Sonny and Me: Writing for YAs

By Ross Sayers

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Sonny and Me tells the story of Billy Daughter and Sonny Irvine, two boys in their fourth year of high school who, after their favourite teacher leaves the school, decide to investigate her departure and stumble on a conspiracy that goes all the way to the headteacher. As you can imagine, hijinks ensue.

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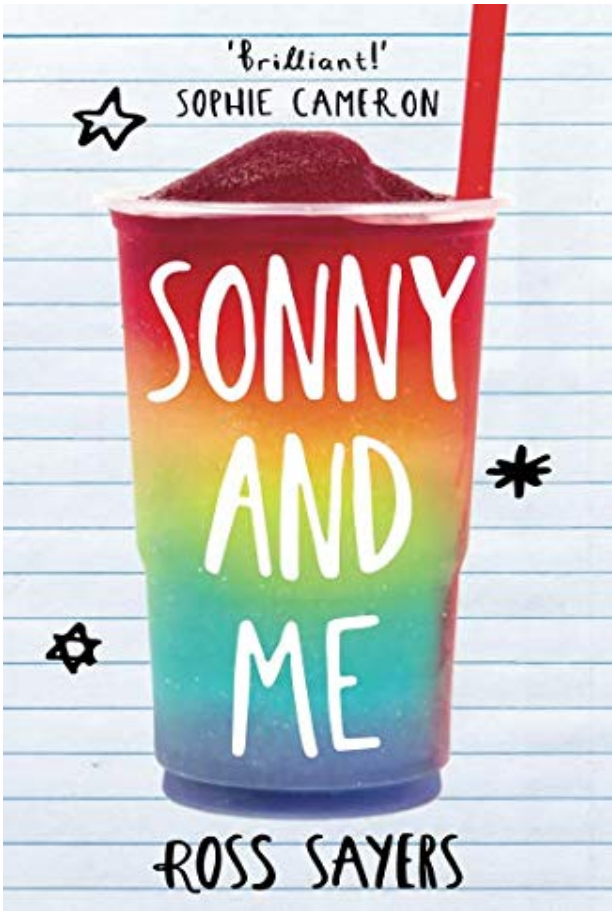

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My biggest worry was that I hadn't held back with language – most YA, at least at the time, seemed to go out its way to avoid offending anyone (parents, I imagine). I don't think it's a big secret that teenagers swear, and yet every YA book I read, they exclusively seemed to stick to 'bloody' and 'freakin'. Fortunately for me, Cranachan, as an independent publisher, were comfortable offending any possible conservative parents to release something much more (I hope) authentic.

There's also something to be said for treating young adults as just that. Adults, who are young. Not giving them watered down stuff that they're *allowed* to read, with society's explicit permission. Not taking out all the bits you'd leave in if a university student was going to read it, rather than a high school student.

Think back to yourself at that age, if you were told that certain books were 'written for kids your age' and some other books were 'too old and mature for you', which books do you think you'd be more keen to read? Same goes for films. Were you content with 12 certificates when you were twelve? Did you wait until the day of your fifteenth birthday to watch a 15? No. You sought out every film you could get your hands on that bore the gloriously dangerous red 18.

It's perhaps worth noting that YA is a term that does not tend to cross over to TV and film. There are a lot of adults who would dismiss reading anything with the tag YA on it, and yet would happily watch *Derry Girls* and *The Inbetweeners*. I suppose the general consensus is that those shows are written with adults in mind rather than YA fiction, which is not. So should writers and publishers start pitching their YA for the old folk? I'll leave that for people smarter than me.

The book is set around the time I wrote it, 2017-ish. Writing contemporary stories comes with its own unique problems. Specifically when writing about young people. Say you want to write a book about teenagers in 2023 – they have to be on TikTok and Instagram, don't they? You'll have to at least mention your characters use them, have them on their phones.

But that'll age the book, of course. In a few years, those apps could be obsolete and suddenly your book has all these tech references to a specific five-year period of time. Gone is any hope you had that your book would be universal and connect with teenagers for the rest of time. So, you don't put in any references to social media.

But wait, the teenagers in your book don't use TikTok? Get with it, old man! What, are these the only teenagers in the entire world who don't use TikTok and Insta? Your teenagers aren't relatable. You've written a bunch of Amish teens in some kind of parallel dimension where young people have been frozen in time and experience the world the same way *you* did back in the day. Your book is out of touch. *You're* out of touch.

The reality is technology is moving faster than ever before and your book will be

dated with a few years whether you like it or not. The decision becomes whether you want to try to give an accurate depiction of what the youth of today lives with (online bullying, TikTok, boys seeing Andrew Tate as a role model) or whether you want to try to give a general sense of what everyone goes through at that age, regardless of what year it is (spots, exams, fancying people who don't fancy you back).

Or you could try a bit of both. When writing *Sonny and Me*, I was trying to portray modern teenagers. I included things that I didn't have in high school. There's a key plot point where the characters see a tweet which then gets deleted. Looking back now, I can admit this was probably the wrong app to go with – the majority of teenagers see Twitter as an entirely uncool place to be (quite rightly). Many of the reviews I got from my peers featured the same word: 'nostalgic'. Despite my best efforts, I'd written my own experiences of high school, poorly disguised.

I think it's difficult to write an entirely accurate depiction of a generation you do not belong to. And that doesn't mean the book will be bad – it's a piece of fiction after all, not a historical document. You can speak to young people and get them to read your book and tell you which bits are wrong, sure, but ultimately you're taking an educated guess. And the further removed you are from them, the more difficult it becomes. I started writing *Sonny and Me* seven years after leaving high school. Today, it's now thirteen years since I was in high school. If I try to write another book set in high school, I can only imagine it'll have diminishing returns. I'm currently writing a book set in university and even then, I'm wondering if I'm too far removed to get these people right.

Then I tell myself to stop worrying so much. One of the biggest shows on TV at the moment, *Euphoria*, is about a group of teenagers – portrayed by twenty-somethings and written by a guy who's closer to forty. Does this tell us that what people really want from their "YA" fiction has nothing to do with how realistic it is? But, I suppose, I'm not writing for an HBO audience. I'm writing for Scottish teenagers, and I think I owe them at least a decent effort to reflect them in the writing.

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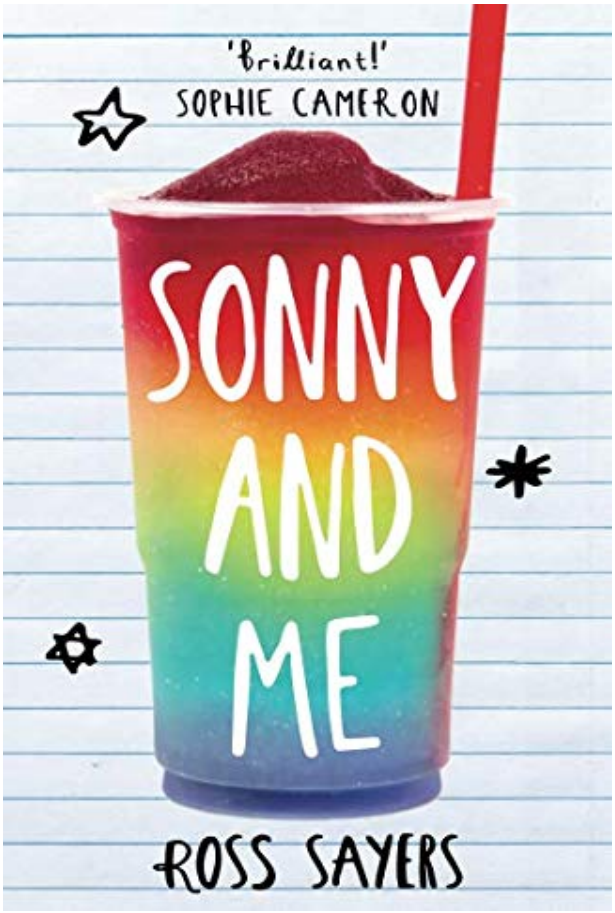

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