

Interview with YA author and Children's Editorial Assistant Suzanne Sutherland

By Mark Black

Suzanne Sutherland is an author and editor living and working in Toronto, Ontario. Her first book *When We Were Good* is due out in mid-April of 2013 and will be published by Sumach Press. *When We Were Good* is a young adult novel about heartbreak, sadness, relationships, and straight edge culture. Sutherland also works as a children's editor for Greenwood Books, a children's publisher and an imprint of renowned Canadian publisher, Anansi Press.

A brief note before the interview:

When We Were Good deals with the straight edge scene which is an offshoot of hardcore (itself an offshoot of punk rock). Straight edge is a movement or philosophy that started in the early 80s (and continues today) that eschews drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex. Straight edgers sometimes mark a big black X on the back of their hands to denote that they're straight edge. The practice stems from early punk rock clubs in Washington, DC marking underage patrons who couldn't legally drink with an X on their hands. Minor Threat of Washington, DC is considered the progenitor of the straight edge movement.

Can you tell me a little bit about your book?

My book is called *When We Were Good*, it's a novel about grief, music and love from the eye level of a 17 year old girl.

Why did you choose to write a YA novel and how did you come to work in children's literature?

I'm an editorial assistant at Greenwood Books which does books from board books to baby books all the way up to Young Adult. I work with kids books now, but the process is sort of fun and roundabout because when I wrote this book I had no idea it was YA at the time.

I wrote this first draft and gave it to a friend to read and he got back to me and he said, "Oh yeah, this is cool! This is a really fun YA book that you wrote."

At the time it seemed like a slight a little bit because just because it's a young person talking doesn't necessarily make it a YA book. But then in the process of revising it I was like "Oh no! That's exactly what this is. Why was I fighting this?"

All the movies that I own are like these teen stories, I've worked with teens, and I've wanted to be a teacher and somehow it just had not occurred to me that I was going to wind up writing a YA book.

Once I embraced that then it was a lot of fun because I did all of this reverse-homework and then start reading YA from that point on. Because I did that I was able

to get an internship at Random House. They were like, “You must be a kid book expert because you wrote one!” I learned a lot more and I sort of turned myself into a kid lit expert and that’s how I got the job now.

Did you find it difficult to adopt the “voice” of young adults?

I knew from the beginning that I was writing 17 year olds. And I think like many writers of fiction I’m kind of a chronic eavesdropper; I’m very interested in patterns of speech among young people—among any people. It was fun to play around with that. I became more self conscious about the language later on once I realized this is YA. So then with my editor we went through and a lot of it was, “Read this out loud, does this sound like something anyone would say?”

I worried about it more so after the fact but at the time I was thinking, “Ok, I know how people talk—all conjunctions and weird jokes.”

What sort of research went into the book?

Initially my inspiration was this image of a girl hanging off the Bloor viaduct daring herself to jump off. That’s not a thing that can reasonably happen now because the Bloor viaduct has the suicide barrier on it. It was built in, as I found out, 2001. So that was my major research project.

If a teenage girl was going to dare herself to jump off the Bloor viaduct it would have to be in the year 2000. And then I had to work backwards and say, “Ok, what was this

record store called...” I just had to make sure I was referencing things that were still there—reconstructing the not so distant past.

Why did you choose the straight edge scene as one of the major elements of *When We Were Good*?

Straight edge for me was a big part of my high school experience. At the same time, it was sort of a problematic identity to have because straight edge wasn’t cool when I was in high school. It was the product of having a punk older brother who said (to my parents), “I will not be drinking or smoking in high school. I’m straight edge.”

I took that mantle on myself when I started high school, but found that a lot of people really took it as an aggressive stance — being outspoken about the fact that you weren’t going to take part in these things that so many people took to be traditional high school experiences and the fact that [there] weren’t very many visible straight edge musicians.

On at least on occasion I x’d up and had a girl on the subway call me out and say, “Who do you think you are Bif Naked?!” I had some really snotty retort for her—because at the time I really liked Bif Naked—“Whatever she’s an amazing artist!”

Basically straight edge was something that I found really fascinating because it was an idea that I really identified with idealistically. It was a fascinating idea that totally didn’t work for me. I was interesting

in going with that idea because the main character I have who is straight edge, it doesn't really work for her. She's just sort of angry and nobody else takes her seriously. The fact that she has this belief is just another thing that makes her a total oddball.

What do you think straight edge can offer young adults?

For me straight edge became this window into other stuff that was really interesting. It was a way of looking into punk and just sort of subcultural stuff in general.

The straight edge identifier led me to some straight edge vegan messageboard that people were [talking about] the straight edge-vegan zine that they do. And I was like "That sounds awesome! I want to do that. I want to know what that is!" It's a thing to mark you as weirdo to make you look for other weird things. A window into countercultural goings-on.

How do you plan on marketing your book to Young Adults?

A good friend of mine is a manager at Mabel's Fables which is a big children's book store in Toronto. They run a "I haven't read the book" book club where they have authors come in and do workshops with teens and go do a reading at a high school. They're in the middle of revamping it and they've asked me to come in and take part. It'll be more outreach oriented.

What do you hope readers take away from *When We Were Good*?

I'd love if someone reading this was like, "Yeah, I should start a band" or "I should write a book". People in the book who are making music or playing shows, they don't necessarily know what they're doing, but they are doing it.

Start a band, write a book, go listen to more bands and read books. But also a big focus of the book is that it's a queer love story. In terms of upping representation and it's great that we're finally starting to pay more attention to the fact that queer kids in high school are just having a hell of a time.

It's great to see that because for years it's been the (rough) end of the stick. Not saying that I have anything to say about that, but just the fact that it is a queer love story, it is part of a growing collection of queer stories in YA. If it's going to make anyone's life a little easier getting through high school, I would feel really good about that.

There seems to be a shift where queer characters are THE character, rather than the sidekick or the best friend.

Even just seeing more queer characters in genre fiction in YA, like here's a dystopian novel and *also* the characters are gay. After I finished the first draft and handed it off, I remember talking to my mom about it and she said, "Oh I don't know. I heard Jian Gomeishi talking on Q about how there were no Gay YA books." I was like that's just

not the truth, but who cares—there needs to be more.

Jian really had my mom concerned that no one was going to buy my book.

It's a story about grief and music and finding love amidst those things. I wasn't trying to make it a really huge coming out story. I don't happen to identify as queer myself and I don't want to make that the focus. I don't want to feel like I've done a disservice to that (detailing an experience I haven't had). But still the books I was reading in high school, the people I was meeting in high school, and the people I am spending time with now—it's a part of my life; hanging out with queer people and people who want to explore those ideas. It was just a natural extension that was the story I wanted to tell.

I'm proud to have done it and I hope it turns out alright.

Young Adult recommendations from Suzanne Sutherland:

Nielsen, S. (2012) *The reluctant journal of Henry K. Larsen*. Toronto: Tundra Books.

Pohl-Weary, E. (2004). *A girl like Sugar*. Toronto: McGilligan Books.

Rowell, R. (2013). *Eleanor & Park*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

