



# You go girl!

Former Hardie Grant  
Egmont publisher  
Susannah McFarlane  
is back with a new company  
and two exciting new series.  
She spoke to  
**Matthia Dempsey.**

KEEN WATCHERS OF THE CHILDREN'S BOOK WORLD may have noticed a 'gap' in the industry in recent times.

Susannah McFarlane, founding co-owner and publisher of Hardie Grant Egmont (HGE), has been keeping a low profile since selling her share of that business in mid-2008.

But while she's been away McFarlane has spotted some gaps of her own, and her return to publishing this year, under the banner of her new business LemonFizz Media, will see her attempting to fill these gaps with two exciting new series.

'Why don't girls get to save the world?' This is the question behind the first of McFarlane's new series, an adventure series aimed at 'newly confident readers' aged eight to 10, which features a code-cracking girl hero who must juggle school and friendship challenges with her double life as a secret agent—and challenges such as saving the world!

McFarlane, who ushered the HGE 'Go Girl!' series into being, said the new series 'EJ12: Girl Hero' was a response to a dearth of adventure books for girls. While there are plenty of fairy books, plenty of horse

books and plenty of boy-based adventure books, McFarlane, who has a young daughter, could not find anything in the girl adventure genre—and saw an opportunity.

'She loves maths and that's how she gets into the Shine Agency,' says McFarlane of her girl hero, code-named EJ12. 'The Shine Agency is trying to recruit spy code-crackers and they don't seem to mind what age they are.' In the first title *Jump Start*, which launches in February next year, EJ12, AKA Emma, is having trouble with gymnastics moves at school. Luckily her secret life as a spy and the gymnastics required for the job end up helping her out in her everyday life. McFarlane, who wrote *Jump Start* and the follow-up *Hot and Cold* (which also launches in February), said the stories were intended to empower girls in their own daily lives by offering a girl hero they could identify with. In a nice touch, the books in the series feature only women characters, in similar vein to the movie *The Women*. This characteristic of the books is not an in-your-face one, says McFarlane—it just turns out that the characters Emma interacts with happen to be female.

## Partnering with Scholastic

McFarlane is 'co-publishing' the series as part of a partnership with Scholastic. McFarlane describes her role under the deal as 'packager plus'. Her agreement with the publisher means she is 'responsible for the branding and marketing', while Scholastic will print the books and drive retail and educational marketing.

'If you're small you've got to admit you're small,' says McFarlane of her decision to co-publish. 'I needed a market partner and I am thrilled with Scholastic.'

The agreement is for an initial three series of a minimum of 12 books. Two more EJ12 books will launch in April next year and another two in June. The second series McFarlane will be launching—in March 2010—is aimed at boys and is similarly a response to what McFarlane sees as a gap in the market.

The publisher behind the successful 'Zac Power' series tells *Junior* that through her visits to schools and work with kids she has realised that, while the boy spy series has captured the imagination of many reluctant boy readers, 'there are still kids not reading even Zac Power' and that insight produced the Zac Power Test Drives series. Looking at what other options are out there for boys, McFarlane saw that there was 'still an opportunity in fantasy'. Series such as 'Beast Quest' are great, she says, but there's still nothing in that realm catering to the boy reader who is really struggling—boys for whom a picture book might be the right fit in terms of reading level but for whom such books seem too childish.

McFarlane's solution is her new series *Boy v Beast*, a series she is creating in partnership with leading educational publisher Louise Park. *Boy v Beast* will build on boys' 'visual literacy' by incorporating gaming-style images and concepts with relatively simple text for books that, while only including 35 words to a page, tell a far more complex tale than most picture books provide. 'But don't tell the boys any of that,' says McFarlane. 'They are just going to think they are great books.'

And such boys are fussy, she says. Recounting her visits to schools,

## 'Why don't girls get to save the world?'

McFarlane tells *Junior* that in the world of 'beasts' boys are expert. She's conducted wide consultation on the subject of what makes a creature a monster and what makes one an alien (the presence of external bones or fur figure strongly in determining such things). 'They'll tell you if you've got it wrong!' she says.

McFarlane is keeping mum on the third series she'll be producing with Scholastic, but she is willing to tell us about a separate project she's working on with the publisher, as an author. 'It's a multi-title picture book series that should launch in August 2010.'

So, author, publisher, packager, marketer ... it's looking like a full year for McFarlane. But there's one thing she's ruling out. Despite the 'media' in her new business name, McFarlane will be sticking to books. The name reflects the fact that McFarlane's series concepts can be built on in many ways and on many platforms in future—but these developments will be through partnerships she insists. 'I'm not about to be a television producer—at least not yet!' she says. **JUNIA**