on middle grade manuscripts (middle grade is my #1 love!). Is this feasible? Is there enough middle-grade work out there to go around? Or does it make more sense to say middle grade is my favorite, but I also work on YA, etc?*

**Answer**: That’s a great question and something that I struggled with a lot when I started my business. Going niche is such a great thing when it comes to marketing your business which is why I opted to focus on just genre fiction, and even more specifically just horror, sci-fi, mystery and fantasy. I knew these were the genres I enjoyed reading, writing and editing and I figured a narrow niche would either make or break my business!

On the upside it meant I could be really specific about who I targeted and what sort of content I blogged about, plus I could join genre-specific professional bodies and get involved in those as much as possible.

I always knew I wanted to do MG and YA because I love them both, but I can absolutely understand you wanting to just focus on the audience you love the most.

I’ll give you the advice my husband always gives me when I think about narrowing my specialism even further (I’m always saying I JUST want to edit horror forever!): It’s fine to decide you just want to edit middle grade and you can focus your marketing energy and funds on going after those authors.

But don’t burn your bridges by listing on your website that you will only edit MG. Say you do MG and YA so that you’re not limiting your market too much, and if you want to turn down those YA manuscripts when they come in, you can. But at least you give yourself a better chance to have a successful business at the beginning. If things go well and you get so much MG stuff that you don’t need to accept YA anymore, great!

**Comment** *(JL): Just in general, I find that niches make it so much easier for you to find and target a specific audience of clients. But as Siobhán says, I wouldn’t necessarily “officially” limit what you will take on. Think of it more as a guiding principle for where and how you’ll market versus a public proclamation of what you do and don’t do.*

*That said, I do think it’s reasonable to draw lines in for fairly big market segments: I edit adult fiction but not children’s or MG and I am pretty upfront about that; I do a small amount of YA if it comes in but don’t specifically market to YA writers.*

*I’ve also found that even very narrow niches can be supported, surprisingly narrow niches, but it can take time to find those people and in the meantime you can get some good experience (not to mention income!) from casting a wider net.*

**Comment** (Siobhán): Yes, I totally agree with Jennifer. I know editors who only edit LGBTQ+ romance, for example, or crime written by women, so specialising can be really great but you might want to cast that net wider to start with and then narrow in when you’re ready.

**Question** *(Erin Arcand): What are your favorite resources (books, blogs, professional associations, conferences, editors/agents to follow on social media, etc) to learn about and stay on top of all things kid-lit?*

**Answer**: Some of my favourite craft books for MG and YA are:

The Magic Words
Writing Irresistible Kidlit
Writing Young Adult Fiction
Writing Great Books for Young Adults
Encountering Enchantment: A guide to speculative fiction for teens

Some of my favourite blogs and websites are:

Write Mentor
Spooky MG
The Horn Book
SCBWI website and blog
Mixed Up Files for MG Authors

People to follow on social media:

I just follow a BUCKET LOAD of kidlit agents, publishers, bloggers, authors and reviewers so I don’t really know where to start here, to be honest!

Keep an eye out of MG and YA pitch sessions as you’ll see which agents are particularly active in the social media community, and follow any and all children’s publishers you can find because they’re such a great resources for publishing news and releases.

**Question** *(Erin Arcand): What is on your list of must-read middle grade horror?*

**Answer**: I posted a few above right at the beginning of this chat but one I left off that I really love are *The Haunting of Aveline Jones* by Phil Hickes. In general I’d recommend keeping an eye on awards as well as lists from the Ladies of Horror Fiction and Summer Scares.

**Question** *(Jake Nicholls): I’m only familiar with adult and older YA horror, so I’d be really interested to know how the genre conventions are different for middle-grade and younger YA audiences. Are there general guidelines for ‘how scary is too scary’ for kids and younger teens?*

**Answer**: There are conventions when it comes to middle grade horror although of course they’re just guidelines and recommendations, not rules set in stone!

In terms of ‘how scary is too scary’, it’s sort of subjective because what scares one child witless won’t have any effect on the next. But in terms of subject matter, middle grade horror tends to deal more with the supernatural: ghosts, monsters, vampires, etc.

I watched a Masterclass with R. L. Stine and he said that his one rule with Goosebumps was that the horror always had to be fantastical; there couldn’t be any axe murderers or people breaking into the house with guns. The readers always needed to be able step back and remind themselves ‘this is just a story’ it would never become reality. But when he wrote Point Horror, those stories were always anchored in the real world, because teens were able to cope better with that sort of horror.

I’m not saying this is a ‘rule’ in horror but you’ll find that most MG horror is paranormal as opposed to realistic which really helps keep that boundary in place for kids and allow them to face up to their fears and live out their most terrifying nightmares in a safe space where they know that, when they turn off the light, those things aren’t really going to happen. It’s just a scary story. Whereas in YA and adult fiction, a lot of horror revolves around events that could realistically happen home invasions, serial killers, etc., and those things can really play on a reader’s mind for a long time afterwards.

*Daughters unto Devils* by Amy Lukavics is one of the best books I’ve ever read, let alone the best YA or the best horror. It’s just phenomenal and it’s interesting study in the limitations or lack thereof in YA because it’s incredibly gruesome and disturbing in places and honestly I haven’t stopped thinking about it since I read it last year! (It’s definitely not for the faint-hearted.)

**Question** *(Jacque Hamilton): Horror and thriller convention lines can sometimes be blurred within adult fiction. Is there a sure-fire way to distinguish a MG or YA thriller from horror?*

**Answer**: It can be hard to determine what’s a psychological thriller, crime thriller, murder mystery or horror within any age group and sometimes authors deliberately blend genres and blur the lines. For me, horror is any story that deliberately tries to evoke fear of some sort in the reader.

I’ve just finished a YA novel called *The Final Girl* which is titled *The Mary Shelley Club* in the US, and it’s generally marketed as a thriller rather than horror. But in my opinion, there is such an air of creeping dread and constant threat, plus lots of ‘jump scares’, that it reads as horror to me because it feels as though the author is deliberately trying to scare readers (plus it’s all about a group of teens who love horror, so is really does scream horror on every page!).

There are so many reader expectations and common tropes when it comes to horror that anybody picking up a horror novel will expect even want specific things from it. A monster, for example; an isolated location or setting that is so atmospheric it acts like a character in its own right; life or death stakes; escalating levels of fear/dread, etc.

A horror novel doesn’t have to have ALL those things but there are certain elements and scenes readers will expect and it’s important, especially in kidlit, to consider those expectations.

I would say that in middle grade, it’s even more crucial that a scary book is labelled horror rather than thriller because younger readers need to know what they’re getting into! If they scare easily, they can avoid those books.

**Question** *(JN): Could I ask about the typical level of peril in MG horror? Can the stakes be life and death, or is the threat level generally lower?*

**Answer**: Oh, it can definitely be life or death! Just a couple of examples from the list I posted earlier:

In *Spirit Hunters* by Ellen Oh there’s a dark force in the MC’s house threatening to kill her brother and she has to save him.

In *Doll Bones*, the threat is a life-long curse which maybe isn’t TECHNICALLY life or death but I think it’s close enough!

In *The Haunting of Aveline Jones*, a ghostly presence is trying to drag the MC into the sea.

In *The Agony House*, which is marketed as YA but I’d say is more ‘teen’ or MG/YA crossover, the main character’s haunted house is constantly trying to kill her and her whole family.

And if you think about the Goosebumps series which are aimed at a young MG audience, there’s often a threat of being eaten by a zombie, killed by a possessed ventriloquist’s dummy, etc!

Another guideline I’d give is that MG should typically end on a hopeful note although it can leave the door open to future threat. For example, maybe the kids defeat the killer zombie and everyone thinks they can relax, but on the last page another zombie climbs through the window. Because the reader knows the protagonist defeated the zombie once already, they know they’ve got the tools they need to do it again, so they can feel confident that things will end happily beyond the page.

So, the ending doesn’t have to be completely happy but you want a resolution that lets children sleep easy at night!

**Question** *(Coralie): I notice from the list of books you posted, that they were all horror. Do you have a mystery MG & YA list to share?*

Answer: Here are some of my favourite MG and YA mysteries of the last few years:

Anything written by Karen M. McManus (haha sorry, is that cheating?)
Any of the Murder Most Unladylike series by Robin Stevens
A Good Girl’s Guide to Murder by Holly Jackson
Lemons by Melissa Savage
The Cheerleaders by Kara Thomas

A few of those horror titles above could be classified as mysteries too, particularly Rules for Vanishing.

**Question** *(Khelsea Purvis): I have a quick question regarding horror. (I have a feeling this question is better for YA than MG, but you can let me know!)*

*Have you ever seen titles that are more on the psychological side of things? Basically, are there books that are less about the monsters on the outside and more about the monsters on the inside? If so, could you share some of those titles?*

**Answer**: Do you mean stories that are more about the protagonist’s inner demons rather than an external antagonist? Or just horror that isn’t about monsters or murderers? I think maybe folk horror would be a good place to start for that. But let me know what sort of thing you’re thinking of and I’ll come back with some more specific suggestions!

**Question** *(KP): I was referring to the protagonist’s inner demons. However, I am curious about folk horror as well!*

**Answer**: Got you. Well, I’d say a lot of MG and YA horror features protagonists with inner demons and secret pasts even if they’re not the focus of the story. For example, in *Spirit Hunters* which I mentioned earlier, the main character keeps having flashbacks of a fire that she can’t remember and it eventually transpires that (SPOILER ALERT!) she was the one who set it and has been blocking out the memory.

And in *The Mary Shelley Club*, the story opens with the MC being attacked in a home invasion and we learn as the book goes on that she did something during that incident she is struggling to live with.

I’m not sure that’s quite what you’re after, though. There are definitely psychological horrors for MG and YA but not quite in the same way there are for adults. There’s usually some external threat that the main character must fight against, but there’s often some internal demon they need to face, too.

**Question** *(JL): Folk horror: am I right in thinking this is more about isolation/nature/beliefs than explicit external perils?*

**Answer**: It can incorporate both really. But you’re absolutely right there are usually themes of isolation, religion and nature, rural locations, etc. There’s often a sort of mob mentality among locals like in *The Wicker Man* where a group of people act as though what they’re doing is completely reasonable and justified because they’re driven by custom and folklore, but often to the protagonist it’s anything but reasonable!

So there’s that psychological focus because it’s not necessarily supernatural (although folk horror can feature supernatural elements, too) and it’s not a slasher it’s about the terrifying things humans can do to each other in the name of custom and community.

**Question** *(JL): Do you know of good MG-language-level books with more sophisticated plots/storylines (including older protagonists) for people who struggle with reading, perhaps adult learners of English, etc.?*

**Answer**: My first thought would be books aimed at readers with dyslexia like the Barrington Stokes titles and Books on the Hill (<https://www.booksonthehill.co.uk/dyslexic-friendly-books-for-adults-/>).

**Question** *(JL): Since MG books are meant for children around 8 12, I’m assuming simpler sentence structures are used and a more limited vocab. What about plot and character development/arc? Are these simplified, too? What specific kinds of problems would we be looking for as dev editors?*

**Answer**: Honestly, sometimes the writing style and language in MG are indistinguishable from YA or adult novels, particularly in upper MG. Yes, usually sentences are shorter (and at the moment agents are calling for shorter sentences, shorter chapters, shorter books in kidlit) and vocab is kept to a level that most 8-12 year olds will recognise but you’ll find some really sophisticated, lusciously written middle grade, too. It just depends on the author’s style.

In terms of character arc and structure, these don’t really differ from adult novels. You still need an active protagonist with a goal, a motive and an internal need who is involved in a significant central conflict and goes on a journey of personal growth, ultimately facing the antagonist and their own internal flaw in order to grow as a character. Lots of children’s books will follow the same structures Save the Cat, the hero’s journey, etc as adult novels.

As developmental editors, it’s important to watch out for that character development because a lot of children’s authors \*think\* writing for kids is much simpler and the general storytelling rules don’t apply, but that’s not the case. Even a fun adventure story or scary ghost tale should feel fully developed with subplots, character goals, emotional journeys, etc.

**Question** *(JL): So it’s still all “tell a great story” and our goal is to help authors do that. So would you say it is the word count that affects the complexity of the storyline more than anything else? (Assuming MG runs 20 to 50K generally, right?) I mean, we’re not assuming these readers can’t follow a complex plot.*

**Answer**: Oh yes, absolutely. I don’t think I’ve ever had to tell a client that their story is too complex for young readers; MG and YA should still have multiple layers and subplots, lots of questions for the reader to constantly ask themselves, etc.

Yes, the word count definitely affects how involved the story can get: with MG you generally don’t want to go over 60,000 for a debut sf/f or horror novel and that does limit the story you can tell, particularly as you might need to explain things in a little more detail for young readers and that will take up some of your word count.

I know we’re nearing the end so I just wanted to give one of my golden rules for editing MG and YA as it hasn’t come up yet: remember that middle grade and YA protagonists *almost* ALWAYS need to be children or teenagers. No adult perspectives here, please! There are some rare exceptions but on the whole, young readers can’t and don’t want to relate to grown-ups and their issues. It’s one of the most common problems I come across in the manuscripts I edit and nine times out of ten it would be an instant NO from agents.

Siobhán, thank you so much for being here and answering all our questions!