

# It all started with a story ...

**Melanie Butler** and Maria Cleary, author and series editor of Helbling Young Readers, discuss stories, pictures, sounds and the importance of Henry Harris and his Hatches

For Maria Cleary everything starts with the story. I tell her the tale of how, when I came to prepare for this interview, I found her readers had disappeared from my desk and, despite turning the office upside down, we could not find them. Then over the weekend a *Gazette* staffer found them in his small daughter's bedroom – she had come into the office and, finding the pretty books, taken them home. 'How lovely,' says Maria in her soft Irish lilt. 'Can we mention that in the interview? It is such a good story.'

The editor of the Helbling Young Readers series insists, 'If you want to capture children's attention, tell them a story. Story-telling is an excellent first way of negotiating a foreign language: it's a format they already recognise, it uses natural language. Repetition is a natural part of children's stories, using language they have already come across and using something a little bit new – just perfect when you are teaching a language.'

Maria's very first experience of teaching language was with small children when she worked as a nanny in Italy while at college. When she came back to the country, where she still lives, as an EFL teacher she found herself teaching adults. 'I enjoyed it a lot,' she says, but she gravitated back towards younger learners.

'I've always loved the buzz and the feedback and the physical way they react,' she laughs. 'When I moved into writing and

publishing and we had a chance to develop a series of stories for young learners, I leapt at it. It was something I had been doing in practice for years.'

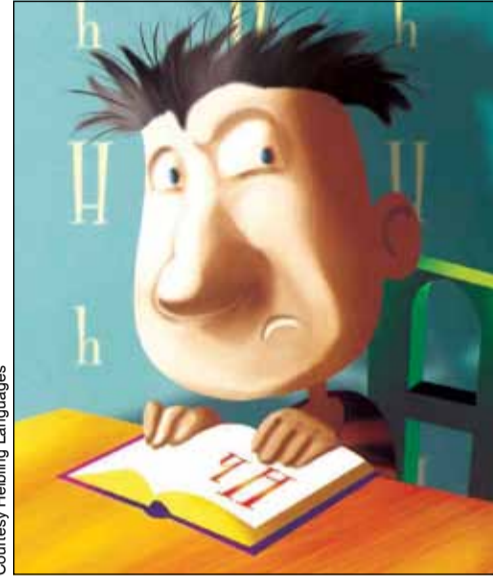
The series is designed to start with very young children, normally when they have mastered reading in their first language at around five or six. So how did she come up with a syllabus?

'The way I went about it was to ask, what would interest children at different ages? I started with vocabulary. I asked what lexical groups are relevant and the type of language that we used was built on that, a sort of lexical approach. We wanted language that kids could take ownership of, that was significant for the age group, and that they could use quite naturally.'

Preparing for the project, she began looking at reading research, influenced by approaches such as Kieran Egan's *Imaginative Education*, and became convinced that 'there are a lot of things in the research which make sense in ELT'. Getting children to use the pictures to help them decode the meaning, for example, and getting them to use actions – the books begin and end with sections of games and activities, and the sto-



Courtesy Maria Cleary



Courtesy Helbling Languages

**HAITCH FOR HELP** Maria Cleary (left) reveals how Henry helped her Helbling Young Readers series

ries themselves are sprinkled with quick activities and personalised questions: 'listen and point', 'are you afraid of the dark?'

I tell her I am fascinated by the importance of sound in the series. There is a CD-Rom with each book, lots of chants and songs in the activity sections, while the stories themselves are stuffed full of rhyme, assonance and alliteration. Even the book titles play with sound:

*Sam and the Sunflower Seeds*, for example, or, my personal favourite, *Henry Harris Hates Hatches*.

'Part of this is conscious,' Maria tells me, 'and part of it is unconscious. Rhyme, rhythm and alliteration play a huge part in the success of all children's stories – we remember words that rhyme better than words that don't.'

The CDs are designed to reinforce that – helping non-native

teachers who aren't confident in reading, and allowing children to hear the stories again at home. 'If children like a story, they'll listen to it again and again.' It also helps in getting children decode a non-phonemic language such as English to hear it as they read.

The focus on listening also features in the writing and editing. 'It's part of the process – the story must work when it's read

aloud. You need to hear the rhythm, the words that fall in together, the stress. I read aloud everything I get sent.

'I do read to groups in school – we have a reading club where we're based – and I can see when something works, the little bright eyes listening to key words.'

As one of the authors in her own series, she sends her own stories out to be read aloud, 'to friends, people I trust.'

We've talked about stories, and pictures and rhythm and rhyme. But what about characters? Of the characters in her own stories, for example, which one does she like best: Fat Cat, Henry Harris or Barney Bunny?

'Oh Henry, I love Henry – he was my first. I was planning the reader series when an illustrator friend, Lorenzo Sabbattini, decided to enter a competition and asked me to give him a story – as sort of an excuse as an illustration. We were very self-indulgent. The original Henry was much too difficult for readers of the Helbling Young Readers series – there were too many pages and too many horrible things happening. But Henry is the one I love most – especially the uncensored Henry! ■

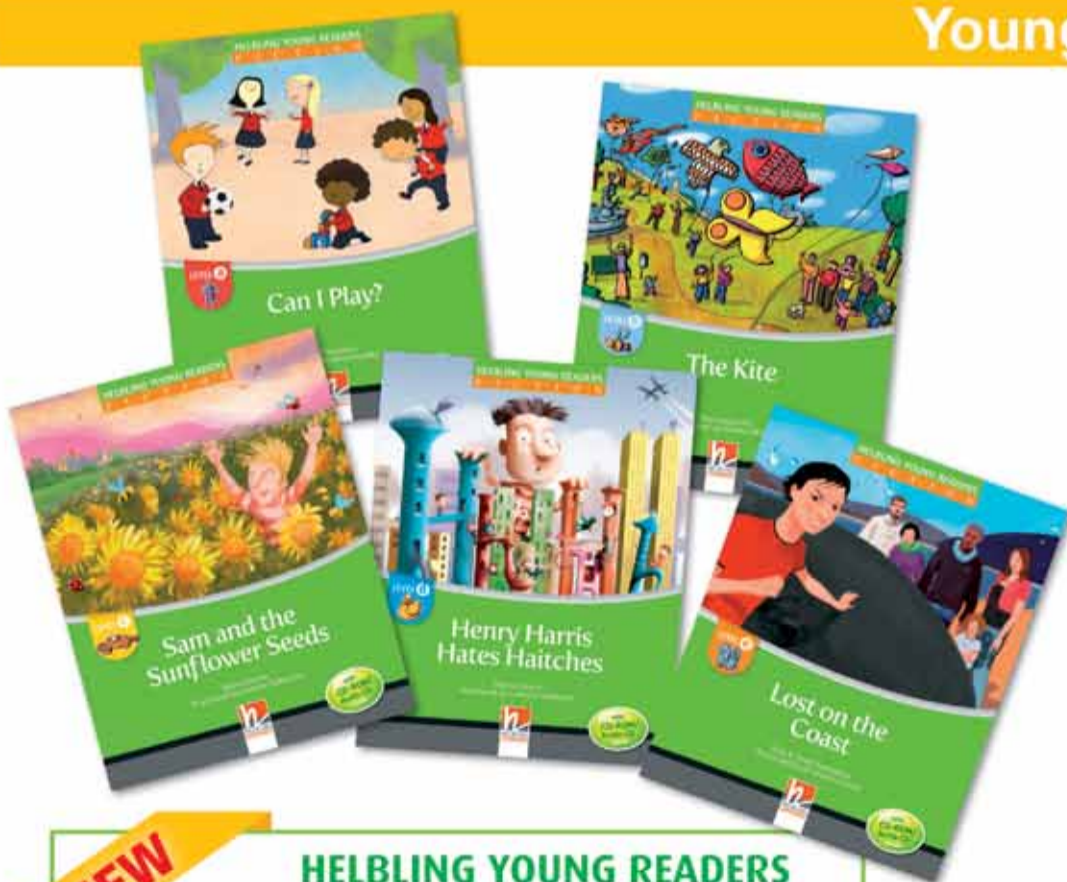
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