

BEHIND THE SCENES: ADAPTING STORIES

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCES MARIANI

NORA NAGY, 13 MARCH 2014

HELBLING LANGUAGES · HELBLING READERS BLOG

Have you ever wondered how graded readers are put together? Who writes them? What is it like to adapt stories? Maybe you've thought of adapting or writing your own reader and are wondering how to start. Today we will take a peek behind the scenes and learn about how our graded readers are born.

In the first part of this series you can read an interview with two adaptors and editors, Frances Mariani and Jennifer Gascoigne, who have worked on several Helbling Readers. They shared their adaptation process, talked about their experiences, and gave us some practical tips you can try with your students.

Nora Nagy (NN): What is the first thing you do when you are given a reader to adapt?

Frances Mariani: If I haven't done so already, I read the original. I also try to read around the story: about the author and any good critical notes I can find.

NN: Describe your typical adaptation process.

Frances: First, I get a clear idea of the linguistic level and age group for which the reader is targeted and the page numbers required. With this in mind, I think which parts of the story might not be suitable for that age group, and do a rough plan of my adaptation, deciding which sub plots and characters to cut completely and how to divide chapters. Then, I download the original story into a huge Word file. At this stage I start writing 'on top of' the original story, cutting and rewriting to level, trying, where possible, to keep dialogue close to the original. I add picture indications, reflection boxes and page breaks, as I go. Always keeping track of how many pages I have left and when would be a good point to have a new chapter. I sketch out a page layout plan which I refer to and complete as I write. I then try to write quite intensely, setting myself targets, so as to 'live' the story and complete the adaptation within a set amount of time. But constantly going back to re-read and edit my own work.

NN: How important is the choice of reader?

Frances: I think unless you really hate a book, it is possible to adapt anything so long as it has been carefully selected for level and age group by the editor. The longer the original obviously the longer it will take, just because there is more to get through but this doesn't mean to say that it will be more difficult.

NN: Is there any style/author you prefer?

Frances: Not yet.

NN: Do you remember any words, phrases or sentences that were really hard to change?

Frances: No, you shouldn't be sad or scared to change great or famous phrases. That's part of the fun of adapting: thinking how you can say the same thing in style but to level.

NN: How can you make sure that the original style stays with us?

Frances: If you know the original and re-read it enough while you are adapting the author's original style and rhythm becomes a part of you and it comes naturally.

NN: What would you say to people critical of adaptations?

Frances: Adaptations are not a substitute for the original but they are a great way to get students reading. If the story has become a classic then there is a good reason for it. The story will continue to appeal to contemporary readers and the adaptation to level will make it accessible and enjoyable to read. This encourages students to read authors they wouldn't never normally even contemplate reading. Adaptations are not a 'dumbing down' but a 'reaching out' to a wider audience.

NN: Adaptation is a kind of interpretation. How much creative freedom do you allow yourself?

Frances: Lots! Depending on the level you can have all sorts of fun choosing words and structures to resay things in style.

NN: What's your overall philosophy when you're adapting a story?

Frances: Every single word matters.

NN: Can you give us some tips to keep in mind when adapting original fiction?

Frances: Never summarise, it is better to cut. Dialogue is always a useful way of telling the story at the lower levels. Remember you are creating a story within its own right. Each page has to work structurally, enthrall readers, but also teach and then consolidate language in a natural way. Adaptations are stories and need rhythm. To quote our wise series editor, Maria Cleary, 'Read the adaptation aloud to yourself and edit your own work as you read. If it reads naturally out loud then the story will flow and you're almost there. Enjoy it, because, even if you think you know the story when you accept to do the adaptation, by the time you have finished it you will know it inside out and it will stay with you forever.

Anyone can make something complex; it takes a genius to make something simple.

Readers adapted by Frances Mariani:

- *The Fisherman and his Soul* by Oscar Wilde
- *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë