

Episode 24 | Let's talk about Morris and Rufus transcript

Hello to everyone listening. I'm Jo Francis CoramBAAF's Publishing Manager. And today I'm talking to Jill Seenev, the author of some of CoramBAAF's most popular children's books. You may know her books, Morris and the bundle of worries and his safe place to Rufus when not writing children's books. Jill is a fostering and kinship training manager at West Sussex County Council and has a great deal of experience in the sector. Jill, it's great to have you with us today.

Yeah, it's good. To be here really nice way to end the week.

Jill, we're speaking to you today as CoramBAAF has just published a new children's book. Where did my dinosaur? Ago, but your children's books have been best sellers for some years now. What do you think initially made them so popular and keeps them so popular today?

Yeah. Well, just.

To say at the beginning I've I have a copy of where my dinosaur go and I think it's great. It's a it's really lovely to see a care, experienced adults doing the illustration. And I really like the idea of a team project that involves care, experienced young people, carers and has got a psychology based to it. It talks about children who've moved several times, which sadly is is sometimes the case and it's all about it's how you establish trust, which is so important. The children when I first wrote Morris, there were hardly any therapeutic stories out there.

You. Yeah.

Back in 2007, which is clearly there are there are a lot of stories out there now which which is great for children, but I think really with with Morris morals are very funny, little characters, aren't they? And I think a a mole who has worries and keeps them underground.

Yeah.

It's it's quite a good way of representing children bottling things up, you know. Hopefully I I think children must relate to him because he has been around for a little while. Now and I and I think with the roof the the cats are popular in children's stories, aren't they? They're easy animals to relate to and a lot of children like it's important to think of having a safe cosy place where you can feel OK and particularly for children who.

Yeah. Yeah.

Have moved a lot and I think that may be appeal for idea of a of a safe place and not only thinking about moving home moving. School is foster carer that I work with now, who often

gives children a soft, fluffy cushion when she's going out or something to hold on to hold that memory of her when they're feeling insecure. It's quite simple idea and often the simple ideas work the best. Yeah, I mean Morris and Rufus have both. Travelled very widely because I keep track of their movements from time to time and they certainly travelled a lot more widely than I have. And you know it's brilliant to hear that they're in different. Some countries across the world, so we.

Yeah, yeah, we have translations now in several different countries. So they they have clearly struck a chord for a lot of children, I would say.

So it's wonderful that they're still around and still appealing to people. But the thing actually, the thing I should say, which is really key is Rachel Fuller's illustrations, which are amazing. I think they still look great. And for me, the illustrations are absolutely key to a book.

Yes.

And with your new book that, that's how they've got to appeal to children.

Yeah.

Most definitely. Yeah, shout out to Rachel where she did do.

Yeah, definitely.

A very good job, yeah. I mean, so looking at Morris particularly that's that's your first children's book, in case listeners aren't familiar, Morris the mole has a lot of worries that distress him. I mean, he can't go to sleep, but he learns that discussing his worries. That others can help deal with them and even make them go. The way, and I must admit, Morris has always been a favourite with Gore and Bath staff. The book was even read to a child by Queen Camilla on a visit to Korea's offices. What first made you think of writing a children's book and where did you specifically come up with the idea of for Morris and his worries?

So I mean just in relation to Queen Camilla that, that that was incredible. I had to read that.

OK.

E-mail several times to believe it. It was just a piece of wonderful serendipity and very good timing for me to get that as well. So yeah, I feel very fortunate with that, but I think in terms of being a social worker, it's always been really important for me to be creative and in my work.

Yeah. Yeah.

I don't work. Much now directly with children, but I have done in the past and Morris's story actually came from a child who I worked with, who was very troubled, really, emotionally struggling and had some mental health difficulties. I had to go and visit them and it was quite a long journey.

Yeah.

Me, and actually the story came as I was driving backwards and forwards because I was really worried about that child and the story kind of, I don't know it came.

Yeah. Yeah.

Out of the.

Ether.

To me and it helped me to process what was what was actually a really difficult time because there was very little that I could do at that point. For him and I find the ideas come to me when I'm on the move, either a on a train or or in a car, and it felt like something really positive to come from. A difficult situation because I felt that if he had, if he had had an opportunity to speak about his worries earlier earlier on, maybe things wouldn't have been so difficult for him. And I thought it would be really helpful for children to.

Yeah.

Be able to think about that and how you come to the point of being able to share those worries with you. My daughter, who was nine at the time, did the original drawings because I guess it would be helpful to have some drawings.

Yeah.

And we did get to a point where she said, Ohh not another mould. Boring mummy. We've got more to do. And I did end up tracing. Some other than where? But I've still got one of her little drawings up on the wall and yeah, but it it, it certainly came from a difficult a difficult.

Yeah, yeah.

Piece of work and it was really good to have something positive to give back to children to hopefully help other children in similar circumstance.

Yeah.

Says.

Have you used Morris? The the book yourself when working with children and what's the sort of reaction that you've seen from children or from foster carers?

I've not actually used Morris directly myself with children, but I've certainly recommended him to carers and to colleague and one of the best. Things for me has been hearing back that children have really got something from it and and hearing the Maurice's story really clipped with them and maybe enabled them to talk about something that they had found difficult. My son was in hospital when he was very young and I gave a copy to the hospital.

Yeah. Yeah.

Later on, and I know that they were really happy to have it and use it with children in a in a hospital situation. I've also used it. I used to run a storytelling course for student social workers about how to engage children in doing direct work. So I've used Morris.

Yeah.

That and I have even heard some adults who have, like the the story, cause I I think there's a there's definitely a worry gene that runs in my family and just helping to think about sharing worries is is always a good. Thing, isn't it?

Absolutely. And of course, the theme of worries is quite universal, children and adults. And Morris is notable in that the story never explicitly mentions fostering or adoption or kinship, although of course on our website we do make clear that the book is ideal for use in those areas. Do you think that kind of universality has helped its appeal?

Yes, I think it has. That was very deliberate that I wanted it to be wide-ranging in terms of making it available to lots of children, but also in terms of that message that children who are fostered and adopt.

Yeah.

Kids who are with kinship carers and have similar worries as well, and I think one of the great beauties of of books is that they do relate to children's play and children can relate to them on the level that that they want to so they can read a story and think ohh this is a story about Earth. Ohh with some worry. OK, it's a nice story. There's some nice pictures or they can start to think about. What are those worries that Morris got? And.

Storing in.

Yeah.

And you can talk about that or you can then begin to think about. Ohh, I've got some worries and and share those if if the child wants to and the the idea of the the different types of worries, the feathery little worries that we all have from day-to-day things and then thinking about the much.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Deeper things that the terrors that could be something very deep rooted from a trauma experience in their background. And it's very much up to the child when they when they want to share that. But I really wanted to make it so that children have that were able to use it in whichever way they would like to. I think more people like Margo Sunderland talk about children relating on different levels. And just to give it as wide a wider scope as possible, really the, the, the other thing in terms of uh recommending Morris and Rufus and where they've been used, I have occasionally store Morris and Rufus. I I think it's OK to stalk Amol, isn't it?

Absolutely.

On the Internet and I know that Morris has been used in primary schools I've seen.

Yeah.

Videos being used in in primary schools. So it it does seem to have that wide appeal, and I've seen a similar one for Rufus. I think being used as therapeutic stories by different trauma organisations and zillion to see that happening.

Yeah, yeah, in. Fact I recall that we've had a couple of letters from primary school children come to core and Bath talking about how they've read Morris in class. And these are children who weren't adopted or fostered, but who, yeah, connected to it on a more universal level and and wanted. To tell us about that so.

Oh, wow, that's lovely. I mean that. That is just. Directly, the best hearing that yeah, that that's the best thing about doing these.

Yeah.

Books safe place to Rufus was your second children's book and it was another big hit for listeners who aren't familiar. Rufus the cat moves to a new place, but he finds it hard to settle. And he doesn't feel safe. He tries the various different spots around the house and the garden before he finds the perfect spot that makes him feel safe. Again, and of course, there's a strong identification between the story and children moving to new places. So how did you come up with the idea for Rufus?

Well, funnily enough I had a cat from cat protection who arrived around that time and arrived with a blanket. Police sat in a cupboard with his blanket for about 3 months.

It was amazing.

And it was very difficult to get him out. So I think that certainly triggered the the start of the idea. I'm very conscious from the work that I've done that a lot of children have really difficult transitions and I think it's an area of work that we need to improve on. So I I thought it would be really good to do that.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I think I had quite a difficult move when I was 7 as well, which you know, maybe something resonated there. But as I said earlier, I think objects and places can be really important for the children before they establish trust in adults. Or maybe you know when they're moving from one place to another and then a cushion cushion. Another object could be really help.

Yeah.

So that that story kind.

Yeah.

Of wrote itself in a couple of weeks.

Yeah.

And the character. I know people say that, but it does actually happen. The character kind of appeared as and it it just wrote itself quite quickly and it is a very simple idea I think. But again, I had a lot of fun. Fun with it, yeah.

It was simple but incredibly effective. I think it again, this one has definitely struck a chord with a lot of readers, I think. And in both of these books a short booklet for adults is included with suggested questions to discuss. With children to ensure they get the most out of the story and what have you heard from carers and workers about their use of of these booklets.

I think people. Really appreciate them thinking about new carers. They often worry about getting it right. What you you know what you say to children and and how do you start to to ask them questions from a story or whatever those booklets are so helpful. And I know you. You do that with with a lot of the.

Yeah. Yeah.

Books it kind of gives you prompts ideas about how to. To approach things and obviously different individual children, different things will work, but it might trigger an idea for the career as well.

Yes.

Of something else. So I think they're really really useful and and in in your new book about the dinosaur, there are lots of really helpful questions.

Please.

In their about how carers could use. But so yeah, certainly I've had feedback that people find that, you know, really helpful and they're there if you want to use them. And if you don't and you just simply want to read the story and the idea is that if a child really likes the story, you may use it several, you know, children like to reread them, don't they? And.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

You might have to read that story quite a number of times, yeah.

Yeah.

And you might use a different approach.

Absolutely.

Yeah, yeah, definitely.

And uh, I mean, we we're straying into direct work territory here, and I do hear more these days about the importance of direct work with children. And how perhaps agencies are trying to prioritise this, perhaps more than in the recent past? What are your feelings on this in this increased attention?

I really, really hope that's the case. I mean, it's something that's gone right through my career right from the beginning. I've always thought that direct work with children is incredibly important and we're working with children. We need to be involving them and involving them in a way.

Yes.

That is meaningful to to them, and using their play and stories, because that is their world. And when you think of models like Secure base, Gillian Schofield and Mary Beak, which is, which is an amazing simple model, it is all about how we relate with children, how we develop.

Yes. Yeah.

Trust how we help them to manage feelings, develop their self esteem, etcetera. And and I don't think you can do that unless you're relating on the child's level. So I'm delighted that there's more emphasis on that. I think there's much more emphasis on voice and

participation. Children in care councils as well. Yeah, they're having much more say in what what they feel.

Yes.

We should be. Doing that is absolutely the the the way it should. So books very much fitting into that.

There's there's nothing quite like sitting with the child and reading a story, is there? It's. Yeah, it's universal.

Absolutely. For, for, for, for developing that trust and it's all the nonverbal communication that that goes alongside that. And it's fun. I mean, when you think about positive parenting, having a playful approach and, you know, having a bit of fun reading a story is is very important.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, well, perhaps a perhaps a cheeky final question. Here, have you ever been asked to autograph a copy of your books? There must be thousands of well used copies out there.

Yeah, it's. It's great to think of that if that's, if that's the case. I have been asked, OK, that sometimes I've been asked by colleagues or a little bit embarrassed. But, you know, colleagues. But I have also, I think one of the things again that I've really enjoyed.

Ohh Julian.

Is giving copies to children and I and I have done that over the years where I thought it would help. Them and I and I've signed signed a copy for them and I I think maybe my favourite example probably is when I wrote Rufus in the story, Rufus will only eat pilchards when he first arrives and that was based on a a great foster carer who I worked with.

Yeah. Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Yes.

And. A child who was placed with her and he he would only eat sweet things for about a year when he he moved, I sent a a copy of the book to him with a little explanation of how I've used it in in the story and and wishing him well. So he he is certainly a teenager now. But it was just it was really lovely to be able to do that. The books have brought many amazing opportunities for me that I've really made the most of and enjoyed.

OK.

Wow, so this has been a fascinating chat. Jill, thanks so much for speaking to us today. I hope we see many more years of your books helping children.

Thank you, Joe. I just want to say I feel incredibly privileged to have had this opportunity to do write these books for core and Banff. It's been such fun and I really would encourage other social workers to think about writing for children. So a huge thank you from me.

Also listeners, you can visit our online bookshop and search for Morrison. The bundle of worries or a safe place for Rufus. To find out more and to buy our website also hosts a catalogue listing all our children's books. So do look out for that and thank you for listening.